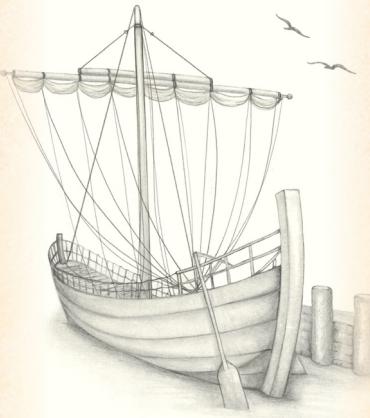




Historically Speaking

Volume 4, Number 10 October 2025

Greek Drama



What's happening?

I was fortunate enough to get to attend the Pacific Northwest Writers Assoc. conference in Seattle Sept. 11 through 14. Margaret Atwood (The Handmaid's Tale) was the keynote speaker (virtually). The conference was fantastic. It was a great networking opportunity.

I got to sell a few books at the book fair at the conference.

Greek theatre began in the 6th century BCE in Athens with the performance of tragedy plays at religious festivals. These, in turn, inspired the genre of Greek comedy plays. The two types of Greek drama would be hugely popular and performances spread around the Mediterranean and influenced Hellenistic and Roman theatre.

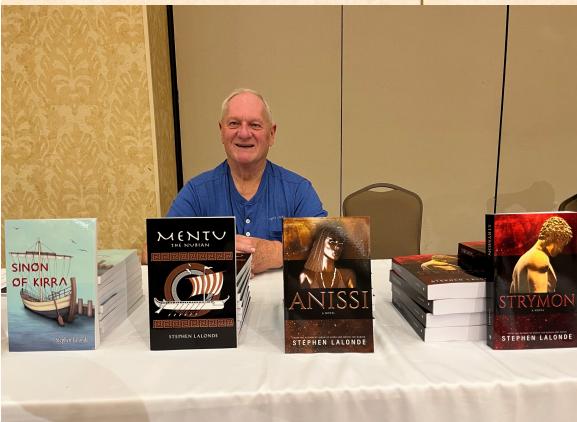
As a consequence of their lasting popularity, the works of such great playwrights as Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes formed the foundation upon which all modern theatre is based. In a similar way, the architecture of the ancient Greek theatre has continued to inspire the design of theatres today.

The Origins of Tragedy

The exact origins of tragedy (*tragōida*) are debated amongst scholars. Some have linked the rise of the genre to an earlier art form, the lyrical performance of epic poetry, (and this is the theory to which I subscribe, and yet the following is also true. S. Lalonde.) Others suggest a strong link with the rituals performed in the worship of Dionysos such as the sacrifice of goats - a song ritual called *tragōdia* - and the wearing of masks. Indeed, Dionysos became known as the god of theatre and perhaps there is another connection - the drinking rites which resulted in the worshippers losing full control of their emotions and in effect becoming another person, much as actors (*hypokritai*) hope to do when performing. The music and dance of Dionysiac ritual was most evident in the role of the chorus and the music provided by an aulos player, but rhythmic elements were also preserved in the use of first, trochaic tetrameter and then iambic trimeter in the delivery of the spoken words.



A terracotta tragic theatre mask, 200-250 BCE. (Agora Museum, Athens). The masks also served to amplify the actors voice through resonance (SDL)



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Greek Comedy - Origins

The precise origins of Greek comedy plays are lost in the mists of prehistory, but the activity of men dressing up and mimicking others must surely go back a long way before written records. The first indications of such activity in the Greek world come from pottery, where decoration in the 6th century BCE frequently represented actors dressed as horses, satyrs, and dancers in exaggerated costumes. Another early source of comedy is the poems of Archilochus (7th century BCE) and Hipponax (6th century BCE) which contain crude and explicit sexual humour. A third origin, and cited as such by Aristotle, lies in the phallic songs which were sung during Dionysiac festivals.

A Greek Comedy Play

Although innovations occurred, a comedy play followed a conventional structure. The first part was the parados where the Chorus of as many as 24 performers entered and performed a number of song and dance routines. Dressed to impress, their outlandish costumes could represent anything from giant bees with huge stingers to knights riding another man in imitation of a horse or even a variety of kitchen utensils. In many cases the play was actually named after the Chorus, e.g., Aristophanes' *The Wasps*.

The second phase of the show was the agon which was often a witty verbal contest or debate between the principal actors with fantastical plot elements and the fast changing of scenes which may have included some improvisation. The third part of the play was the parabasis, when the Chorus spoke directly to the audience and even directly spoke for the poet. The show-stopping finale of a comedy play was the exodos when the Chorus gave another rousing song and dance routine.

As in tragedy plays, all performers were male actors, singers, and dancers. One star performer and two other actors performed all of the speaking parts. On occasion, a fourth actor was permitted but only if non-instrumental to the plot. Comedy plays allowed the playwright to address more directly events of the moment than the formal genre of tragedy.

The most famous comedy playwrights were Aristophanes (460 - 380 BCE) and Menander (c. 342-291 BCE) who won festival competitions just like the great tragedians. Their works frequently poked fun at politicians, philosophers, and fellow artists, some of whom were sometimes even in the audience. Menander was also credited with helping to create a different version of comedy plays known as New Comedy (so that previous plays became known as Old Comedy). He introduced a young romantic lead to plays, which became, along with several other stock types such as a cook and a cunning slave, a popular staple character. New Comedy also saw more plot twists, suspense, and treatment of common people and their daily problems.

The satyr plays can be considered the reversal of Attic tragedy, a kind of "joking tragedy." The actors play mythical heroes engaged in action drawn from traditional mythical tales, but the chorus members are satyrs, guided by old Silenus. Satyrs are nature spirits who combine male human traits (beards, hairy bodies, flat noses, and an erect phallus) with the ears and tails of horses. (See also satyr and silenus.) The satyrs are contrasted with the main characters—who are more or less serious—by their dancing, their love of wine, and their diverting banter, often expressed in low language. This contrast, which is the special trait of satyric drama, served to alleviate the emotional tension of the tragic trilogy.

Under the influence of comedy, the growing sophistication of Athenian audiences reduced the need for satyr plays to produce comic relief, as is seen in *Alcestis* (438 BC), the fourth drama produced by Euripides, which is almost completely lacking in the genre's traditional characteristics. Only one traditional satyr play, Euripides' *Cyclops*, survives.



Ancient Greek comedy masks made from organic materials like leather, linen, and hair, these full-face masks covered the actor's head and allowed a single performer to embody different personas, with the mask dictating the character's role in the performance.