

1 The genres of performance

A spectator at the **City Dionysia** festival at Athens in the fifth century BC could enjoy an extravaganza of entertainment with all the magnetism of a Woodstock or a Glastonbury festival. Everything from dithyrambos to satyr-plays played to an enthusiastic audience of thousands, and the atmosphere was by all accounts electric. Add to this the fact that in any given year you could see tragedies and comedies by great playwrights such as Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes, and it is easy to see why Athenians were obsessed with the theatre. Centuries later, these plays are still admired as unsurpassed masterpieces, and their skilful artistry and raw emotion play to packed houses all over the world.

How did we get to this point? And how did Athenian drama come to exert such an influence on western theatre from Shakespeare to Stoppard? Not only the vocabulary of the stage (words like protagonist, episode and scenery) but the very way we think about character, plot and artistic originality is the legacy of the remarkable artistic creativity of Athenian society.

In all, four different types of performance were put on in the theatre at Athens: dithyrambos, tragedies, satyr-plays and comedies. Of these genres, tragedies have come down to us in the greatest number (33); next come comedies, of which 18 have survived entirely or in large part. Of satyr-plays, we only have Euripides' *Cyclops* and portions of Sophocles' *Trackers*; no actual dithyramb survives in full, although its influence may be felt in certain tragic choruses and in the poems of the fifth-century lyric poet Bacchylides.

Dithyramb

Little is known for certain about **dithyrambos** – not even what the word actually means. We know that they were hymns sung and danced in honour of Dionysus. They were not plays as we would think of them, with individuals acting out parts, but rather large-scale choral performances of song and dance. In the City Dionysia festival at Athens, dithyrambic performances took place on the first day and were the 'show opener'. The renowned lyric poets Simonides, Bacchylides and Pindar are all known to have entered the dithyrambic competitions at the City Dionysia. Although our best evidence comes from Athens, dithyrambos were also performed at rural festivals in Attica (the area around Athens), in the Peloponnese and in the Aegean islands.

The following description is given by an ancient **scholiast** (commentator) on Aeschines' (lived c. 397 to c. 322 BC) lawcourt speech *Against Timarchus* 10, explaining a reference in the speech to 'circular choruses'. In the speech itself, Aeschines explains that Athenian lawgivers have set up measures to protect young boys from unwelcome attention; for example, they have stipulated that those sponsoring dithyrambic choruses be over forty years old to ensure that the education of Athenian youth be entrusted to individuals old enough to act responsibly.

- 1.1 By custom the Athenians put on choruses of fifty boys **or** fifty men per tribe; so there are ten choruses, since there are ten tribes. They compete with each other in the dithyramb, and each sponsor provides for the needs of his chorus. The winning chorus receives a tripod, which it dedicates to Dionysus. The dithyrambic choruses are called '**circular choruses**'.

The following fragment of a poem by Archilochus, preserved in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistai* or *Learned Banqueters* (628a–b), dates to the seventh century BC, indicating that the dithyramb went far back.

- 1.2 Since I know how to **lead off** the lovely song of Lord Dionysus, the dithyramb, when my **wits have been blitzed by wine** ...

The painting on a krater (a large vessel used for mixing water with wine) dating to c. 425 BC depicts a choral performance, as is clear from the central figure playing the double-pipe, who is typically included to indicate a live

or each Athenian tribe entered both a chorus of fifty boys *and* one of fifty men. Thus, the ten choruses of 50 boys and ten choruses of 50 men totalled 1,000 competitors, a sizeable proportion of the population. It would be fair to say that in the fifth century a lot of Athenian males would have had experience performing and would have therefore been a well-informed audience.

circular choruses (Greek *kyklios choros*) this common description of the dithyramb recalls earlier descriptions in Homer of choruses dancing in circular movements around a floor of beaten earth to the accompaniment of the double-pipe and lyre (e.g. *Odyssey* 8.260–5; *Iliad* 18.484–5, 569–72, 590–606).

lead off this refers to the role of chorus-leader (Greek *exarchos*). Tragedy also had a chorus-leader (the *koryphaios*) who in addition to leading the chorus in unison singing and in dancing also had individual spoken lines and conversed with the characters in the play. It is likely that in the dithyramb the chorus-leader also sang a separate part (as the officiating priest exchanges alternating responses with the congregation in some liturgies nowadays) and that dithyrambs drew their subject-matter from myth, especially myths about Dionysus.

wits have been blitzed by wine Archilochus describes the effect of wine using a verb that literally means 'blasted by a thunder-bolt'.

performance. The five men who flank him are mature adults with beards, dressed ornately and crowned with wreaths of ivy, a plant associated with Dionysus. The central figure looks out towards the viewer – thus his frontal representation distinguishes him from the four figures flanking him, who appear to be singing. In the centre of the field is a pole embedded in a stand and entwined with ivy.

This scene is interpreted as a representation of a dithyrambic chorus of men, and the frontal figure is identified variously as the chorus-leader, the poet, or the sponsor of the performance. That five chorus-members are represented rather than the full complement of ten need not concern us since vase-paintings frequently economize like this owing to the constraints of space. The dithyrambic chorus – unlike the choruses of tragedy, satyr-play and comedy – did not wear masks, and there is no trace of a mask on any of the characters in this painting. Each figure is identified by name; the name of the figure facing outwards, Phrynichus, is that of a well-known comic poet. It is possible that this Phrynichus also wrote or performed dithyrambos and is being celebrated on this vase, though the name is a relatively common one.

1.3



- 1 What might be the function of the ivy-clad pole in the centre?
- 2 What modern-day performances could you compare to dithyrambic choruses?

Tragedy

Tragedy was performed by an all-male cast which, in its final form, consisted of fifteen chorus-members and three character actors who, between the three of them, played all the speaking parts, male and female alike. The structure of the plays was highly formalized. Almost always, a brief prologue setting the scene was followed by the entry of the chorus (the *parodos*); they remained on stage for the remainder of the play, which consisted of sung choral odes alternating with episodes. Most of the plot developments of the play occurred in the **episodes** (the technical term referring to scenes), which were spoken by the main characters.

Tragedy almost always drew its subject-matter from mythology. Even plays that staged recent historical events, such as Aeschylus' *Persians*, did so in a mythologized form. The Persian invader Xerxes is a victim of destructive *atē* (a blind madness sent by the gods), and the play uses mythological patterns such as the unheeded prophecy, uttered by the ghost of King Darius. Although the general subject-matter was usually familiar to the audience, playwrights had the freedom to develop it in innovative ways.

Tragedy was the most prestigious of the dramatic genres. Tragedies were performed at the City Dionysia and **Lenaea** festivals in Athens; they were also performed in the **Rural Dionysia**, local festivals in communities throughout Attica. At all three events, playwrights competed for prizes.

Aristotle's *Poetics*, a treatise written in the late fourth century BC, is perhaps the single work that has had the greatest influence on interpretations of Greek tragedy down the centuries. Although Aristotle lived soon after the heyday of tragedy and is therefore a valuable source, his statements are sometimes idiosyncratic and speculative, and his theories have often been misinterpreted. In this extract (1449a), Aristotle traces the origins and development of different genres of poetry, especially tragedy.

- 1.4 When tragedy and comedy had both come to light, people were drawn to each **according to their natural inclination**. Some became **composers** of comedies

according to their natural inclination surviving records corroborate the picture that we get here that playwrights composed tragedies or comedies but not both.

composers the Greek word *poiētēs* literally means 'maker' of comedies – this same word gives us our word 'poet'; it stresses the creative element of art (a playwright 'makes' his artistic piece just as a sculptor would) over the written script, which was not at all important in a culture where poetry was primarily transmitted orally. This is reflected in the word translated 'producers of tragedies' which literally means 'teachers of tragedies', indicating the key role played by the poet in teaching his play to the cast.

instead of **iambic poems**, while others became producers of tragedies instead of epics, since these forms [i.e. comedy and tragedy] are greater and more noble than the others [i.e. iambic and epic]. Now to consider whether tragedy is already developed enough in its elements or not, and to critique it in itself and in relation to its audience, that is a separate subject. But since tragedy came into being **from an origin in improvisation** (this was the case with both tragedy and comedy, the former **from those who led off the dithyramps**, the latter from those who led off the phallic performances, which, even now, continue to be customary in many cities) tragedy grew little by little as people developed every element that was invented; after undergoing many changes, it stopped when it had **attained its own form**. **Aeschylus** was the first to raise the number of actors from one to two; he **reduced the part of the chorus** and gave the leading role to spoken dialogue. Sophocles introduced three actors and **painted scenery**. Now as to the greatness

iambic poems short poems that often included obscene language and lampooned individuals.

from an origin in improvisation, from those who led off the dithyramps it is wise to be suspicious of Aristotle's explanation of the origins of tragedy. Despite his authoritative tone, it is unlikely that, living in a culture with very few written records, he had any clear evidence on which to base his assertions of what had happened centuries earlier. Nothing that we know about dithyrambic poetry, which appears to have consisted of carefully composed matching sets of verses, suggests that it was improvised. Furthermore, it is strange that dithyramps were performed alongside tragedy if the former evolved into the latter. The word tragedy seems to mean 'goat-song' – though what exactly goats have to do with tragedy is not at all clear. Perhaps the best explanation is that the word refers to choral songs performed at the sacrifice of a goat (another suggestion is that a goat was the prize for the winning tragic chorus).

attained its own form Aristotle is perhaps influenced by his own interests in the natural world, where he was a keen observer of the different stages of animal development, and by his philosophical belief that everything in the natural world has its own inherent form. His belief in a static mature phase in the development of tragedy seems a little odd: the surviving plays show that playwrights continued to experiment.

Aeschylus ... reduced the part of the chorus the Greeks tended to attribute every advancement to a specific inventor: Prometheus was said to have invented metalwork, mining and a multitude of other technologies, while Arion, a poet living in Corinth around 600 BC, was credited with having invented both the dithyramb and tragedy. The innovations that Aristotle here ascribes to Aeschylus and Sophocles could, however, quite plausibly have been made by these influential playwrights. What Aristotle says about the increased prominence of spoken parts and the decline in the role of the chorus (whose odes were sung) can be statistically documented in the surviving tragedies whose date is known.

painted scenery since each of the four plays put on by a tragedian at the City Dionysia might have a different setting, such scenery must have been either generic or easily removable. The surviving plays use the words of the characters to paint the scene in the mind's eye (see p. 65).

of tragedy, which developed from small plots and ridiculous wording, it is only lately that it has become dignified – **since it developed out of satyr-performance** – and the metre has changed from tetrameter to iambic. At first they used the tetrameter because its poetry was appropriate for satyrs and more suitable for dancing; but after speaking was introduced, **nature herself** discovered the proper verse form. For of all the metres, the iambic is the most like speech.

Metres

Tragedy employs a multitude of metres, but Aristotle mentions two by name: the trochaic tetrameter (tetrameter: consisting of four feet to the line), which he believes to have been the original metre of tragic dialogue (and which does appear more frequently in the early plays of Aeschylus), and the iambic trimeter (trimeter: consisting of three feet to the line), which is the main metre of dialogue in both tragedy and comedy. The basic unit of the trochaic tetrameter is the trochee, a long syllable followed by a short. This is the metre used by Longfellow in his *Song of Hiawatha* (By the shores of Gitche Gumee / By the shining Big-Sea-Water). The iambic trimeter, on the other hand, is built up of iambs, which consist of a short followed by a long. This is the metre used in Shakespearean blank verse ('But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?' in *Romeo and Juliet*). Anapaests are also common in tragedy, used by the chorus, especially when they make their entrances and exits. They consist of two shorts followed by a long: you may be most familiar with them in Clement Clark Moore's Christmas poem ('Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house / Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse). Unlike English verse, however, which is stress-based, Greek metre is quantitative (i.e. based on syllable length). While the chorus in tragedy sings in a variety of lyric metres, the characters speak predominantly in the iambic metre, said to reflect the rhythms of normal conversation.

since it developed out of satyr-performance this comment, included as an aside, is perplexing and seems to contradict what Aristotle writes a few lines earlier about tragedy originating in the dithyramb. We have no convincing evidence that tragedy developed from satyr-play, which seems to arrive later as a dramatic genre.

nature herself in arguing that tragedy's adoption of the iambic metre was a spontaneous adaptation of nature to the introduction of spoken dialogue, Aristotle introduces an important motif of his analysis of drama – that art is imitation or *mimēsis* of reality (in the case of tragedy, Aristotle says earlier in the *Poetics*, what is being imitated are people's actions). For Aristotle, the theatre-goer experiences pleasure in drama precisely because of its mimetic quality – for, as he argues, 'the human differs from all other animals in this respect: that it is the most mimetic' (*Poetics* 1448b). See 6.20, where the intellectual pleasure of *mimesis* and *Poetics* 1448b are discussed at greater length.

- 1 What aspects of Aristotle's account of the development of the dramatic genres strike you as most idiosyncratic and least credible?
- 2 What appear to be Aristotle's main interests in analysing the development of different dramatic forms?
- 3 'The purpose of playing', said Hamlet (3.2), is 'to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature.' Do you believe that theatre does serve as a mirror of real life, or is it inherently deceptive?

The following extract is taken from the work of Diogenes Laertius (3.56), probably writing in the third century AD; his compendium of the lives and doctrines of philosophers collects information gleaned from earlier writers.

- 1.5 But just as long ago in tragedy at first only the chorus performed, then later **Thespis** devised a single actor in order to give the chorus an intermission, then Aeschylus introduced the second actor, and Sophocles the third, thus bringing tragedy to its complete form – **so too philosophy** at first was of just one type, namely physics, then Socrates added the second type, ethics, and Plato the third, dialectics, thereby completing philosophy.

- 1 Modern-day audiences tend to see the episodes played by the actors as being the core of Greek tragedy and view the choral odes as intermissions. What evidence do ancient sources such as Aristotle and Diogenes Laertius offer to suggest that this attitude is misguided?
- 2 What interests and attitudes do these two authors share?
- 3 What reasons might there be for the introduction of the actor other than the explanation given by Diogenes Laertius – that he was invented in order to give the chorus a breather?
- 4 What dramatic possibilities were opened up by introducing a second actor?
- 5 Thespis is still remembered today in the word 'thespian'. How is this word used today?

Thespis Thespis (active in the late sixth century and said to come from Ikarion, a village with close ties to Dionysus) was credited with many different theatrical inventions, including the mask and the invention of tragedy itself. Here he is said to have invented the actor. The Greek word for actor (*hypokritēs*) literally means 'answerer' (though it can also mean 'interpreter' or 'expounder'). One possible explanation for the word is that it reflects the origins of the single actor, who emerged from the chorus and was given spoken lines that responded to the songs of his fellow-dancers.

so too philosophy tragedy is frequently compared to other performance genres, especially philosophy, rhetoric and epic. Like tragic actors, philosophers, rhetoricians and rhapsodes also addressed large audiences, and frequently used the theatre as their venue.

Satyr-play

Satyr-drama seems to have been a relatively late addition to the theatrical repertoire; according to tradition, it made its debut at the City Dionysia around 500 BC. However, the tradition of impersonating dancing satyrs seems to go back much further, judging from the pictorial evidence. These early representations portray satyrs as part-human, part-animal (they have the basic figure of a human, with the ears and tail of a horse and a permanently erect **phallus**) and they often accompany Dionysus. Athenians seem to have dressed up as satyrs for the springtime **Anthesteria** festival that celebrated the arrival of Dionysus and of the new wine.

Satyr-plays seem to have shared certain elements, though our direct knowledge of their content is limited, since sizeable portions of only two satyr-plays have survived – part of Sophocles' *Trackers* and all of Euripides' *Cyclops*. They sported a chorus of satyrs, accompanied by an elderly satyr called Silenus (the Athenian word for a satyr) or Papposilenus ('Daddy-Silenus'). These satyrs behaved badly, flouting many of the inhibitions of civilized society. They indulged their appetites to an extreme, eating and drinking without restraint and seeking sexual gratification wherever they could find it. At the City Dionysia during the fifth century BC, each tragic playwright put on a satyr-play after his three tragedies; its subject-matter might or might not be related to that of the preceding three plays. After the intensity of tragedy, whose stage action often exposed the dire consequences of making the wrong choice, the hilarity of a satyr-play must have come as light relief, like the jig at the end of an Elizabethan tragedy. It also might have contributed to what anthropologists identify as one of the key functions of festival, which is to serve as a release for society, a socially sanctioned temporary reversal of societal norms. Like tragedy, it drew its subject-matter from myth; but it took the heroic world of tragedy and epic and subverted it through parody. Written by the same playwrights as the preceding tragedies and employing the same cast, they were clearly an integral part of the ensemble at the City Dionysia festival, though they did not feature among the performances at the Lenaea festival.

A famous vase (1.6) dating to c. 400 BC offers us a unique look at the cast of a satyr-play. The figures are arranged schematically, with chorus-members (**choreuts**) occupying the flanks, main characters taking up the centre of the upper field, two musicians displayed prominently in the middle of the lower field, and the poet seated to their left. Most are identified by name.

The choreuts are shown in a state of relaxation. Several appear to be conversing; the two outermost figures in the upper field are surveying the scene. One choreut is shown in full swing, performing the **sikinnis**, the vigorous dance of satyr-play.

This snapshot gives us an excellent view, from various angles, of satyr costume. Unlike the actors in other dramatic genres, members of the satyr chorus wore very little clothing. Their costume consisted of a pair of shaggy breeches, representing the hairy body of a satyr, to which were attached a horse-tail and phallus, and a full head mask, with the snub nose, straggly beard and elongated ears characteristic of satyrs. Most of the choreuts are holding their masks, and some appear to be scrutinizing them. The second figure from the right in the lower field is wearing an elaborate sleeveless *chiton* (tunic) and a *himation* (cloak). That he is playing the part of a satyr is indicated by his mask – perhaps his costume distinguishes him as the leader of the chorus, or perhaps he is wearing the robes that he wore in the victory procession. All the choreuts appear to be in the prime of their youth. The names that appear above their heads are generally ordinary Athenian names and reflect the names of the performers rather than of their characters.

The figures seated on the couch are not actors: two of them are women, and women were not allowed to act. The reclining male figure is labelled as Dionysus. He wears a tiara, his wavy hair falls down onto his bare chest, and he holds his characteristic ivy-topped *thyrsus* staff; to his left grows a vine. He shares the couch and footstool with a female figure (probably his consort Ariadne) whom he clasps in an embrace. Neither one carries a mask; they are not characters in the play but are probably included because of Dionysus' association with the festival. Perched on the end of the couch is a woman holding a female mask. She may be a personification (e.g. the Muse of tragedy, or the personification of satyr-play) or she may represent a female part played by one of the three male actors. The high headdress on her mask might suggest that she is an oriental queen. She is attended by a small winged figure labelled Himeros ('desire'), so perhaps she represents the love-interest of one of the male characters.

Flanking this central tableau are the three actors of the play. They are all mature men with full beards. To the left of Dionysus stands an actor carrying a mask with full beard. His mask and his elaborate costume with its rich embroidery suggest that he might be playing the part of a king. To the right of centre stands the actor playing Heracles, wearing trademark lion-skin, club and lion-head mask. His *chiton*, *himation* and high boots are all elaborately decorated and he wears a breastplate that accentuates his physique. Like the actor to Dionysus' left, his face bears a curious resemblance to his mask, so that it almost looks as if he has become the character he is impersonating. Facing him to his right stands the actor who played Papposilenus. The white beard and hair of his mask, which is crowned with an ivy-wreathed diadem, and his full-body woolly tights, dappled with white tufts, characterize him as the patriarch of the satyrs. He carries a staff and a leopard skin.