

Great drama arises where the theater occupies an important place in the life of the community. In many respects, Western understanding of drama originated in fifth-century (500–400) BCE classical Athens, where the theater played a central role in politics, religion, and society. The Athenians invented forms of **TRAGEDY** and **COMEDY** that persist to the present day. In tragedy, the Greeks dramatized climactic events in the lives of legendary heroes from prehistory and myth, bringing ethical problems of motive and action to the stage. In comedy, the theater staged satiric portraits of the life of the **POLIS** (the city-state), vividly depicting the energetic conflicts of contemporary Athens in matters of politics, war, education—even the arts of drama. Playwrights through the long history of the theater have continued to find in Greek drama both a model and a point of resistance against which to practice their own craft (see, for example, Jean Racine’s *Phaedra* or Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara* in this book). And we need only recall Sigmund Freud’s understanding of the “Oedipus complex” to sense the influence of models of action derived from the Greek theater on later Western culture.

Athens and Sparta were dominant rival powers in fifth-century Greece, which comprised many small independent city-states, each with its own political and cultural institutions, form of government, and alliances. Dramatic performances took place under a variety of circumstances in all Greek cities, but drama as we know it developed in Athens. Dramatic performance in Athens was part of citywide religious festivals honoring the god Dionysus, the most important being the **CITY DIONYSIA**. Plays were produced for contests in which playwrights, actors, and choruses competed for prizes and for distinction among their fellow citizens. These contests, held in an outdoor amphitheater adjoining the sacred temple of the god, followed several days of religious parades and sacrifices. This connection between early drama and religion suggests that the essential nature of Greek drama lies in its supposed “origins” in religious ritual. But the City Dionysia was also a massive civic spectacle that went far beyond religious worship, emphasizing the theater’s implication in other areas of public life. Dramatic performance contributed to this celebration of Athens’ economic power, cultural accomplishment, and military might. The City Dionysia united religion and politics, enabling Athenians to celebrate both Dionysus and the achievements of their *polis*.

The City Dionysia was the most prominent of four religious festivals held in Athens and the surrounding province of Attica between December and April; it took place in the month of Elaphebolion (March–April), one month after the previous festival. Although its purpose was primarily a religious one, the City Dionysia was structured around a series of contests between individual citizens and between major Athenian social groups—the ten (later twelve to fifteen) “tribes” that formed the city’s basic political and military units. Dramatic performance was introduced to the City Dionysia during the sixth century BCE and became the centerpiece of the elaborate festival. Each year a city magistrate, or **ARCHON**, honored selected wealthy citizens by choosing them to finance one of the three principal tragic dramatists competing for a prize at the festival. Each sponsor, called a **CHOREGOS**, was responsible for hiring the **CHORUS** of young men who sang and danced in the plays. The *choregos* hired musicians and provided costumes and other support for the playwright to whom he was assigned. Later in the period, the state assigned the leading actor to the *choregos* as well, and this actor also competed for a prize. The playwright was responsible for training the chorus and the actors, and for some of the acting himself, and he shared his prize with the *choregos*. Serving as a *choregos* was both a civic duty and an important honor, equivalent to other tasks imposed on the wealthy—maintaining a battleship for a year or training athletes for the Olympic games.

Taking place over several days, the City Dionysia opened with a display of actors and choruses to the city; on the next day there was a lavish parade of religious officials through the city, followed by religious observances and sacrifices held in the theater. Athens also

The City Dionysia

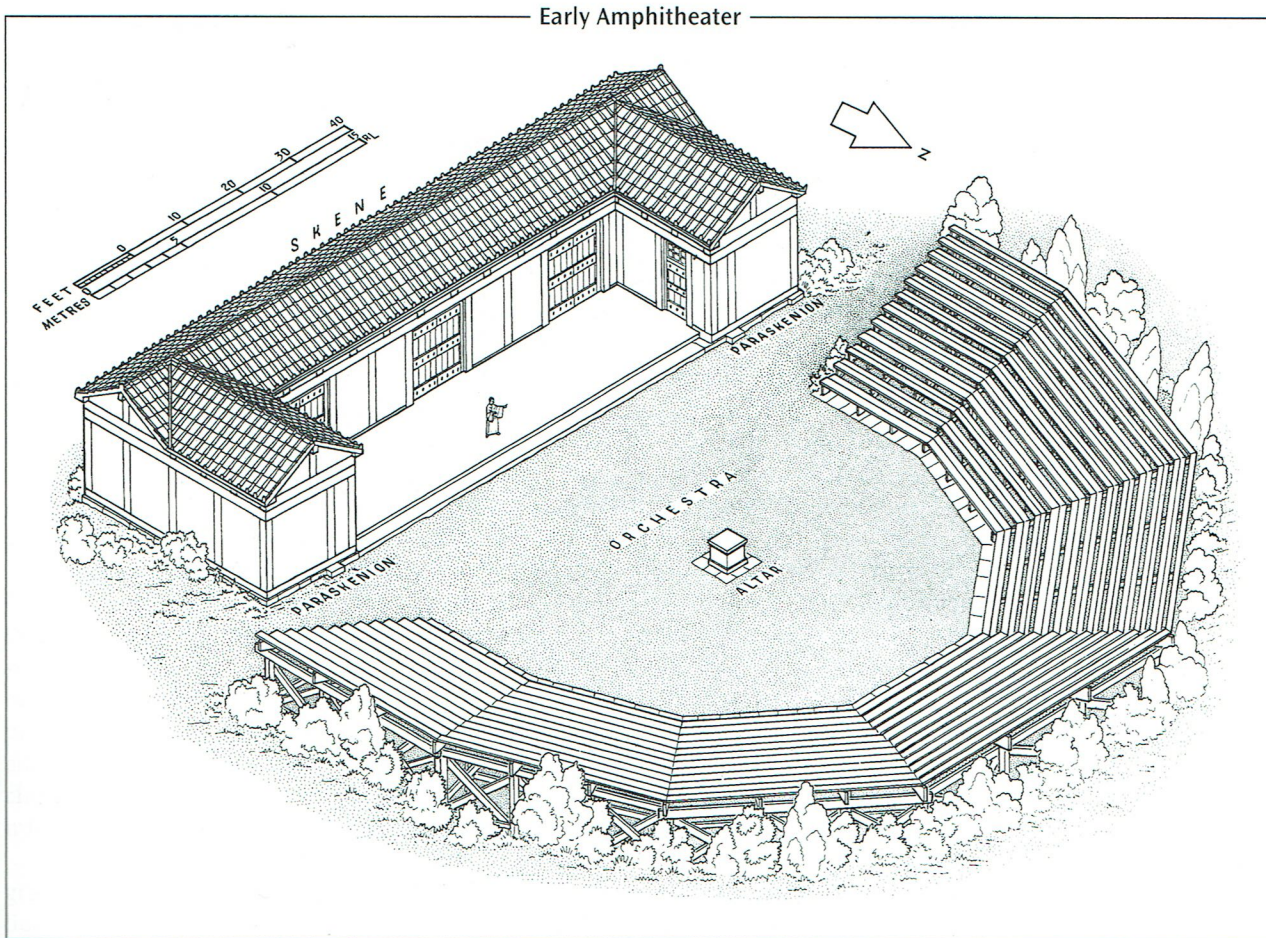
received its annual tribute of grain, money, and slaves from subject and allied states at this time, and war orphans raised at state expense were displayed to the audience. After this display of religious worship and civic pride, two days were devoted to contests of **DITHYRAMBS**, hymns sung and danced by a large chorus. Each of Athens' tribes sponsored two choruses: one consisting of fifty men, another consisting of fifty boys. The city's politics revolved around the tribes, and their contribution to the festival was prominent in this contest. The dithyrambic contest involved a thousand Athenian citizens directly in the performance, a significant portion of the adult male citizens. (It is estimated that Athens in the fifth century had a total population of about 300,000: 100,000 slaves, 30,000 noncitizen foreigners, and 30,000 to 40,000 adult male citizens; women and children were not citizens.) Following the dithyrambs, the main dramatic contest began. The competing playwrights each produced a **TRILOGY** of tragedies, staged over three days. A trilogy could take a single theme or series of events as its subject (like the three plays of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, 458 BCE), or present three distinct, unrelated dramas. A rugged farce called a **SATYR PLAY** followed the performance of each complete trilogy and was considered part of it; these plays parodied a god's activities, with actors dressed as satyrs—half-man, half-goat. After 486 BCE, comedies were also awarded prizes, but it is unclear whether the comedies were performed on a single day or spread over several days. Prominent citizens representing each of the tribes served as judges and awarded prizes to the playwrights, their *choregoi*, and the actors.

The Theater of Dionysus

The Greek theater was a public spectacle, a kind of combination of Inauguration Day, the Super Bowl, the Academy Awards, Memorial Day, and a major religious holiday. Plays were first produced in the **AGORA** (marketplace), which often served as a performance place for festivals in Athens and in the surrounding **DEMES** of Attica, which also staged dramatic performances. However, the size and importance of the City Dionysia required a separate site, and a theater was built on the slope of the Acropolis, near the precinct of Dionysus. The original theater, a ring of wooden seats facing a circular floor, was later refined, enlarged, and constructed of stone. By the time of Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, and Aristophanes, the Athenian theater had achieved its basic design: a circular floor for dancing and acting, ringed by a hillside **AMPHITHEATER** and backed by a low, rectangular building.

The focus of the classical amphitheater, which seated about 14,000 people, was the round **ORCHESTRA** ("dancing place") containing the central altar of Dionysus, at which the festival sacrifices were performed. The dithyrambic choruses performed their ecstatic dances in the orchestra, and most of the action of the plays took place there as well. Facing the orchestra, the hillside was divided into wedge-shaped seating areas. The citizens sat on wooden benches with their tribes: leaders and priests in the front of the sections, women perhaps toward the rear or possibly in a separate section. *Metics* (resident aliens) and visitors were probably seated in a separate area. Special front and center seats, called *prohedria*, were reserved for the judges and the priests of Dionysus.

Behind the *orchestra*, a low building called the **SKENE** faced the audience. Although the *skene* became a permanent stone structure in the fourth century BCE, in the fifth century it was a temporary wooden building, used for changing masks and possibly also for changing costumes. Playwrights quickly found the theatrical potential latent in the *skene's* facade and set of doors; through these doors the audience heard Agamemnon being murdered in his bath, or saw eyeless Oedipus return to confront the Chorus and his future in exile. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the Watchman awaits the signal fires on the palace roof, and in performance he may have waited on the roof of the *skene*. The theater also used some machinery for scenic effects: a rolling platform (the **EKKYKLEMA**) used to bring objects or bodies from the *skene* into the orchestra; a crane (**MACHINA**) to raise or lower characters—the gods, for instance—from the orchestra over the roof of the *skene*; later, in the fourth century, painted panels were used to indicate the play's setting or location.



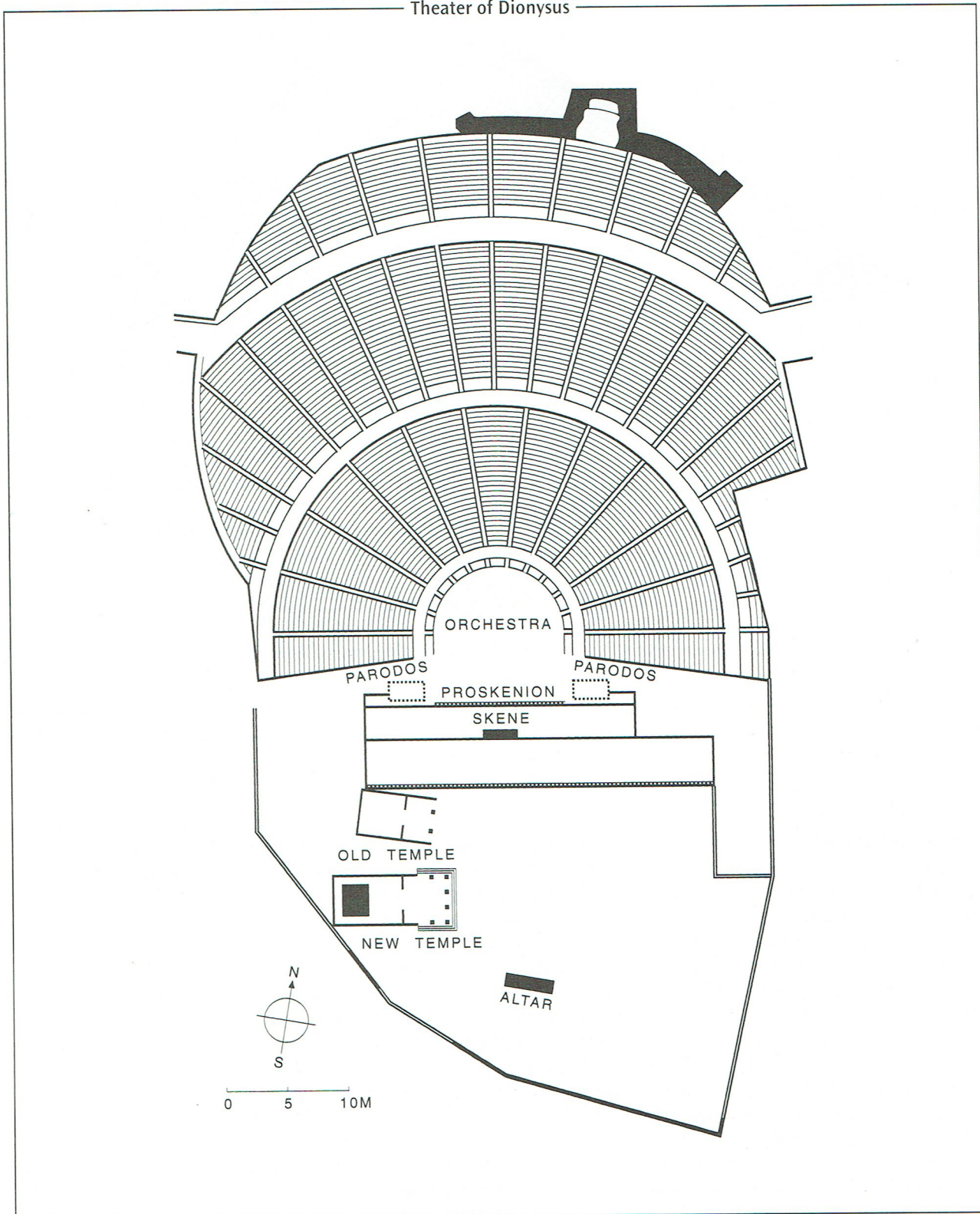
This is an artist's reconstruction of an early theater in Eretria, Greece. Notice that the seating is constructed of wooden benches and the *skene* is a temporary structure.

The experience of theater in classical Athens was in some ways akin to participation in other institutions of civic life. Athens was a participatory democracy for its citizens, although citizenship was restricted to adult male Athenians: women, foreigners, slaves, freed slaves, and children were not citizens. Citizens sat in the assembly to discuss and vote on matters of state policy, and they were eligible to serve in all public and military offices as well. Attendance at the City Dionysia was, then, like other aspects of Athenian public life, a privilege and an obligation mainly reserved for citizens. Citizens received tickets to the festival from officials in their neighborhood, or *DEME*; tickets may have been awarded on the basis of participation in other civic obligations—serving in the courts, the assembly, the army. At the theater, citizens sat together with members of their tribe. In a sense, the theater offered a visual map of the organization of Athenian society, for the tribes formed the basis of political participation outside the theater: The Athenian Assembly and the army were similarly arranged by tribe. Organized by tribes, with precedence given to religious officials and with inferior status or nonparticipation accorded to noncitizens such as women, slaves, and foreigners, the theater of Dionysus mirrored the structure of Athenian society.

The fifth century BCE was the era of Athens' greatest political power and cultural vitality and an era of intense reciprocity between Athenian theater and society. Yet the tension manifest in Greek drama perhaps points to the precarious stability of the Athenian

The Theater and Social Life

Theater of Dionysus



This ground plan is of the sacred precinct of Dionysus in Athens, fourth century BCE. Notice that the theater is much larger than the earlier theater at provincial Eretria. The large and permanent *skene* was constructed after the fifth century BCE.

pol
in a
mil
Spa
Ath
the
dyn
dra
role
one
con
the
abs
the

In
cho
"ch
The
tak
suc
be p
par
cho
cho
mil

gra
ligh
cho
clai
was
ani
Ari
or J
act
of n
that
peti
play

In A
spo
play
Bac
adm
exa
cise
Ath
she
her
just

polis. The Athenian maritime empire, forged after the defeat of massive Persian forces in 479, was resisted by the smaller Greek states and opposed by Athens' chief rival, the military state of Sparta. Following a long period of hostility and skirmishing, Athens and Sparta declared war against each other in 431 BCE, resulting in Athens' utter defeat in 404. Athenian democracy was replaced by an oppressive oligarchy, the Thirty Tyrants. Although the tyrants were rapidly overthrown and democracy restored, Athens never regained the dynamic cultural life and political power it enjoyed during the fifth century. And although dramatic performance continued after the restoration of democracy, the theater's central role in the *polis* seems to have declined after the Spartan victory. Yet, the theater became one of Greece's most widely disseminated cultural products. When Alexander the Great conquered Greece, the Near East, and northern Africa, he took Greek culture—including theater and drama—with him throughout his empire. And when the Roman Empire later absorbed Alexander's former dominions, it also appropriated Greek dramatic traditions, the design of Greek theaters, and the arts and religion of Greece, as well.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle suggests that drama originated in the singing of the dithyrambic choruses; a masked actor was first used to respond to the chorus as an individualized "character" in the mid-sixth century BCE, an innovation attributed to the playwright Thespis, about whom little else is known. Aeschylus was the first to use two actors, probably taking one of the parts himself; in the 460s, Sophocles introduced a third actor and was successfully imitated by Aeschylus in his *Oresteia* in 458 BCE. In general, classical tragedy can be performed with three actors and comedy with four, although each actor may play several parts. All of the performers in the Greek theater—the dramatists, actors, musicians, and chorus members—were male citizens of Athens, as was most of the audience. The dramatic choruses were perhaps composed of young men between the ages of seventeen, when military training began, and twenty-one, when Athenian men entered into adulthood.

The chorus of tragedy both sang and danced, and it was expected to perform with grace and precision. Actors and choruses wore full-head masks made of painted linen or lightweight wood. The main characters' masks were individualized, but the members of the chorus all wore identical masks, giving a special force to the conflict between the unique claims of the protagonist and the more diffuse claims of his society. Costuming in comedy was somewhat more complex. Aristophanes' plays suggest that the chorus at times wore animal masks. The comic protagonists' masks, though, were again individualized; since Aristophanes often put his contemporaries in his plays—Socrates in *Clouds*, for instance, or Euripides in *Frogs*—the masks probably resembled these citizens quite closely. Comic actors often sported a leather PHALLUS, clearly visible in statues depicting comic actors and of much dramatic use in plays like *Lysistrata*. In reading Greek drama, we should remember that its leading parts—both the leading character and the chorus—were designed for competition, as instruments for the actor and chorus to win prizes. The literary brilliance of the plays is, in this sense, a means to enable a particular virtuosity in performance.

In Athenian tragedy and comedy, female characters were played by men. Not only did men sponsor and write the plays, but the "women" onstage were literally men in disguise. Yet, many plays throw the theatrical convention of men playing women into relief. In Euripides' play *The Bacchae*, Pentheus is possessed by Dionysus when he dresses up as a woman and Dionysus admires his good looks; in *Lysistrata*, the Spartan woman Lampito is closely and physically examined by Lysistrata and the other women in ways that focus the audience's attention precisely on the fact that the woman is being played by a man. Drama, then, participated fully in Athens' denial of equality to women. Athena says as much in Aeschylus' *The Eumenides* when she judges Orestes' murder of his mother as a lesser crime than Clytaemnestra's murder of her husband. Looking closely at both the drama and its performance can help us to see how justice, power, and gender came to be arranged in Athenian society.

Drama and Performance

Women in the Athenian Theater

Although the theater—like Athenian society—was a male-dominated institution, Greek drama repeatedly inquires into the nature of gendered behavior and uses female characters to focus some of its most challenging questions. Given the absence of women from the stage and their marginal status in the theater and in the state, it is fascinating to note how many plays turn on the action of female characters. Women were not themselves citizens of Athens, and their prerogatives, which were considerable, in the *polis* were defined only through marriage to a citizen. Yet many of the plays raise critical moral, ethical, and political problems through the actions of women: Clytaemnestra and Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Medea in Euripides' *Medea*, and the women of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and *Assembly of Women*. Although Aristotle probably voices his contemporaries' views when he remarks in his *Poetics* that "a woman can be good, or a slave, although one of these classes [women] is inferior and the other, as a class, worthless," the theater stages women in ways that implicitly challenge the authority of this "natural" connection between the good, the legitimate, and the masculine. As a category that troubles the "natural" linkage between masculinity and humanity itself, women in Greek drama often appear to stage a crisis in how the state imagines and justifies itself.

Forms of Greek Drama

Formally, the organization of Greek tragedy is somewhat different from that of modern plays, because Greek drama is based on the singing and dancing of the chorus, for whom many of the plays were named. Most plays begin with a **PROLOGUE**, such as the Watchman's speech at the opening of *Agamemnon*, followed by the **PARODOS** (entrance) of the singing and dancing chorus. Several **EPISODES** follow, in which the central characters engage one another and the chorus; the chorus itself often sings (and dances) several **ODES**, which are used to enunciate and enlarge on the play's pivotal issues, and the chorus often becomes a decisive character in the play, as it does in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* or Euripides' *The Bacchae*. The choral odes are written in lyric meters different from the meters used for the characters' speeches. The play's **CATASTROPHE**, literally its "down turn," marks some change in the hero's status and is followed by the departure of the characters from the stage and the **EXODOS**, or final song, dance, and departure of the chorus. Comedy—at least for Aristophanes, whose plays are the only surviving comedies from the period—is structured similarly, although Aristophanes' plays usually include a long **PARABASIS**, a choral ode delivered to the audience discussing political issues, and a final **KOMOS**, a scene of choral dancing and revelry.

This formal description, however, hardly accounts for the real and continued power of Greek drama, which arises from an intense and economical relationship between (1) a situation, usually at the point of climax as the play opens, (2) a complex of characters, each with distinctive goals and motives, (3) a chorus used both as a character and as a commentator on the action, and (4) a series of incidents that precipitates a crisis and brings the meaning of the **PROTAGONIST**'s actions into focus. Aristotle called this crisis the **PERIPETEIA**, or "reversal," in the external situation or fortunes of the main character, and he argued that it should be accompanied by an act of **ANAGNORISIS**, or "recognition," in which the character responds to this change. Indeed, Aristotle argued that when the pressure of the tragic action produces a close relationship between reversal and recognition, it instills in the audience intense feelings of fear and pity and then effects **CATHARSIS**, a purgation of these emotions.

Because the plays were written for a contest, it is not surprising that their language and construction provide opportunity for powerful acting, particularly since the plays were judged only in performance. Yet the stage action of Greek drama is hardly spectacular in the modern sense. Although the visual dimension of *Agamemnon*'s descent from the chariot onto the blood-red tapestry, or *Medea*'s appearance in the dragon-drawn chariot, or even the aching gait of the men in *Lysistrata* is critical to any understanding of these plays, scenes of murder, suicide, or battle usually take place offstage, to be vividly reported by messengers—as in the reports of Jocasta's death and Oedipus' blinding, or of the death of Jason's young bride in *Medea*. Cassandra's graphic prophecy of *Agamemnon*'s murder likewise provides a brutal counterpoint to the slaughter taking place offstage.

The scenic simplicity of the Greek theater enabled playwrights to achieve a special kind of concentration, one that capitalized on the special circumstances of the open-air, festival theater. Greek comedy has come down to us in the work of only two playwrights, Aristophanes and Menander (c. 342–c. 291 BCE). While Aristophanes' plays—usually called **OLD COMEDY**—are energetic and sometimes ribald comedies lampooning the Athenian *polis* and its leading citizens, Menander's comedies—called **NEW COMEDY**—are more generally concerned with mores and manners. Menander wrote more than 100 plays, but only one of his comedies—*The Grouch*—survives in its entirety. Menander's plays—and those of his contemporaries, Philemon, Diphilus, and Apollodorus—were often focused on a comic conflict between parents and children, devising situations and characters that forged an important link between the Greek and Roman theaters, and helped to establish the enduring traditions of stage comedy.

While the comedies center on the life of the community, the stage action of Greek tragedy focuses on the relation between the hero's intention, action, and consequence in ways that typically pit the hero's greatest talents against his unavoidable destiny, his society, his family, and himself. This recipe has provided—in plays from the era of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides to our own—the substance of tragic drama. The characteristic concerns of Greek drama speak undeniably of classical Athens, but the plays also represent trials of decision, suffering, and desperation with a power and purpose that continue to speak to us in accents very much our own.

The forms of Greek drama and theater remained in use after the fall of Athens to Sparta; indeed, they were both exported to Rome, Egypt, and the Middle East by Alexander. Yet while tragedy and comedy continued to be written and performed throughout the Greek Mediterranean throughout the Hellenistic period (fourth and third centuries BCE) and beyond, and theater design continued to develop and refine the classical amphitheater, in an important sense the tradition of dramatic writing and performance inaugurated in fifth-century Athens was confined to the Greek provinces. The modes of Greek drama and (to a lesser extent) performance survived somewhat longer in the eastern reaches of the Roman Empire, but in the west they gradually disappeared under the influence of Roman culture. Moreover, although the manuscripts of Greek drama—and of important collateral texts, such as Aristotle's *Poetics*—continued to be copied for students and readers, they fell out of public circulation. The few texts that have survived of the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes are based on copies made for teachers and scholars in Byzantium, dating from the third and fourth centuries CE. Not only have most of their plays been lost (Sophocles is said to have written 123 plays, of which we have seven; Aeschylus is thought to have written more than seventy, of which seven remain; Euripides' nineteen plays are all that remain of more than ninety), but the entire dramatic output of 700 years of theater was lost as well—the names of Agathon, Thespis, Chairemon, Theodektes, Philokles, Ariastas, and others are all that remain of their work. Moreover, since these manuscripts were collected in scholarly or monastic libraries, they have been subject to the destructive forces of history. Many Greek plays were lost in the burning of the library at Alexandria during Caesar's invasion of Egypt; the crusaders sacked Constantinople (previously known as Byzantium) in 1204, and in the process destroyed a city that had joined eastern and western cultures for centuries.

However, for all their violence, the Crusades also reopened cultural contact with the Islamic Middle East; many of the texts of Greek and Roman culture had been translated into Arabic or had been preserved by Islamic scholars and libraries. With the reopening of European trading and military contacts in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, Europe was able to rediscover the literature of classical Greece, sometimes in Latin translations, sometimes only through commentaries on still-lost texts (such as Aristotle's *Poetics*). In many respects, though, this recovery was principally of Roman theater and drama.

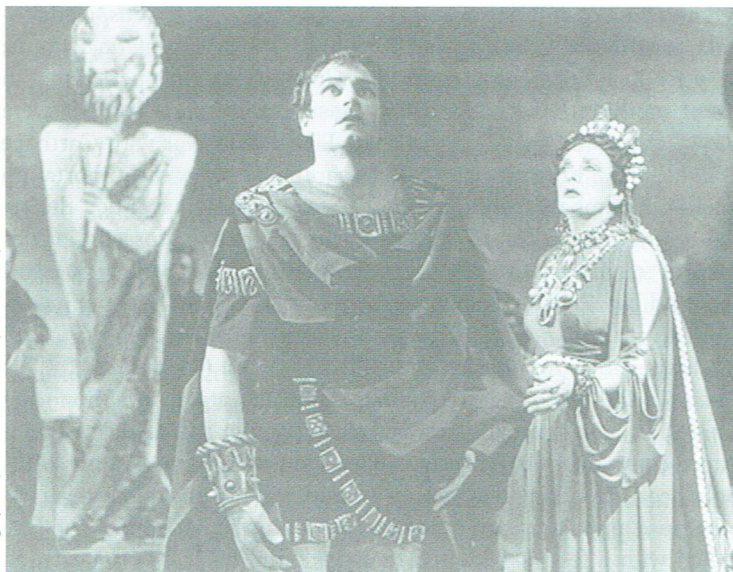
Greek Drama in Performance History

The prestige and availability of texts by Latin authors like Plautus, Terence, and Seneca meant that these playwrights were widely taught in schools, convents (such as Gandersheim, where the canoness Hrosvitha [953–973 CE] wrote six comedies modeled on Terence's plays), and universities, where their plays were often performed; the influence of these playwrights can be felt everywhere in European drama of the sixteenth century, most familiarly in Shakespeare's early comedies (like *A Comedy of Errors*, based on Plautus' *The Menaechmus Twins*) and in the vogue for violent tragedies reminiscent of Seneca's unstaged dramas, plays like Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (see Unit III). The rediscovery of Vitruvius' first-century book on Roman architecture, *De Architectura*, in 1414 (it was printed—a new technology—in 1486) also led a generation of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century architects to design and build theaters on what they took to be a Roman model.

In many respects, though, Greek drama only became widely known in Europe in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where Greek plays often provided the models for contemporary playwrights, such as Jean Racine (see Unit IV), as well as for the first operas. And it was only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the restoration of classical amphitheaters and the historical and archaeological recovery of the theatrical practices of classical Athens began to make possible experiments in staging classical Greek drama in ways that attempted to approximate the circumstances of classical theater or that attempted to translate those circumstances into a more effective modern idiom. Since the late nineteenth century, for example, the amphitheater at Epidaurus has often been used to stage classical Greek plays in ways that attempt to approximate the traditions of fifth-century Athenian performance.

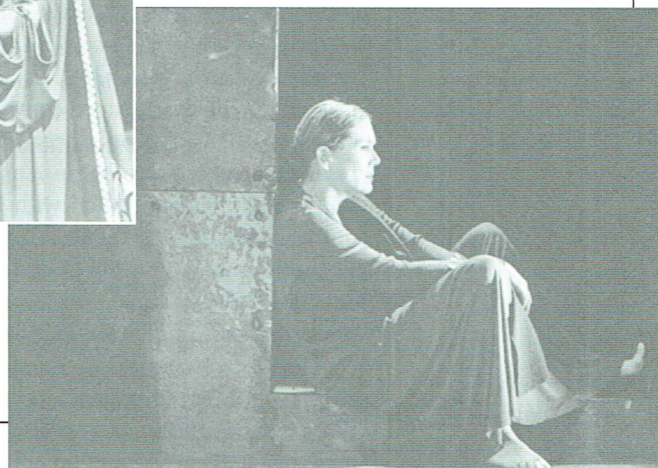
Clearly, of course, much has changed in the last 2,500 years, and performing classical drama poses a series of challenges to modern performers. First, the chorus—both its singing and dancing performance style and its function in the drama—has posed a critical problem for modern companies and audiences: German director Max Reinhardt staged a production of *The Oresteia* in 1919 that was among the first of his productions to experiment with large crowds onstage; later productions have tended to make the chorus smaller and more energetic in an attempt to recapture the exciting movement of the classical chorus. Beyond that, the use of masks in classical theater is no longer conventional on the modern stage, although many modern playwrights—Eugene O'Neill, for example, in *Strange Interlude* (1928)—have experimented with masks in an attempt to render psychological complexity with what they take to be “classical” decorum. The 1981 National Theatre (London) production of *The Oresteia*, directed by Sir Peter Hall, used an entirely male cast and performed the play in masks; this production was the first English-language production of a Greek tragedy to be performed in the classical theater at Epidaurus. Although this effort to “recover” the initial circumstances and flavor of Greek performance has driven many performances, Greek drama has also provided the framework for a number of important AVANT-GARDE theatrical experiments in the modern era. Of course, Racine's adaptation of Euripides in *Phaedra* might be considered an “updating” of this kind, but in the modern era, stage practices have often been used not so much to recover the classical past as to restage the plays in a modern idiom. Josef Svoboda's brilliant 1963 production of *Oedipus the King* in Prague, for example, took place on a thirty-foot-wide staircase that rose from the bottom of the orchestra pit to beyond the top of the proscenium. The French director Ariane Mnouchkine staged a production of Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis* as an introduction to her staging of *The Oresteia* in 1990 (under the overall title *Les Atrides*); this brilliant production used makeup, costume, movement, and dance idioms from classical Indian and Indonesian theater, implying that a contemporary staging of the Greek classics might well turn to another tradition of “classical” performance to find a still-living stage language. Both for directors—Peter Sellars' 1993 staging of Aeschylus' *The Persians* framed the play with allusions to the Gulf War—and for writers, such as Heiner Müller (*Medeamaterial*), Charles Mee, Jr. (*Orestes*), Caryl Churchill (*A Mouthful of Birds*, based on Euripides' *The Bacchae*, and written with David Lan), Timberlake Wertenbaker (who has translated several

Photographer: John Vickers. Courtesy of University of Bristol Theatre Collection



Framed by a masked member of the Chorus and Jocasta, Oedipus—played here by Laurence Olivier in the landmark 1945 production of *Oedipus the King*—seems finally to recognize the “truth” that he has been seeking.

Framed in a doorway and lit in profile, Diana Rigg embodies the isolation and abandonment of Euripides’ Medea.



© Joan Marcus

Greek plays), Wole Soyinka (*The Bacchae of Euripides*), and others, the theater and drama of classical Athens continue to provide a way to see and understand ourselves.

Although many of their traditions originated in Greek culture, the Romans developed a distinctive theater, quite different from the Athenian stage. From its beginnings, Roman entertainment was more varied than the Greek, including various forms of dramatic, quasi-dramatic and improvised performance, as well as acrobatics, juggling, athletic events, gladiatorial combats, and public spectacles. In the sixth and seventh centuries BCE, Rome was a relatively unimportant town, ruled by the Etruscan kingdoms of northern Italy. In 509 the Romans drove out the Etruscans and founded a republic; the republic expanded its influence throughout the fourth century BCE and by 265 BCE—well after the Peloponnesian War that marked the decline of Athens’s political and cultural predominance in the region—controlled the Italian peninsula, including territories once governed by the Greeks and by Alexander. Much as the Romans absorbed other Greek institutions, they also absorbed Greek theater and drama, which were first performed in Rome in the mid-third century, in 240 BCE. As Rome’s political influence expanded, particularly under the successor to the Republic, the Roman Empire (27 BCE–476 CE), the Romans disseminated their characteristic cultural institutions—including theater and drama—throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.

Like the Greeks, the Romans associated drama with festivals. The Romans not only produced plays on festival occasions throughout the year, however; they also developed a much wider variety of theatrical entertainments, of which drama was only a small part. Some of the Roman entertainments descended from the sixth-century BCE *LUDI ROMANI*,

Classical Rome

Roman Festivals and Drama

and eventually included a variety of entertainments: chariot racing at the *circus*, gladiatorial combats, beast hunts, rope-dancing, boxing and wrestling, and other athletic contests; dramatic performances were included beginning in 364. Greek drama was performed in the former Greek cities of southern Italy; Latin adaptations of tragedy and comedy were first produced at the *ludi Romani* in 240 BCE, during the First Punic War with Carthage (soldiers are common characters in Roman comedies), a year that also saw the importation of the first mortal gladiatorial combats from Etruria. Theater in Rome expanded during the Punic Wars, even as—during the Second Punic War, when Hannibal crossed the Alps with elephants—the war was fought in Italy itself. Dramatic performances were introduced to several other festivals, and by 179 BCE, drama was being performed at major religious festivals throughout the year: at the *ludi Romani* honoring Jupiter in September, at the *ludi Plebei* also honoring to Jupiter in November, at the *ludi Megalensia* (the Great Mother) in early April and the *ludi Florales* honoring Flora in late April, and at a festival honoring Apollo, the *ludi Apollinares*, in July. Dramatic performances, though still associated with festivals, were much more common in late republican and imperial Rome than in fifth-century Athens, not only because special celebrations sometimes also included theatrical performance, but also because any disruption or inconsistency in the performance of the religious rituals connected with a festival required that the entire festival be repeated, a not-uncommon occurrence. Throughout the Roman period, as the Republic gave way to the Empire, the number of festival days regularly increased: by 354 CE, seventy-five days were given to gladiatorial combats and chariot races, and one hundred to theatrical performances. Audiences attended the theater for free, and plays drew—as the sometimes-disdainful, sometimes-placating comments of playwrights suggest—an energetic, if not always sophisticated audience. Indeed, plays could also be performed on other occasions—such as a wedding or a funeral—and so playwrights and performers had to work hard to attract and hold their audience's attention.

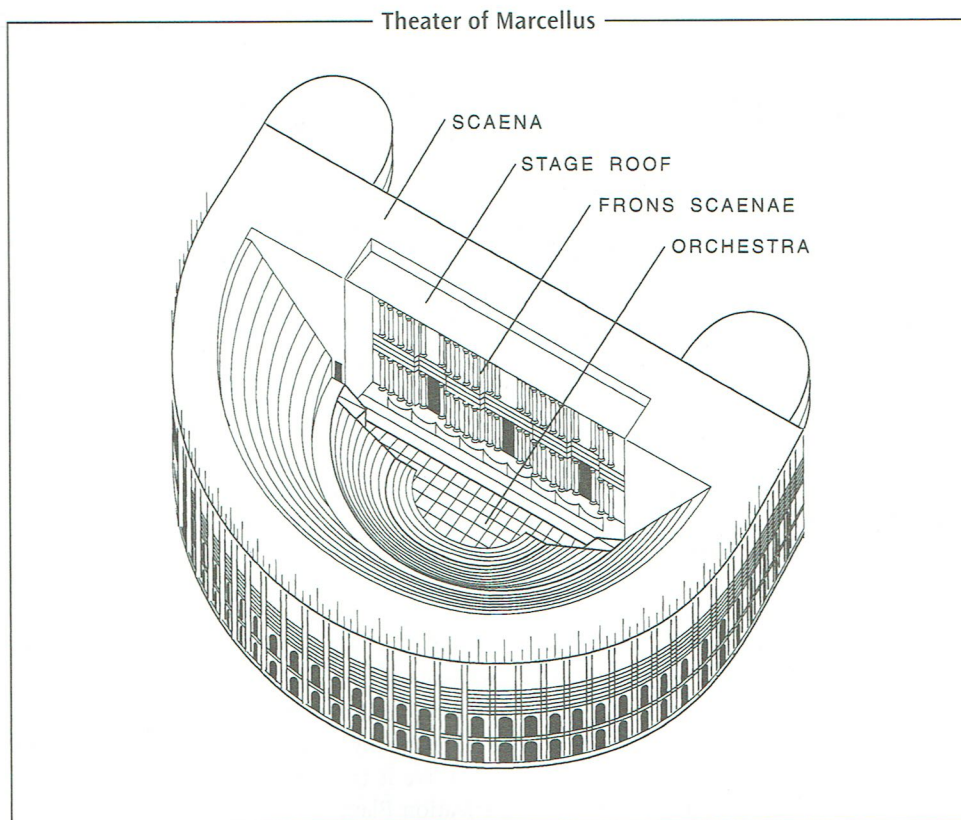
As in Greece, the organization of a festival usually fell to a prominent citizen or magistrate, who was granted a fee to fund the games; the magistrate typically contracted a manager (*DOMINUS*) of an acting company (*GREX*). Actors, however, were considerably lower in status in Roman than Greek culture. Companies producing scripted drama consisted of several male actors (or *HISTRIONES*, adapting the Etruscan term) and slave musicians, and they maintained stock costumes and properties; they typically purchased the script directly from a playwright for a fee. Although actors in the earlier Republic often had been freed, actors in the Empire were frequently slaves, suggesting something of the relationship between actors and their audiences. Tragedies and comedies were performed with masks. Made of linen and attached to a wig, the mask covered the entire head of the actor; like the masks, costumes tended to be conventional. Given the reliance of Roman comedy on music, actors had to be good singers.

Roman Theater Architecture

Given the variety of entertainments offered in Rome—including the chariot races, wild animal hunts (*venationes*), full-scale sea battles (*naumachiae*), and gladiatorial combats that became increasingly popular in the later Empire, especially after 300 CE—it is not surprising that the Romans built several different kinds of entertainment buildings, stadiums (such as the Flavian Amphitheatre, or Colosseum, begun by the emperor Vespasian and dedicated by Titus in 80 CE), and racecourses (such as the *Circus Maximus*, built 600 BCE) as well as theaters. Having settled southern Italy and Sicily, the Greeks built several permanent theaters, and performances of Aeschylus and Euripides are recorded there in the mid-fifth century BCE. Although many Roman cities had enjoyed the permanent theaters built by their Greek predecessors for centuries, all theaters in Rome were temporary, built and taken down for each festival; indeed, in 159 BCE, when officials attempted to erect a stone theater in Rome they were successfully challenged by Publius Scipio Nasica, whose concern for the corrupting influence of the stage led the Roman Senate to ban seating at any public entertainment. Only in 55 BCE, was Pompey the Great (Gnaeus Pompeius

Magnus) able to persuade the Romans to build a large theater in the Campus Martius as part of a new architectural complex—including a colonnaded forecourt behind the auditorium where audiences could get out of the sun and rain, and a temple to Venus—perhaps a sign of Pompey's political skill in maneuvering the building through moral opposition.

The Romans built theaters of stone throughout the Empire; many of the Greek theaters that remain today were refurbished and redesigned by the Romans. Like their Greek predecessors, the Roman theaters were outdoor amphitheaters, but the Romans built their theaters on level ground rather than into an existing hillside, and their superior engineering—particularly the Romans' use of arches in construction—enabled them to build much more massive buildings. Roman theaters were generally three stories in height. A stage house, or *SCAENA*, stood like the Greek *skene* behind the semicircular orchestra and faced a steeply tiered semicircular auditorium. The facade (or *FRONS*) of the *scaena* was elaborately ornamented with columns and porticos, and—extending the structure of earlier temporary theaters—typically had two or three stage doors facing the audience, enabling the stage readily to resemble the street setting of most Roman comedy. The auditorium, or *CAVEA*, of Pompey's theatre was divided into thirty-two sections, separated by aisles and ascending stairs, and audiences sat according to class; different sections of the auditorium could be reached by separate entryways (*VOMITORIA*); *vomitoria* also led into the orchestra as well. Permanent Roman theaters varied in capacity, but the largest could hold nearly 17,000 spectators; actors played on a large rectangular stage (*PULPITUM*) raised about five feet above the orchestra. In Pompey's theater on the Campus Martius, the stage was 300 feet long (the length of a football field), and 20–40 feet deep; most theaters had an apparatus to lower a curtain through the front of the stage. A short staircase led from the stage to the orchestra, and playwrights frequently complained about townspeople occupying the stage during performances. The Roman theater used little scenery, much along the lines of the *periaktoi* and *ekkyklema* of the Greek theatre.



The Theater of Marcellus was built in Rome, 13–11 BCE.

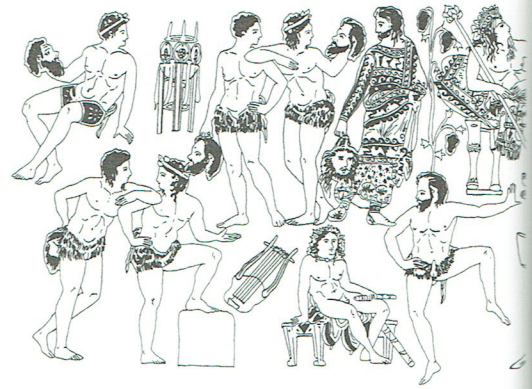
READING THE MATERIAL THEATER

This illustration, taken from an Attic red-figure volute *krater* painted by the “Pronomos painter” c. 450 BCE, is an important document in the history of Greek theater. While

it doesn't directly represent the performance of a satyr play onstage, there is much to learn from this vase painting. Look closely at the illustration: What distinctions can you make among the various figures? First, of course, many of the figures seem to be holding their theatrical masks, and

several seem to be gazing at them. But among the male figures, several are bearded adult men, while a larger number are beardless, suggesting that they are younger, adolescents. What role do you think they play in the performance? One hint here may be the figure dancing in the bottom row

The Pronomos Krater



These actors, apparently in a satyr play, appear on a vase painting by the Pronomos painter. Notice that the central seated figure of Dionysus (holding the polelike *thyrsus*) is surrounded by actors holding their masks. The older, bearded actor to the right of Dionysus, wearing the lionskin over his shoulder, is

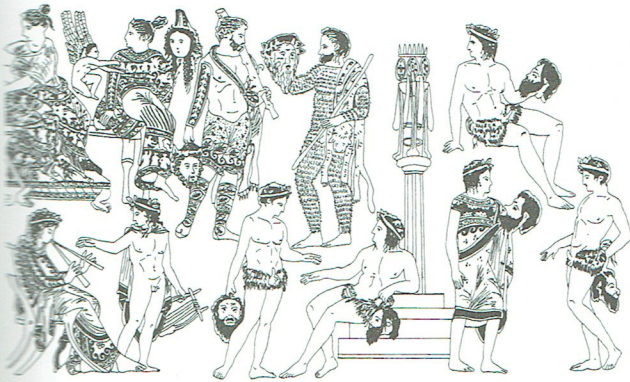
Roman Drama

Although the Romans continued to perform plays from the Greek theater, they also developed a native strain of drama—represented in the plays of Plautus, Terence, and Seneca—that flourished during the middle and later years of the Republic. In Italy, comedy first derived from farcical parodies of tragedy, called *PHYLAKES*—the word is also used to mean “gossips”—whose performances resembled those of itinerant *MIME* companies. Roman drama is often said to originate from Livius Andronicus (240–204 BCE), possibly a freed slave, who adapted Greek drama into Latin, wrote original plays, and became a fine actor; the titles of eight of his tragedies and three of his comedies remain. It's notable, though, that some of this history derives from the Roman historian Titus Livius (59 BCE–17 CE), allegedly the descendant of the man who first freed Livius Andronicus. Gnaeus Naevius (270–201 BCE) wrote comedies (which have not survived), and possibly collaborated with Titus Maccius Plautus (c. 254–c. 184 BCE), the most influential Roman comic playwright. Roman comedy embodies the generic indeterminacy of Roman entertainments: heavily dependent on music and singing, comedy provided actors with signal opportunities to interact with the theater's lively audiences, and Plautus' plays are definitive in this regard. Plautus' earliest surviving plays date from 205 BCE, or about thirty-five years after Greek drama was first introduced to Rome. Plautus based many of his comedies on Greek New Comedy, yet since none of these prototypes survive it is difficult to gauge the extent of his originality, though in action and characterization Plautus' plays are fully Romanized.

of figures: He has put on his mask, is wearing the *phallos*, and seems to have a satyr's tail. The central figure seated on the throne, with the *thyrsus* in his hand and vines growing just to the left, is labeled "Dionysus," as though the god were seated among the players (he shares the seat with

his wife, Ariadne), but there are several other characters who seem to be in costume; the most identifiable is looking at his mask, wearing a full-body costume and carrying the lion-skin of Hercules. Although the illustration seems to provide some fascinating clues to the nature of

theatrical performance, it is also misleading in some obvious ways: Just to the right of Ariadne is a seated female figure holding a mask. ■



apparently playing Hercules, the protagonist of the play. The other, younger and beardless figures may compose the chorus. While Hercules holds an individualized mask, the chorus members all hold masks similar to each other, and they wear costumes suggestive of satyrs.

Plautus is thought to have written more than 100 comedies, many of which—*Amphitryon*, *The Braggart Warrior*, *The Rope*, and *The Brothers Menaechmus*, for example—established the formal conventions of later comedy. Publius Terentius Afer (c. 195–159 BCE), usually called Terence, was probably born in Carthage and brought to Rome as a slave. Unlike the prolific Plautus, Terence wrote only six comedies, all of which survive; he, too, strove throughout his career to adapt Greek originals to the Roman stage: *The Woman of Andros*, *Mother-in-Law*, *Self-Tormentor*, *Eunuch*, *Phormio*, and *The Brothers*. Terence died mysteriously, leaving Rome on a voyage to Greece to study the theater, and never returning. The plays of Plautus, Terence, and their contemporaries were based on Greek models, and involved Greek settings and characters; they are often called *FABULAE PALLIATA*, referring to the Greek costumes worn by the actors, the Greek cloak or *pallium* for men and *palla* for women. Earlier comedies written in the first century were set in Rome and involved Roman characters, and were called *FABULAE TOGATA*, for the togas worn by the actors.

Roman comedy used music extensively, especially in the ironic or satirical song that usually opened the principal scenes of the plays; Roman tragedy, like Roman comedy, also eliminated the chorus. While tragedy was, like comedy, performed at festivals, the depictions of tragic performance on Roman tombs witnesses the fact that tragedies were often performed at funerals as well. The influence of Euripides in the Hellenistic period was massive, and played a role in the development of the first generation of Roman

(Aside)

ROSCIUS

Roscius—Quintus Roscius Gallus, 126–62 BCE—is the most celebrated of classical actors; born near Lanuvium, he became a distinguished comic actor in the first century, notably the friend of Cicero (Marcus Tullius Cicero, 106–43 BCE), the great Roman orator. Cicero, who is said to have studied with Roscius to improve his skill as a public speaker, speaks frequently of him, notably praising Roscius' care and attention to the preparation of his parts, and more generally noting that the actor should have the physical training of both an athlete and a dancer; he was praised by Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, 65–8 BCE) and by the poet Catullus as well (Gaius Valerius Catullus,

84–54 BCE), and wrote a treatise comparing the arts of the actor and orator. According to Macrobius (Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius, 395–423 CE), writing considerably later, Cicero and Roscius had a contest in which they competed to see whether the orator, using only his voice, or the actor, using only gestures, could more convincingly convey the matter of a public address. When he died in 62 BCE, Roscius had amassed a considerable fortune, and had been given a gold ring by the dictator Sulla (Lucius Cornelius Sulla, 138–78 BCE) and elevated from *plebian* to the status of “equestrian,” just below the *patricians* or ruling aristocracy, an extraordinary honor given the low social standing of actors and theater in Rome. Pliny (Gaius Plinius Secundus, 23 BCE–79 CE)

reports Roscius earning 50 million sesterces per year, a huge sum. Indeed, Roscius fell into legal trouble when a farm (worth 100,000 sesterces) he claimed to have received as a gift was challenged by C. Fannius Chaera, who argued that he was owed half of the value of the farm due to a previous agreement with the actor. Roscius was defended in court by Cicero in 76 BCE, in a brief oration which survives. As the preeminent actor of Republican Rome, Roscius' name became an important means of honoring actors in the Renaissance, and many later actors—perhaps beginning with Edward Alleyn (1566–1626), the great English actor and creator of many of Marlowe's roles (see Unit III below)—were called the “Roscius” of the day. ■

tragic writers, notably in the plays of Accius (b. 170 BCE) and Ennius (234–169 BCE). The rise of Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (63 BCE–14 CE) to power—he was crowned as the first Emperor, taking the title Augustus in 27 BCE—marked the end of an era of civil war (dramatized in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*) and the beginning of the two-hundred-year *Pax Romana*; it also initiated a brilliant age of Roman literary writing, including the careers of Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, 43–17 BCE) and Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro, 70–19 BCE), whose *Aeneid* celebrated Augustus' reign by creating the heroic epic of the founding of Rome by Aeneas. Ovid and Varius (Lucius Varius Rufus, 74–14 BCE) each wrote a tragedy this period (Ovid's *Medea*, and Varius' *Thyestes*, both now lost), but the only surviving Roman tragedies were written by Lucius Annaeus Seneca (5 BCE–65 CE). Seneca was an influential philosopher, and the tutor of the young emperor Nero (Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, 37–68 CE), the last of the imperial line descended from Julius Caesar; Nero's mother Agrippina played a crucial role in his rise to the throne, but when she objected to his divorce from his step-sister Octavia, Nero had her murdered (Octavia was subsequently banished, and executed upon her return to Rome). Seneca had a long and difficult relationship with the Emperor, serving as his advisor from 54 to 62: as part of his struggle with Agrippina, Nero accused Seneca of sexual relations with her, but Seneca was acquitted in 55 CE. He was also accused of taking part in a conspiracy to murder Nero; the historian Tacitus (Publius Cornelius Tacitus, 56–117 CE) described Seneca's subsequent suicide, indicating that he slit his wrists, then took poison, and when neither worked quickly enough he jumped into a pool to help the blood drain more quickly—Tacitus reports that he only died from choking on the steam. Though Nero's name today is usually synonymous with lascivious spectacle and personal immorality, he frequently performed plays in a private theater in the palace, commanding masks to be made resembling members of the Roman elite; Nero also had the Athenian Theater of Dionysus rebuilt and dedicated to him, and appeared there in the costume of Dionysus. Seneca's tragedies were adapted from Greek plays but tend to be more sensational and violent; indeed, it is doubtful that they were performed in the theater. The only drama based on contemporary Roman history, *Octavia*, is sometimes attributed to Seneca; although

only nine of Seneca's plays survive—*The Trojan Women*, *Medea*, *Oedipus*, *Phaedra*, *Thyestes*, *Hercules on Oeta*, *Hercules Mad*, *The Phoenecian Women*, *Agamemnon*—Senecan tragedy exerted an important influence on later drama, providing a crucial prototype for the nascent drama of sixteenth-century England.

Literature and architecture flourished in the Augustan age, but the social standing of the theater continued to decline, which may explain why the great writers of the period were by and large not attracted to dramatic writing; indeed, Livy regarded the contemporary theater—not least the actual execution of criminals as “characters” in plays, and the display of sexual acts onstage—as essentially degrading to public morality. By the first century BCE, the formal genres of comedy and tragedy seem to have lost much of their appeal for writers and audiences, displaced in part by the more spectacular gladiatorial contests, and by more home-grown dramatic genres, the *ATELLAN FARCE*, *MIME* and *PANTOMIME*.

Atellan farce originated in the city of Atella, near modern Naples, and was originally improvised, built around stock scenes—usually of low-life cheating and skulduggery—and coarse character types, similar to the manner of later *COMMEDIA DELL' ARTE*: *Pappus*, the comic old man; *Maccus*, the gluttonous fool; *Bucco*, the braggart; and *Dossenus*, the hunchback. In the first century BCE, Atellan farce was scripted as well, though only 42 titles and about 140 lines remain. The Roman mime descends from a form of Greek performance as well; “mime” was the generic term for the short entertainments undertaken by itinerant troupes of men, women, and children who set up a platform stage in the market and performed various acts: singing and dancing, acrobatic and juggling skills, and dramatic skits. These companies were known by their *RICINIUM*, a square hood that could be thrown over the shaved head as a disguise, and they generally wore a patchwork jacket, tights, and the phallus. Like other forms of comedy, it seems to have had a number of stock character types; mimes were performed by both men and women, though a Roman *mima* would be recognized as little better than a prostitute, perhaps given the generally salacious character of the performances. Mimes were certainly performed earlier, but are first recorded at the *ludi Florales* in 212 BCE, where Pompilius is said to have danced during the Romans' victorious battle with the Carthaginians; the festival's fertility theme is often said to have prompted the mimes' focus on adultery and sexual adventure. Many of the dramatic mimes were on contemporary subjects and scandals, and one Roman emperor ordered mimes to include live sex acts; the intimacy and satirical element of the mimes was perhaps underlined by the fact that they were performed without masks. Their salacious reputation contributed to their stigmatization by the early Christians; for their part, the mimes often ridiculed the bizarre religious practices of this still-new and unfamiliar religious sect. Roman pantomime was, perhaps, closer to modern narrative ballet, usually taking a serious, mythological theme of the kind approached by tragedy; performed with masks, it gradually superseded the performance of spoken tragic drama.

As Polonius puts it in *Hamlet*, announcing the arrival and praising the versatility of the players, “Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light.” Roman comedy and tragedy were particularly influential on the form and structure of later European drama. In the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, Roman drama was often used to teach Latin in schools and universities, giving rise to generations of playwrights (including William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe and others) who found in Roman drama the plot and character types—the confusion of identities, the young lovers, the bitter old man, the tricky servant, the braggart soldier in comedy; the passionate tirade and bloody climax in tragedy—for their own contemporary plays. Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* baldly rewrites Plautus' *Brothers Menaechmus*, and the gruesome events of his *Titus Andronicus*—the hero's daughter is raped, has her hands amputated and tongue cut out; other characters are variously dismembered, and the rapist sons are served up to their mother baked in a pie—are usually attributed to Seneca's example. Since the sixteenth century, Seneca's tragedies have continued to have a literary descent, producing adaptations by some of the twentieth century's greatest writers, notably the poet Ted Hughes and the playwright Caryl Churchill.

Roman Drama in Performance History