Chapter 1

Drama in the Beginning ─ Part I: Theater in Ancient Greece and Rome

In this chapter, you will be introduced to the origins of drama in ancient Greece and Rome. Although this part is not contemporary, a reading of this chapter would provide us with the essential knowledge of certain key dramatic terms, along with their historical background, for example:

- Tragedy
- Theater space
- Greek chorus
- Commedia dell'arte

History

Drama in Greece began with the observation of religious ceremonies. Think of a chorus of worshippers standing or moving in a circle round the altar of a god, chanting in unison and indulging in unrehearsed dance. The first movement towards the dramatic came when one member of the chorus separated himself from the rest, speaking lines to which the chorus collectively replied. Once this single actor established the situation, it would be followed with the appearance of the other actors. These actors would begin a formal dialogue and the attention of the spectators would be focused on them.

Tragedy emerged out of a religious observance, and to the end it remained integrally related to the service of the gods. Audiences appreciated these works not just for entertainment but also for the feelings of devotion and awe these plays aroused. Not surprisingly, only a formal tone was used in the description of plot and dialogue.

The stories told in these tragic dramas were for the most restricted to a set of legendary themes. We must also note that essentially these tragedies were religious exercises, and were presented on special days of festivals when all the inhabitants of the city state eagerly visited the theatres.

Thw word 'tragedy' can trace its etymology to the Greek *tragoidia*, a derivative of tragoidos singer in a tragic chorus, performer in tragedy. The origins of the tragic form are Greek, meaning "goat-song", and possibly refer to the sacrifice of a goat for fertility to the god Dionysus, in whose honour tragedies were performed.

Chorus

Chorus was a group of people, wearing masks, who sang or chanted verse while performing dancelike movements at religious festivals. The group would make its entrance by marching in a stately rhythm through the passage between the theatron and the skene. When all the members of the chorus had entered the orchestra, they arranged themselves in rectangular formation and began their choral song and dance to the accompaniment of a flute. In the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, they served mainly as commentators on the characters and events. They expressed the then contemporary traditions, morals, and religious attitudes. They remained in the orchestra throughout the play, performing not only during its odes, but also during the episodes. They would sometimes make gestures and movements in sympathetic response to the action.

You should also remember that the Greek ode consisted of two kinds of movements: *strophe* (movement of the chorus from right to left) and *antistrophe* (moving back to the original position). Epode was a verse form composed of two lines differing in construction and often in meter, the second shorter than the first.

Choral performances continued to dominate the early plays until the time of Aeschylus (5th-4th century BC), who added a second actor and reduced the chorus from the initial 50 to 12 performers. Sophocles added a third actor and increased the chorus to 15. The Greek comedies used 24 performers for chorus.

During the Elizabethan period, however, "chorus" also stood for a single character who spoke the epilogue and prologue of the play as in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.

In more recent times, we use the term *choral character* to denote a person who stands largely apart from the action and comments on the proceedings of the play, for example, Alfieri in Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* (1955) and Seth Beckwith in Eugene O' Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1947). Still, in the works of some writers such as T.S. Eliot, particularly in *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), you will find a revival of the use of group chorus.

The theatre

The theater of Dionysus could accommodate almost fifteen thousand people. Actors used exaggerated gestures, spoke loudly and wore masks which were large and stylized. This, coupled with their costumes, represented character types. Actors would change their masks depending on their situations, fortunes and emotions in the play.

In the beginning, the theatre consisted of a sloping hillside, which provided accommodation for the audience. It had a level tract, marked out in a circle, on which the players moved and spoke.

Later improvements included a semicircle of stone seats which became an auditorium, and the space for the chorus became an orchestra. Facing the viewers arose a building the front of which came to serve as a background for the performers. In the forepart of this building a long, narrow raised stage offered a platform for the actors, while the chorus stood below them. These theatres were huge and were spread in vast areas. The actors wore high boots, called the *cothurnus*, to give them added height. They also wore masks over their faces, and spoke in loud and majestic tone.

Major parts of the ancient theatre

Orchestra was the dancing place. The chorus would sing and interact with the actors who were on the stage near the skene.

Theatron: The theatron (literally, "viewing-place") is where the spectators sat.

Parodos was one of two gangways on which chorus and actors made their entrances from either side into the orchestra.

Skene, the word from which we get the word scene, was originally a flat-roofed stage building. It was used as a scenic background.

Case study: Important personalities and their works

> **Aristotle** (384-322**)**
>
> Aristotle was born in Stagira in northern Greece. He enrolled in Plato's Academy in 367 and spent 20 years in the Academy as a student. He was a tutor to Alexander, the Great.
>
> His seminal writings are: *Categories*, *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Physics*, *De Anima*, *Metaphysics*, *Ethics*, *Politics* and *Poetics*. We are more concerned with Poetics which contains Aristotle's theories of literature.
>
> *Poetics* (4th c BC)
>
> *Aristotle's definition of Tragedy*
>
> "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions. . . . Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody."

Plot construction: Aristotle defines plot as "the arrangement of the incidents": i.e., not the story itself but the way the incidents are presented to the audience, the structure of the play.

The plot must be "a whole," with a beginning, middle, and end.

The beginning, called by modern critics the **incentive moment**, must start the cause-and-effect chain but not be dependent on anything outside the compass of the play (i.e., its causes are downplayed but its effects are stressed).

The middle, or **climax**, must be caused by earlier incidents and itself cause the incidents that follow it (i.e., its causes and effects are stressed).

The end, or **resolution**, must be caused by the preceding events but not lead to other incidents outside the compass of the play (i.e., its causes are stressed but its effects downplayed); the end should therefore solve or resolve the problem created during the incentive moment.

 Aristotle calls the cause-and-effect chain leading from the incentive moment to the climax the "tying up" (*desis*), in modern terminology the **complication**. He therefore terms the more rapid cause-and-effect chain from the climax to the resolution the "unravelling" (*lusis*), in modern terminology the **dénouement.**

The end of the tragedy is a *katharsis* (purgation, cleansing) of the tragic emotions of pity and fear.

Katharsis is another Aristotelian term that has generated considerable debate. The word means "purging," tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear in order to purge away their excess, to reduce these passions to a healthy, balanced proportion. This enables the spectator to face the world with strength.

Aristotle also talks of the "pleasure" that is proper to tragedy, apparently meaning the aesthetic pleasure one gets from contemplating the pity and fear that are aroused through an intricately constructed work of art

Ideal Tragic Hero

Characters in tragedy should have the following qualities

i. "good or fine." Aristotle relates this quality to moral purpose and says it is relative to class: "Even a woman may be good, and also a slave, though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless."

ii. "fitness of character" (true to type); e.g. valor is appropriate for a warrior but not for a woman.

iii. "true to life" (realistic)

iv. "consistency" (true to themselves). Once a character's personality and motivations are established, these should continue throughout the play.

v. "necessary or probable." Characters must be logically constructed according to "the law of probability or necessity" that governs the actions of the play.

vi. "true to life and yet more beautiful" (idealized, ennobled).

vii. A fatal flaw or error

Sophocles (496-406 BC)

Sophocles was born in Athens in a wealthy family. A much admired public figure, he held many influential positions in his great city-state. He served as an ambassador, general, treasurer and even as a priest. His plays were produced on stage after a drama competition that was held in Athens each spring as the major event in a festival celebrating Dionysus, the Greek god who represented the power and fertility of nature.

Sophocles wrote many plays out of which only seven have survived. His most enduring plays are: Antigone, Oedipus Rex, and Oedipus at Colonus, all dealing with related characters and themes.

The Roman Theatre

The drama of Greece was the chief model for the Roman theatre. The major names in the Roman theatre were Seneca 4BC-65AD), Menander (342BC-291BC) and Terence (195BC-159BC). These dramatists had a far-reaching influence on the English drama, about which we will learn in the next section. The Roman theater never approached the heights of the Greek, and the Romans themselves had little interest in serious dramatic endeavors, being drawn toward sensationalism and spectacle. The earliest Roman dramatic attempts were simply translations from the Greek. Even the nine tragedies of the philosopher and statesman Seneca are gloomy and lurid, emphasizing the sensational aspects of Greek myth; they are noted primarily for their inflated rhetoric. The murder of the Emperor Claudius in 54AD, pushed Seneca to the top as favorites of the new emperor, Nero. Seneca's philosophical works include "On Tranquility of the Soul" and "On Leisure."

Seneca became an important influence on Renaissance tragedy, but it is unlikely that his plays were intended for more than private readings. The Elizabethan dramatists produced a specific type known as the revenge tragedy, modeled after Seneca's works, particularly his *Thyestes*. Seneca's plays are marked by a certain style of horror for its own sake and habitual use of pithy , moralizing sayings, called *sententiae*. Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (1590) and *Doctor Faustus* (1604) are two significant examples.

Seneca was charged with treason and was forced to commit suicide. His death is described in the *Annals* of the Roman historian Tacitus.

The Roman preference for spectacle and the Christian suppression of drama led to a virtual cessation of dramatic production during the decline of the Roman Empire. Pantomimes accompanied by a chorus developed out of tragedy, and comic mimes were popular until the 4th cent. A.D. It is this mime tradition, carried on by traveling performers that provided the theatrical continuity between the ancient world and the medieval. The Roman mime tradition has been suggested as the origin of the *commedia dell'arte* of the Italian Renaissance, but this conjecture has never been proved.

Commedia dell'arte: Italian theatrical form that flourished throughout Europe from the 16th to 18th century. It emphasised on ensemble acting, and its plots were frequently borrowed from the classical literary tradition of the commedia erudite, or literary drama. It had stock characters such as two elderly men, two lovers, two Zany (ludicrous) servants; and occasionally, a Columbine (saucy servant girl), a Pantaloon (merchant) and a gullible Dottore (lawyer). it heavily depended on physical comedy and witty dialogues. Commedia dell'arte had far-reaching influence, as you will soon see when you go to the chapter on the theatre of the absurd.

For more details on Roman theatre, go to: http://www.roman-colosseum.info/roman-life/roman-theatre.htm

Quiz

Multiple choice:

a. A mask was a

i. a group of actors on stage

ii. artificial faces that actors would wear on stage

iii. a dance

b. The function of chorus was to

i. comment on the stage proceedings

ii. dance and sing

iii. both of the above

iv. none of the above

c. The Roman theatre

i. was independent and never borrowed from the Greek theatre

ii. never became as successful as the Greek theatre

iii. Seneca was the most well-known Roman dramatist.

iv. Both ii and iii

v. None of the above

Answer key

a.-ii; b-iii; c-iv

Assignment

Based on your readings of Sophocles, analyze Oedipus as an ideal tragic hero.

Suggested reading:

1. Arnott, Peter D. *Public and Performance in the Greek Theatre*. NY: Routledge, 1989.
2. Wiles, David. *Greek theatre performance: an introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Selected websites

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_of_ancient_Greece
2. http://www.richeast.org/htwm/Greeks/theatre/Theatre.html
3. http://www.greektheatre.gr/
4. http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/netshots/tragedy.htm
5. http://www2.cnr.edu/home/bmcmanus/tragedy_theater.html

Chapter 2

Drama in the Beginning -Part II: English drama in the 10th century

Background

For people of the Middle Ages, the Church was the beginning and the end of their lives. The Church provided shelter for the homeless and bread to the hungry. Not just a 'home of God', it was also a meeting-place, a place for learning and a centre of art.

Liturgical performances

In the Middle Ages, plays were enacted within or near a church and related stories from the Bible and the lives of saints. Although they had their roots in the Christian liturgy, such plays were not performed as essential parts of a standard church service. The language of the liturgical drama was Latin, and sometimes music was used as well. The liturgical drama flourished between 10th and 12th centuries, and eventually the plays came under secular sponsorship and adopted the vernacular.

Look at the following example of a typical liturgical drama:

Alas for Judah's wicked seed I
What madness urged so dire a deed?
Oh race accursed !
etc.

When also they come into the choir, they go
towards the tomb, as if seeking, and sing all together
this verse:

But who shall roll away the stone,
Too great for us to stir alone?

To whom makes answer the Angel seated at the
entrance, at the head of the sepulchre, and clad in
white shining raiment, his brows girdled with a
crown, and bearing in the left hand a palm, and
in the right a branched candlestick, and saith in a
voice restrained and of exceeding gravity:

What seek ye in the sepulchre

Christian folk?

The Women.
Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified,
heavenly one !

To whom answereth The Angel.
What, Christians ! Seek the living with the dead ?
The Lord is risen, as to his own he said ;
Remember how he spake in Galilee
That he must die, but after ye should see,
Three days being past, his Easter victory.
(Source:http://www.archive.org/stream/englishmiraclepl00moorrich/englishmiraclepl00moorrich_djvu.txt).

Mysteries and Miracles

Medieval people lacked in means of entertainment, and the liturgical plays put up by church provided an excellent source of relaxation.

At the same time we also witness the democratization of the theatre as the plays increasingly started getting separated from the religious services. Some of the monks and priests made efforts to appeal to a largely unlettered audience, and began to introduce the vernacular into the dialogue. Thus, pure Latin was no longer the language used for drama. Gradually these evolved into complete plays which were written in English instead of in Latin, produced under the auspices of the various trade guilds, and acted on stages outside the church.

In course of time, the plays developed a secular tendency. Occasionally, the Trade Guilds of some towns, under the supervision of the Church, produced a connected series, or Cycle, of plays dealing with the chief scriptural events. The themes ranged between the creation of man to the resurrection of Christ.

The Miracle play used its subject either a story from the Bible or the life and martyrdom of a saint. These plays are of unknown authorship. In the 14th century, there developed in cities such as York and Chester, the practice of putting on great cycles of plays, representing crucial events in the biblical history of mankind. Each scene was played on a separate "pageant wagon" which was drawn, in sequence, to one after another fixed "station" in a city.

Spectacular effects were also used occasionally, for example, thunder was imitated by the beating of drums, and a dragon's mouth represented Hell. The actors were all members of the various Guilds who collaborated to entertain the town. A special feature of these early performances was the comic element, provided by the Devil or by Noah's wife, who was

portrayed as a fighting shrew. At the same time, a mystery on *The Sacrifice of Isaac* contains dialogue of much philosohy and beauty between Abraham and his son; and the plot of *The Mystery of the Holy Sacrament* was capable of producing a strong impression in an age of unquestioning faith. These Cycles were acted all over Englandbetween thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, but only four have been preserved: Chester, York, Towney or Wakefield and Conventry.

The Moralities and Interludes

Morality plays were dramatized allegories of the representative Christian life in the plot form of a quest for salvation, where the crucial events are temptations, sinning, and the climactic confrontation with death. The plays had characters like Everyman, symbolizing the common man; and various personifications of virtues, vices, and Death. The most famous of these Moralities is *Everyman*, an anonymously authored, late fifteenth-century work. In 1450, came a work called *Mankind*, in which the generic hero listens to a crowd consisting of Mischief, New Guise, Nought, and Now-a-days, and eventually receives blessings from Mercy. *Nature* and *Castle of Perseverance* were also written along the same lines.

The Interlude (literally, 'in the middle'), was usually an instructive play, discussing either the topic of the day or matters of routine interest. Interlude can be understood as the form of play that was popular between the Moralities and the Elizabethan Drama. The interludes were relatively short, and more suited for performance at a lord's house. They were staged at intervals between some other form of entertainment, such as banquet, or preceding or following a play, or between acts. A good example of the Interlude is John Heywood's *The Play of the Wether* (1497) and *The Four P's* (1544), the sub-title of which is, 'a very merry interlude of a Palmer, a Pardoner, a Pothecary, and a Pedlar.'

Images from Medieval Theatre

- http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/medplaypics.htm
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Castle_of_Perseverance

Case study

Given below is an excerpt from *Everyman* (authorship anonymous), one of the earliest known morality play.

Everyman: Gentle *Knowledge*, what do you it call?

Knowledge: It is a garment of sorrow:

From pain it will you borrow;
Contrition it is,
That getteth forgiveness;
It pleaseth God passing well.

Good Deeds: *Everyman*, will you wear it for your heal?

Everyman: Now blessed be *Jesu, Mary's* Son!
For now have I on true contrition.
And let us go now without tarrying;
Good Deeds, have we clear our reckoning?

Good Deeds: Yea, indeed I have it here.

Everyman: Then I trust we need not fear;
Now, friends, let us not part in twain.

Knowledge: Nay, *Everyman*, that will we not, certain.

Good Deeds: Yet must thou lead with thee
Three persons of great might.

Everyman: Who should they be?

Good Deeds: *Discretion* and *Strength* they hight,
And thy *Beauty* may not abide behind.

Knowledge: Also ye must call to mind
Your *Five-wits* as for your counsellors.

Good Deeds: You must have them ready at all hours.

Everyman: How shall I get them hither?

Knowledge: You must call them all together,
And they will hear you incontinent.

Everyman: My friends, come hither and be present
Discretion, *Strength*, my *Five-wits*, and *Beauty*.

Beauty: Here at your will we be all ready.
What will ye that we should do?

Good Deeds: That ye would with *Everyman* go,
And help him in his pilgrimage,
Advise you, will ye with him or not in that voyage?

Strength: We will bring him all thither,
To his help and comfort, ye may believe me.

Discretion: So will we go with him all together.

Everyman: Almighty God, loved thou be,
I give thee laud that I have hither brought
Strength, *Discretion*, *Beauty*, and *Five-wits*; lack I nought;
And my *Good Deeds*, with *Knowledge* clear,
All be in my company at my will here;
I desire no more to my business.

Strength: And I, *Strength*, will by you stand in distress,
Though thou would in battle fight on the ground.

Five-wits: And though it were through the world round,
We will not depart for sweet nor sour.

Analysis

The above passage can be noted for the employment of the Everyman (an average, common person) who has to struggle to save his soul in the material world. A standard feature of moralities was the confrontation between the good and the evil. Here we find the Everyman taking a journey (an allegory for the journey of life) and how he is aided by the positive virtues, all personified, such as good deeds, strength, five-wits, and so on.

Find out more on *Everyman*

http://faculty.goucher.edu/eng211/Everyman.html

The Early British Plays

Ralph Roister Doister (1553) is the earliest known British comedy, by Nicholas Udall, while *Gammer Gurton's Needle* by John Still (1543-1626) is an example of an early English farce, and was printed in 1575. Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville performed *Gorboduc* in 1561. It was the first English play in blank verse and the first English tragedy on a Senecan model. The drama was based on the legend of Gorboduc, a mythic king of ancient Britain.

Quiz

a. State whether the following are true or false:

i. *Everyman* is a mystery.

ii. The Miracle play used its subject either a story from the Bible or the life and martyrdom of a saint.

iii. Virtue and Vice were important characters from the Morality plays.

iv. The four Cycles were Chester, York, Towney and Kent.

b. *Complete the following:*

i. The main characters in moralities were………………………………………..
ii. Interludes were…………………………………………………………………
iii. Cycles were plays produced by…………………………………………………

Assignment

Explain the significance of the mysteries, miracles and morality plays on the growth of drama in the medieval age.

Answer key

a-i. False; ii. True; iii. True; iv. False

Supplementary reading

1. Houle, Peter J. *The English Morality and Related Drama: A Bibliographical Survey*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1972.
2. Nicoll, Allardyce. *British Drama*: *An Historical Survey from the Beginnings to the Present Times* . NY: Appleton-Century-Croft, 1950.
3. Stratman, Carl J. *Bibliography of Medieval Drama*. 2 vols. 2d ed.. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972.

Selected websites

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drama
2. http://litera1no4.tripod.com/drama.html
3. http://wsu.edu/~dee/GREECE/DRAMA.HTM
4. http://www.blavatsky.net/magazine/theosophy/ww/additional/ancientlandmarks/TheGreekDrama.html
5. http://www.english.emory.edu/DRAMA/GreekDrama.html
6. http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/greekliterature/a/GreekTheater_2.htm