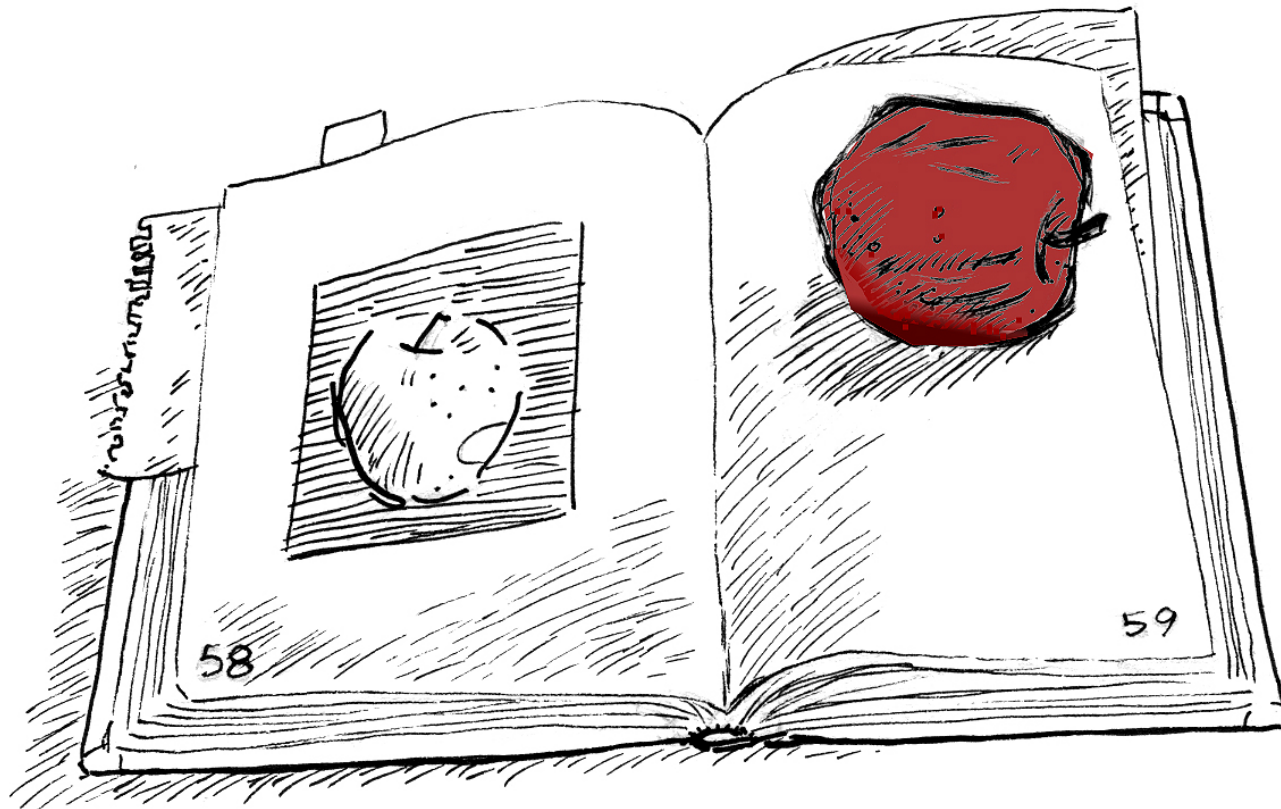


Ancient Greek Drama



Ancient Greek Drama – an overview

Ancient Greek myths are the basis for the tragedies.

Various, sometimes conflicting, accounts exist for more than one character.

- different regions in Greece have differing versions of the same character
- the majority of the stories exist as a way of explaining the Natural World
- Gods and Goddesses interacted with mortals on numerous occasions
- these stories are still major influences on contemporary drama

Ancient Greek Drama – an overview

Definition of Myth:

a religious teaching—developed by a culture which views them as a truth, as a religious mystery; these stories try to explain aspects of the Natural World:

- how the Universe was created
- how gods or goddesses became chief deities
- how humans were created
- how cities, countries, and societies were created
- how human intellect and art developed
- how some heroes became worshipped as gods

Overall these stories show the manner how a culture tries to explain the Divine aspects of the Universe. To explain the unexplainable.

Dionysus

For the Greeks, plays were primarily associated with the festivals of the god Dionysus, Bacchus for Romans.

He is considered the god of wine, harvesting of grapes, a promoter of divine madness and religious ecstasy—these are sometimes produced from an intense epiphany or frenzied trances.

- Patricia Easterling in her article “A Show for Dionysus” confirms that Dionysus exists as a major symbol for Greek tragedy:
 - > As the god specifically associated with wine, Dionysus encourages drunkenness, which leads to inhibition and self-destructive passions.
 - > Dionysus is a god of the untamed, uncontrollable wilderness, elements opposite to civilization: tangled jungles, aggressive animals: leopards, panthers, bulls, and snakes.
 - > He also encourages rampant sexual activities; his followers included lecherous satyrs and crazed female Maenads.(cited by Barbara F. McManus: http://www2.cnr.edu/home/bmcmanus/tragedy_dion.html).

Ancient Greek Drama – an overview

The festival honoring the god was termed *Dionysia*.

Aside from celebrating the cycle of grape harvest and drinking, plays were performed for competition.

- utilizing an open-air theatre, with perfected acoustics, the performance was judged by selected officials
- these early theatres could hold thousands of audience members
- The Theatre of Dionysus Eleuthereus is considered the first location of these events in Athens
- the plays were considered a religious celebration honoring the god

Ancient Greek Drama – an overview

Masks play an important part of the theatre experience.

Each actor wore elaborate headgear expressing an intense expression which mirrored a frozen emotional outburst.

- often the mask distorted the face into an extreme grimace or horror
- the image displayed is a copy of a tragic theatre mask from the First Century BCE.
- in this fashion, the figures on stage are always shown paralyzed by fear or anger; they are caught in the grips of emotional reaction to circumstances unfolding through the plot of the play
- likewise, the exaggerated masks enabled character identification for audience members



For more information visit: <http://www.usask.ca/antiquities/collection/hellenistic/maskbronzetragic.html>

Ancient Greek Drama – an overview

Aside from principle actors on stage, a background chorus was used.

The chorus traditionally consists of twelve individuals, mixing incantations and songs with accompanying music.

- the chorus do not interact with the principle players, nor have distinct monologues directed to the audience; the chorus talks in unison as one voice
- they do react to events as they appear through the plot sequence
- in this fashion they represent a collective voice of a town or a group of citizens usually a common opinion (“groupthink”) on the play’s current action
- at times the recitations act as summaries of past events or as confirmations of personal histories the audience may need for specific characters on stage
- in some cases they are instigators of action, their statements can symbolize a sudden subconscious thought within a crowd of participants, citizens wanting to shift a play’s direction from the background; manipulation of live audience
- the leader of the group is referred to as a mediator between the chorus and the main actors; a go-between

Ancient Greek Drama – an overview

Also, the chorus provides the moral lesson at the close of the play.

In Sophocles play *Antigone*, pay attention to who he casts in this function.

- his chorus is composed of elderly men, individuals who have seen much action in the various events of Theban history
- in this manner they represent a nostalgia for older times
- in addition, as much as they try to interfere in the course of events, they are ineffectual, often ignored by principle characters in leadership roles
- other times they show sympathy to characters in a moment of suffering, and thus they act as agents of audience manipulation; the chorus' feelings trigger and encourage a similar response in the live audience

Ancient Greek Drama – an overview

In this version of *Portable Legacies* the translator shows common Greek staging of the drama.

These various terms indicate the actions taking place on stage.

- **parados:** verse spoken with the chorus' side entrance
- their speeches are termed **odes**; these are composed of
 - > **strophe:** recited as the chorus moves east to west
 - > **antistrophe:** recited as the chorus move west to east
 - > **epode:** recited standing in center stage
 - > **paean:** (see page 825) is a prayer-like chant sending thanks to a god; in *Antigone*, the chorus celebrates the glory of Dionysus, calling to him with one of his epithets, Iacchos (sometimes seen as Iacchus).
 - > **exodus:** the concluding scene
- it is important to notice how tones and language change through these motions