

STORYTELLING AND COMMUNITY: BEYOND THE ORIGINS OF THE ANCIENT
THEATRE, GREEK AND ROMAN

by

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the beginning of time, man has had an innate need for creativity expressed through storytelling. This action, incredibly intimate in its nature, is a ritual found across the world regardless of cultural boundaries or social class; this instinct to convey a narrative has happened ever since communication developed, from the first cave paintings describing a hunt to oral traditions passed on for centuries. Theatre, the art which is performed live and uses storytellers (or actors) to relate experiences to an audience, comes from ceremony, a tradition "...so old that its origins are lost in prehistory" (Brockett, *The Theatre* 3). Humanity is fascinated by action, which are experiences which explain and educate: "...A play is a representation of man in action... 'Man in action' includes the whole range of feelings, thoughts, and deeds that define what sort of creature man is- what he does and why he does it" (28). Greek and Roman theatre are important example of how theatre directly demonstrates the culture from which it is created and that this form of storytelling is vital to a community, for it entertains but also demands reflection and intercourse.

GREEK THEATRE

The origins of theatre may be imprecise, but it is clear who the first masterful storytellers were, for they are the great civilization from which modern political structure, rational thought, and creative art all draw: the ancient Greeks. In his *Beyond the Fatal Flaw*, Coolidge surmises that "the Greek tragedies, perhaps more than any other storytellers, operated within an elaborate framework of traditions and conventions" (101). Theatre and the conveyance of a story to the Greeks are beyond entertainment, but an

integral part of their culture, prompting worship and healthy competition. For the Greeks, theatre was an experience of the entire citizenry and “it is hard to think of any period since then where theatre has expressed so clearly and directly the mood and mind of a whole community” (Knox 3) because the Greeks understood “[the] need to imitate life... innate in the human psyche” (Fraser 7). The Greeks used storytelling to engage but also to create unity in the population and interactive communication between performance and audience. Indeed, the Greeks were so enamored of the theatre that the structure was built into the Athenian capital at Athens in the Acropolis (literally "city on the extremity" or a citadel built upon a hill) next to the Parthenon, the temple dedicated to the goddess Athena (see Fig. 1.). Multi-day festivals and theatre competitions arose out of storytelling and “a love of pageantry and formalized ritual that permeated their entire society... For the Greeks, performance was an integral part of all aspects of their life. Athenian democracy involved the entire adult male population, and at several meetings a month on the Pnyx, a hill standing opposite the Acropolis of the city, these men performed speeches in front of thousands to persuade or to inflame” (“Origins of Greek Theater” 352).

The Dithyramb

To truly understand ancient theatre, one must examine the fundamental worship of the gods. Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, fertility, and spring, was the source of inspiration of Grecian theatre. Dionysus was a symbol of inhibitions and the future:

Dionysus is related to gods from the Near East and Egypt, such as Osiris, but his presence in the Greek pantheon is no intrusion. While Apollo represented qualities the Athenians prized most—such as rational thought,

ordered musical and poetic composition, and civic justice—the Greeks were also aware that human nature is two-fold. For every rational thought, there is an irrational desire. For every beautifully composed paean or song on the lyre, there is a wild and unformed song of pure, raw human emotion. In the Homeric Hymn to Dionysus, the god displays his unpredictable nature and demonstrates how he creates "enthusiasm," literally "the inspiration of the god," in his followers. The women who worship him, known as *maenads*, or "mad women," gave themselves up completely to the intoxicating power of the god, power that could bring ease and comfort from life's suffering but also brought the consequences of inhibition. ("Origins of Greek Theater" 352)

Dithyrambs, although there are none exist today, were hymns sung for Dionysus by a chorus of fifty men, with a dance (specifically known as a *tyrbasia*) accompanied by the *aulos* (Grecian pipes similar to a clarinet) or the *kitharode* (a lyre). In the 600s BCE, the dithyramb was developed by a performer named Arion. Arion “was undoubtedly the greatest harpist of the time and...his most important contribution was the insertion of ‘spoken verses’ in the middle of the dithyrambs” thus creating the first tragedy in Greece (Freedley 30). What little is known today is that these songs were written in stanzas and the dances included a chorus of men or women (rarely mixed) who linked hands in a circle; these moves are preserved on vases and reliefs from the era. The dithyramb blossomed into lively competition with ten choruses each year, five of men and five of

boys. Brown in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre* observes that “rivalry for influence and attention was fundamental to ancient Greek civilization” (13).

Grecian Tragedy

From the dithyramb came tragedy:

In the early days there were just two ‘contests’, dithyramb and tragedy.

Ten choruses of fifty men and ten of fifty boys (making 1,000 performers a year) competed in the dithyramb, an elaborate song with circular choreography, originally about Dionysus. Dithyramb long pre-existed this festival and was not special to Athens: *tragoidia*, on the other hand, seems to have been a purely Athenian art-form, in effect invented when it was established at the Great Dionysia. (Brown 14)

The competition of tragedy began in 540 BCE with the festival of City Dionysia in Athens which lasted until 20 BCE, honoring the cult Dionysus Eleuthereus and “was a religious ceremony and also a political occasion, a celebration of the imperial power and social cohesion of the Athenian people” (Knox 3). Three contestants competed in late March originally in the *agora* (literally “assembly”), and the winner was crowned in ivy. A subsequent smaller festival, Rural Dionysia, began outside of Athens in the fifth century during the month of December, but it was not nearly as popular.

The formal play structure known as tragedy conveyed knowledge, shared cultural heritage, and gave form to expression (Scodel 20). Tragedy required characters of noble birth, commentary from a chorus, high stakes, a serious action and mood, and often questioned man’s actions, the influence of fate, the gods and moral order, and depicted

suffering and conflict. The term comes from the Greek word *tragoidia*, literally meaning “goat song” as a goat was a prize (or sacrifice to Dionysus) for the winner. Ferguson states in *A Companion to Greek Tragedy* that “the association of the goat with Dionysus is important. Dionysus is the power that throbs with animal life, through all life, the power of nature in the raw. He shows himself through wine... The goat is another... manifestation” (7).

The plays themselves were adaptations of well-known stories: “The least innovative feature in the new art of tragedy was its repertoire of stories and characters... [the Greeks] simply moved in and reoccupied the entire archaic forest of myth” (Herington 128). Yet the idea of myth was incredibly influential, considering that for the Greeks, theatre was not just a social event but religious observance. Without theatre, modern literature would have considerably fewer epic tales which have been kept and even rewritten throughout history in different cultures, preserving the narrative. Some of the key elements were *hamartia* (a hero’s tragic flaw) and often specifically hubris (excessive pride), reversal (the protagonist must be punished for misguided actions), and reestablished order (one character self-sacrifices for the greater good). In *An Introduction to the Greek Theatre*, Arnott states that “the excitement of Greek tragedy lies in rather the cut and thrust of debate, the thrill of anticipation, the gradual realization of inevitable disaster, [rather] than in the horror of watching a blood-thirsty spectacle” (23).

Structurally, each play included *stichomythia* (literally “story by lines;” dialogue), a *parabasis* (a choral ode to the audience), a *prologue* (a spoken introduction), a *parados* (the entry of the chorus), scenes called *episodes* alternating with *stasimons* (choral

commentary on previous episode), *strophes* (turn), *antistrophes* (counter turn), *epode* (after song), and an *exodos* (the choral exit). They drew upon epic poetry but “another crucial departure from epic narrative is that tragedy, in contrast to a single voice in a single metre, alternated sections of iambic speech and dialogue with dance-songs performed by a chorus.... The complex metres, which were always different, though known as ‘lyric’, were accompanied by the double pipes (*aulos*). The music and choreography seem to have been expressive of mood, tone, and atmosphere, rather than representing any sort of ‘narrative’ features within the songs” (Brown 16). Grecian tragedy remained true to its dithyrambic roots and always included song and dance.

In Greece, a communal society in general strengthened by a representative democracy, the audience was just as impassioned and emotional as political debate. Even in national crisis and “constantly embroiled in warfare during the century of their greatest accomplishments, they used the strife and suffering that war brings to strengthen their patriotism and their artistic expression” (“Origins of Greek Theater” 352). One of the main functions of tragedy was *catharsis*, the purging of emotion, which embraced the idea of “unity in sorrow” (Silk 197). The theatre was supposed to inspire emotion in the audience, “a concrete, public sharing of grief through the collective response of the chorus, and more broadly through the community of spectators in the theatre” (Silk 149).

The organization of the festival was meticulously planned by the state, even paying for the leading actors and providing the space. The playwrights applied to the city magistrate or the *archon*, an appointed citizen responsible for organizing the festivals who selected three of the playwrights, with the previous winner automatically accepted.

He also chose three *choregoi* by lottery, rich citizens who sponsored a chorus' training, including rehearsals, costumes, and set. Ten judges, representing each of the ten tribes, were chosen by a draw. It is hypothesized that "after the performances, the judges cast ballots into an urn, voting only for the winner. The first five ballots were drawn and publicly read; if the productions had three or more votes, it won. If none did, another two ballots were drawn and read...until a winner emerged" (Scodel 45). The names of the winning playwright and their plays were inscribed upon clay tablets while the remaining votes were destroyed. Awards were given at City Dionysia for the best play (one each for tragedy and comedy) and eventually also for the best actor. There were generally no rules about the plays but simply a "build up of expectations and conventions that grew out of precedents" (Brown 30).

The audience attendance was "closely linked to citizenship" (Winkler 4), because "not only elite males but all male citizens [attended] the Greek theatre" (Garland 1). No legal proceedings were allowed during the festival and even prisoners were temporarily released to see the festival. Admission was two *obols* (literally "spits"; a silver coin which was one sixth of a *drachma*) but any male citizen could enroll with a state fund called the *theorika* to pay for his ticket. Seats were assigned according to the ten tribes.

The process for each day of the festival was very precise. The first day of the festival included a *proagon* or a preview of the plays in "a ceremony in which all classes of citizens, rich and poor alike, took part: priests and other officials dressed in gorgeous robes, young women bearing on their heads baskets containing implements for the sacrifices, young men with shields and spears, the members of choral and dramatic

groups gaily dressed in brilliant costumes, and thousands of others...” (Allen, *Stage Antiquities of the Greeks and Romans and Their Influence* 36) The statue of Dionysus was also carried down the road into Athens. Day two of the festival included the *pompe*, or a ritual procession. Days two and three were devoted to dithyrambic contests, while days four, five, and six were dramatic contests. At the start of the play, “the priest of Dionysus enters and after making an offering on the alter takes his place in the front row... A herald announces the name of the first play and its author... A single actor enters the orchestra by the *parodos* on our right, wearing what will prove to be actor’s standard costume [and] a mask that covers the whole face...” (Sandbach 18).

The Greek Actor

A *chorus*, the descendant of dithyrambic competition, was a vital a group of male performers who acted as one, sung, and commented on the play’s action, led by the *coryphaios*; a tragic chorus originally had 50 members while a comic chorus had 24 members. Indeed, many plays included a choral lament (six of the 32 remaining tragedies: Aeschylus’ *Suppliants*, *Persians*, and *Agamemnon*, Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Euripides’ *Heracleidae* and *Trojan Women*) in which “a mood of hysteria in a world which seems to be overwhelming” was created, taking the point of view of central character and adding “texture” to an otherwise bare plot (Coolidge 8).

In 534 BCE, the chorus member Thespis stepped out to speak lines independently, becoming the first actor, the origin of the word “thespian.” The costume was vital to the success of performing for such an immense audience; tragic actors wore *chitons* (tunics), *himations* (cloaks), *chlamo*i (short cloaks), *kothor*noi or *buskins* (high-laced “boots”), and

masks (large exaggerated masks with a conical mouth, see Fig. 2). Masks were “oversized in order to better express and convey characteristics and emotions in the large theaters... and they were also often designed to help project the voice...” (Fraser 8); Pollux’s list of tragic masks included six old male masks (the three oldest were “shaven,” “white,” and “brindled”), middle-aged bearded masks (“dark,” “fair,” and “fairer”), beardless male masks (“admirable,” “curly,” “younger curly,” “delicate,” “dirty,” “second dirty,” “pale,” and “second pale”), eleven heroic male masks, three male servants masks (“leather-clad” who is a rustic, “wedge-beard” who is a messenger, and “brushed-back” who is also a messenger), and female servant masks with many complexions and hair colors (“grey long-haired,” “free old woman,” “old housekeeper,” “half-shorn housekeeper,” “leather-clad girl,” “long-haired pale,” “half-shorn pale,” “half-shorn fresh,” “first shorn maiden,” “second shorn maiden,” and “girl”) (Webster, *Greek Theatre Production* 46-52). A comedic actor also wore an *embas* (a soft shoe) and a phallus (a large cast of a male sex organ, used in Old Greek Comedy), while “the actor of Old Comedy, when he is to perform a male part, wears a mask, tights with a phallos sewn in to them which support his padding, and over the tights any other clothing that suits his part” (Webster, *Greek Theatre Production* 29).

The Satyr Play

In approximately 515 BCE, the satyr play was created, a raucous comedic entertainment using a chorus of satyrs with horse features including a tail, ears, and a phallus. Allen in *Stage Antiquities of the Greeks and Romans and Their Influence* remarked that “the stock characters [in satyr plays] were the chorus of satyrs and an actor

who impersonated a Silenus... Coarse and bestial were the features of Silenus and shaggy his tight-fitting costume while the makeup of the choreutae comprised loin-bands of cloth or skin, each with phallic symbol and tail attached, and masks with animal ears” (11). Although, there seems to be no standard as “satyr masks did however vary: the early satyr chorus is bald as satyrs often are said to be...” (Webster, *Greek Theatre Production* 31). In 500 BCE, the standard tetralogy, a trilogy of related plays and a satyr play written as a unit by the same playwright, was established for theatre competitions.

The Greek Theatre Structure and Technical Flourishes

Within the Athenian Acropolis, the Theatre of Dionysus was built into the southern slope in 493 BCE (see Fig. 3). It had perfect acoustics and was built permanently in stone in the fourth century, and included the *orchestra* (literally “dancing space,” where the actors performed), the *theatron* (literally “viewing space,” where an audience of roughly 14,000 sat with the front row reserved for priests and important guests), the *thymele* (the altar in the middle of the orchestra), the *skene* (the tiring house behind the stage, which developed in the fifth century a *paraskene* or side wings, a second story on the (*episkenion*), and a *proskenion*), the *parodoi/eisodoi* (arches through which actors entered and exited the orchestra), and the *theologeion* (literally “place where the gods speak,” the skene roof where actors playing gods could appear) (see Fig. 4 and 5). The stage was 45’ wide (increased to 60’ in the fourth century), across the orchestra to the audience measured 60’ (over 70’ in the fourth century), and it was 300’ from the stage to the back row: “This means that an actor 6 ft. high would look 3 1/2 in. high to the

spectator in the front and 3/4 in. high to spectators at the back” (Webster, *Greek Theatre Production* 4).

Scenic elements included the *ekkyklema* (a platform or cart which wheeled out to show dead characters), the *periaktoi* (triangles of scenic flats on a pivot), the *machane* (a crane to lift actors and essentially an early fly system) for the *deus ex machina* (literally “god from the machine,” which now means a contrived ending). In the early fifth century, “we may... assume that screens representing rocks and possibly also a back-cloth representing the sea could be carried on swiftly when desired” (Webster, *Greek Theatre Production* 17). There were no lights or recorded music, even bare by modern standards, but this allowed for the emphasis to remain on the story. Such a building enforces the sense of community, as the plays and emotions they inspired were experienced together.

Grecian Tragic Playwriting

There are very few works of tragic Greek playwriting that remain and “it goes without saying that there is no determining how representative of fifth-century tragedy our surviving sample is” (Garland 2). Yet there are three playwrights, who were writers, directors, composers, poets, and actors all in one, who remain examples of great playwriting today, “whose medium of thought was the sage, who used the whole machinery of the theatre as a way of thinking, critically and constructively, about their world” (Arrowsmith 32). They not only conserved great epics, but asked the congregation to respond intellectually and emotionally.

In 484 BCE, Aeschylus first won in City Dionysia, which was followed by eleven more wins. Aeschylus lived from 525- 456 BCE just north of Athens and was famous for

his lofty themes, complex language, and Homer-esque scope in the estimated eighty plays he is accredited with writing. Of these, seven survive today: *The Persians** (written in 472 BCE), *Seven Against Thebes** (467 BCE), the tetralogy *The Oresteia** which includes *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, *Eumenides* (circa 458 BCE), *The Suppliants** (circa 468 BCE), *Prometheus Bound* (date unknown).¹ Winnington-Ingram is quoted for stating that “no poet has presented tragic evil with less mitigation than Aeschylus” (Garland 7). Additionally, Aeschylus introduced the second actor, an important addition to the dynamics of playwriting and how the characters were portrayed.

In 468 BCE, Aeschylus was beaten at City Dionysia by the great playwright Sophocles. Sophocles (496-406 BCE) was probably born in Colonus and very little was known about his personal life until he competed in his youth in a chorus. He is known as the *best* ancient playwright and a masterful storyteller, and he wrote over one hundred plays, winning City Dionysia approximately twenty times, but only seven of his plays remain: *Ajax* (written circa 440 BCE), *Antigone** (441 BCE), his most well-known work *Oedipus Rex* (circa 430 BCE), *Electra* (circa 418 BCE), *The Trachiniae** (413 BCE), *Philoctetes** (409 BCE), and *Oedipus at Colonus* (circa 407 BCE). His protagonists often were plagued by hubris, such as Oedipus, and had “attributes of divinity- knowledge, certainty, justice- are the qualities Oedipus thought he possessed- and that is why he is the perfect example of the inadequacy of human knowledge, certainty, and justice” (Knox 107). The plays were intricate plot-based stories, with “[an extremely strong] sense of loneliness... But it is always the distinguishing mark of a hero, the sign of fate which

¹ * denotes the play is recorded as having won City Dionysia

makes him an outcast, exiled from the world to the world's advantage and his own anguish" (Arrowsmith 41). Sophocles also made changes to the standards in the theatre competitions, introducing the third actor and reducing the chorus' size to twelve members. George Eliot once said "[Sophocles is] the single dramatic poet who can be said to stand on a level with Shakespeare" (Garland 8).

In 455 BCE, Euripides first competed. Euripides (480-406 BCE) was not nearly as popular and was often mocked by the other playwrights, perhaps because he "almost always begins with a severe critique of tradition, which necessarily means a critique of his predecessors" (Arrowsmith 38). He is attributed with developing the prologue, using *deus ex machina* excessively, painting scenery, enlarging the chorus to fifteen members, writing over ninety plays, and winning City Dionysia four times with modern, idea-based plays. There are eighteen surviving plays by Euripides: *Alcestis* (written in 438 BCE), *Medea* (431 BCE), *Heracleidae* (circa 430 BCE), *Hippolytus** (428 BCE), *Andromache* (circa 425 BCE), *Hecuba* (circa 424 BCE), *The Suppliants* (circa 423 BCE), *Electra* (circa 420 BCE), *Heracles* (circa 416 BCE), his famous *The Trojan Women* (415 BCE), *Iphigenia in Tauris* (circa 414 BCE), *Ion* (circa 414 BCE), *Helen* (412 BCE), *The Phoenician Women* (circa 410 BCE), *Orestes* (408 BCE), *The Bacchae** (405 BCE), *Iphigenia in Aulis** (405 BCE), and *The Cyclops* (date unknown and the only complete satyr play today). These three playwrights dominated the theatre in the Golden Age and their plays were (and are) used as models for centuries. Their plays are important because they consequently sparked serious discussions ranging from fate and the gods to human flaw.

Grecian Comedy

The term comedy comes from the Greek “komoidia,” literally “revel song.” In 442 BCE, the first comedic theatre festival, Lenaea, began. It took place in January with three to five competitors and focused on the less-popular comedy rather than tragedy, like City Dionysia. The structure of each play included a prologue, a parados an agon (literally “a contest” but refers to Old Comedy scripted debate), parabasis (humorous moments), episodes and stasimons, and a komos/comus (a revelrous procession or exit). Comedy is divided into two categories: Old Comedy and New Comedy.

The fifth century was dominated by Old Comedy, with a chorus and a large number of characters, and the subject commented on modern politicians, philosophers, and even gods using parody. Winkler writes that “in tragedy, culture is seen as continuous with nature, in that both are arenas of lawful, comprehensible forces linked by man’s submission to the gods. In Old Comedy, on the other hand, the hero need not submit to the gods; neither nature is permanent” (328). Sandbach finds that Old Comedy “has five elements: 1) anapests; 2) a song (ode); 3) sixteen or twenty long trochaic lines (epirrhema); 4) another song (antode) metrically corresponding with the first; 5) [and] sixteen or twenty long trochaic lines (antepirrhema)” (43). The greatest Old comedy playwright was Aristophanes (448-380 BCE), who first won at Lenaea in 425 BCE. He was a political conservative, bawdy, witty, and wrote roughly 40 plays, eleven of which survive: *The Archarnians* (425), *Knights* (424), *Clouds* (circa 420), *Wasps* (422), *Peace* (421), *Birds* (414), *Lysistrata* (411), *Women at the Festival* (411), *Frogs* (405), *Women in Parliament* (circa 391), *Wealth* (388). Aristophanes is famous for his political criticism

(especially the Peloponnesian War against Sparta, which began in 431 BCE) of anyone from magistrates to Socrates because he strived to teach his audience.

However, theatrical criticism in general stopped after 401 BCE when Athens lost the Peloponnesian War and Old Comedy gave way to New Comedy, the last of Athenian theatrical developments: cultural domestic topics, light in tone, which were sexual not political. The subject was every-day life, often with a young couple in love, and plots included mistaken identities and the beginnings of stock characters. New Comedy plays were “performed by the chorus... The actors’ padding and phalli were things of the past; they were now dressed in decent conventional contemporary clothing... But masks were still worn” (Sandbach 55). The champion of this style was Menander (342-292 BCE). He was a pupil of Aristotle and wrote an estimated 100 plays, none of which survive in entirety except *Dyskolos* but only portions including *Samia*, *Perikeiromene*, *Epitrepontes*, *The Man from Sicyon*, and *Misoumenos*. It might be noted that his work was greatly adapted for centuries after he died. Grecian comedy, both Old and New, demanded reflections on how one lives their life as well as social and political movements.

Grecian Philosophical Observation and Aristotle

The greatest of Grecian philosophers and additionally a commentator of theatre was Aristotle (384-322 BCE), who was also a scientist, studied with Plato, and taught Alexander the Great. He stressed the importance of tragedy in stating that “tragedy is an imitation not of human beings but of action and life” (Jones 14). In 335 BCE, he wrote *The Poetics*, a descriptive criticism on tragedy, which emphasized the importance of *eleos* and *phobos* (pity and fear) which, in his opinion, yielded catharsis. Ingram Baywater’s

translation of *The Poetics*, published in 1909, reveals the following opinions of Aristotle on what made great theatre:

It follows, therefore, that there are three forms of plot to be avoided. (1) A good man must not be seen passing from happiness to misery, or (2) a bad man from misery to happiness. The first situation is not fear-inspiring or piteous, but simply odious to us. The second is the most untragic that can be; it has no one of the requisites of Tragedy; it does not appeal either to the human feelings in us, or to our pity, or to our fears. Nor on the other hand should (3) an extremely bad man be seen falling from happiness into misery. Such a story may arouse human feelings in us, but it will not move us to either pity or fear; pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves; so that there will be nothing either piteous or fear-inspiring in the situation. There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not preeminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error in judgement... The perfect plot must, therefore, have a single issue, and not (as some tell us) a double issue; the change in the hero's fortunes must not be from misery to happiness but on the contrary from happiness to misery; and the cause of it must not lie in any depravity, but in some great error [hamartia] on his part; the man himself being either such as we have described, or of one better, not worse, than he. (Jones 19)

Aristotle also stressed the importance of a structured plot with a beginning, a middle, and end which inspired the modern “plot triangle”: an opening or the point of attack, an exposition, an inciting incident or point of conflict, rising action with obstacles or development, a climax or point of crisis, falling action or abatement, denouement, and a resolution. Aristotle also described six elements of dramatic action necessary for a play: plot or how the story unfolds, character, idea, language or diction, music, and spectacle or the visual elements. He also created the Three Unities, an idea misinterpreted as prescriptive by many that states that the action of the play should focus on a single plot, there should only be a single physical place or setting at one time on the stage, and the time of the play should represent action within 24 hours. These ideas were strongly influential upon the development of playwriting but also are vital in understanding the changes that take place in literature across the history.

ROMAN THEATRE

Classical Greece truly flourished in the fifth and fourth centuries but was soon replaced as the world dominant power by Rome. Ancient Rome was one of the largest empires in history, lauded for its development of an excellent military, a structured government consisting of both patricians (rich upper class citizen represented in the Senate) and plebeians (ordinary citizens who were members of the People’s Assembly), and technological advances such as a network of roads. The Republic (509 BCE to 27 BCE and subsequently The Empire from 27 BCE to 476 CE) was greatly influenced by Grecian culture; part of Rome’s success was the integration of foreign cultures of the lands which they conquered. Roman culture included pieces from all seven hills such as

Latin language, indeterminate mythology modeled after Greek gods, art such as painting and sculpture as well as music based on that of the Greeks, athletics, and also incorporated traditions of conquered nations.

Spectacle

The Romans enjoyed, more than the Grecian tragedy which asked deep intellectual questions, spectacle: “Not only was the audience one with less knowledge and appreciation of drama that was usual among the Greeks, it was also one with less respect for those who performed it” (Sandbach 109). Performances were not limited to theatre but included gladiator contests, sea battles (naumachia), and animal baiting (venationes) along with chariot racing performed in amphitheaters that seated 10,000-15,000 (Brockett, *The Theatre* 123) (see Fig. 6). Brockett, an authority on theatre history, noted “By 78 BC, 48 days each year were devoted to dramatic entertainments at religious festivals. By AD 354, there were 175 public festival days of which 101 were devoted to theatrical spectacles” (*The Theatre* 113).

Roman Theatre Origins

The first Roman theatre performance is documented circa 365 BCE. It is important to remember that “for Romans, ‘theatre’ was always a Greek activity” (Brown 49-51). Certainly, they created their own festivals or games called *ludi*, the four most important being *ludi Romani* in September in honor of the god Jupiter and lasted days to even weeks long, *ludi Plebeii* in November, *ludi Apollinares* in July in honor of Apollo, and *ludi Megalenses* in April in honor of Cybele. In 240 BCE, Livius Andronicus adapted first Greek play for Roman audiences and is considered the first Roman playwright,

although it was not until 235 BCE that Naevius, wrote the first truly Roman play. Roman plays, known first as *phlyakes*, then *fabula Atellana*, then *satura*. By 364 BCE, “the farces were licentious in speech... Like the *phlyakes* [plays] they developed masks of abnormal ugliness of which there were five main type: Bucco, the fool; Dossenus, sometimes called Mandacus, usually hunchbacked, beak-nosed with a prominent wart, probably witty, certainly sharp-tongued; Maccus, a stupid, gluttonous, awkward fool; Pappus, the good-humored, gullible old man; and Cicirrus... [a] bird-like mime” (Freedley 34). The theatre was financed by the state or patricians, had free admission to all citizens who sat in open seating, and included comedy, mime and pantomime. Although cultural heritage was conserved in adaptations of plays, the Roman theatre lost the philosophical discussion between artists and the audience which the Greeks deemed significant to the continuation of a flourishing society.

The Roman Theatre Structure and Technical Flourishes

Roman theaters were very different than that of the Greeks; they were free standing wooden structures, instead of built into the hillside. In fact, “permanent theaters in Rome were banned by senatorial decree until Pompey dedicated his theatre during his second consulship,” which was built in 200 BCE (Sear 249)(see Fig. 7). The Romans had theaters all across the empire (see Fig. 8), adding auditorium isles into the seating called *cavea* and dividing it into three sections, raising the stage to 5’, called the *pulpitum*, changing the *skene* to a *scaenae frons* (a detailed stage background with three openings and a second story; see Fig. 9), creating *vomitoriums* (a passage below the seating), covering the audience with an awning known as the *velum*, adding decorated stairs from

the stage known as *hyposcenum* as well as a curtain, the *auleum*. Statues including those of the Roman ruler were also added around the theatre in reminder of the state's patronage (see Fig. 10 and 11). These permanent stone theaters were eventually included in almost every major city (see Fig. 12 and 13). The theaters also were constructed in three different styles: "1. Theaters with a straight *scaenae frons*: a rectilinear columnar facade decorates the wall of the stage building. 2. Theaters with an indented *scaenae frons*; mixed indentions: a columnar facade still decorates the stage building, but a semicircular niche with stepped- out entablature accents the *regia*, and two rectangular niches with similar entablatures frame the *hospitalia*. 3. Theaters with an indented *scaenae frons*; similar indentions: similar to the second group, but with semicircular niches accenting all three stage doors" (Small 57). Many existing Grecian theaters became adapted as a cheaper way to include theaters in Roman-conquered areas, whose remains can be seen today such as in France (see Fig. 14-19).

Aside from the changes in the physical structure, there were very few visual differences from Roman and Greek theaters. For example, Roman costumes were based on a range of stock characters and maintained the Greek traditions of the *chiton* and *himation* whose colors denoted their social status, masks, and included the *saccus*, a comedic actor's slipper, as well as the *crepida*, a tragic actor's heeled boot.

Roman Playwriting

Adaptations of Greek plays, called *fabula palliata*, were the most common type of Roman play. In 205 BCE, the first great Roman comic began writing. Titus Maccius Plautus (254-184 BCE) strove for variety and modeled life but avoided politics (an

inspiration from Grecian New Comedy), and wrote 130 plays with twenty-one existing today: *Amphitryon*, *Asinaria*, *Aulularia*, *Bacchides*, *Captivi*, *Casina*, *Cistellaria*, *Curculio*, *Epidicus*, *Menaechmi*, *Mercator*, *Miles Gloriosus*, *Mostellaria*, *Persa*, *Poenulus*, *Pseudolus*, *Rudens*, *Stichus*, *Trinummus*, and *Truculentus*. He was also known for using *cantica*, or scenes where the meter changes in each line.

Plautus' predecessor, Publius Terentius Afer or "Terence" (190-159 BCE), was a freed slave of Senator Terentius Lucanus who had him educated from North Africa. He borrowed from the Greek playwright Menander, excluding song and a prologue, and was popular for his high language and subtle humor. All six of his plays survive today: *Andria*, *Hecyra*, *Heauton Timorumenos*, *Eunuchus*, *Phormio*, and *Adelphi*.

Tragedy was much less popular in Rome. Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 BCE-65 CE) was one of the few Roman tragic playwrights. He was also the tutor to Nero and wrote in five acts, but his works are explicitly violent, incorporating magic, soliloquy, moral philosophy, and corruption, with an unimportant chorus. Nine of his plays survive: *The Trojan Women*, *Medea*, *Oedipus*, *Phaedra*, *Thyestes*, *Hercules on Oeta*, *The Mad Hercules*, *The Phoenician Women*, *Agamemnon*.

Roman Philosophical Observation and Horace

Horace (65-8 BCE) was a poet and philosopher who wrote *Art of Poetry* in 10 BCE. However, unlike Aristotle, his commentary is prescriptive: he declared that tragedy and comedy should never be combined, plays should be written with five acts, there should be only three speaking characters, no gods should appear unless it was integral to the plot,

the chorus should offer council, and warned against extreme emotion. He maintained that the purpose of the theatre was to teach and please with decorum, truth, and in moderation.

MODERN REFLECTIONS

The importance of the theatre, vital to the functions of ancient civilization, seems to have become less and less important to the contemporary society. Maybe because there is such a race for technological advances, there is a divide between the arts and sciences; it is deepened by prejudice and elitism, despite the fact that they innately inform each other. Theatre is often brushed aside because it is seen as fanciful and unprofitable because it cannot be measured. Knox maintains a different hypothesis, that “the modern historical myth is choked at birth by the modern historical sensibility and the wealth of evidence which can be marshaled against it...Myth as history is something hard for the modern age to understand. It is especially hard for Americans, for America is the youngest of the western nations and has no myth of this type at all” (12-13) and “the problem lies in the words themselves. They were aimed at an audience which listened to them in a way no modern audience can, an audience which was sensitively attuned to the living word as an art form” (71). But there is a need for modern plays to carry importance in society in order to further achieve the cultural reflection that the Greeks encouraged to maintain a cohesive and open society.

Bombarded by entertainment constantly, modern society has forgotten that storytelling, even as basic as a bedtime tale, is a reflection of culture and happiness. The arts are important because they “provide a liberating space away from the corrupting influences of urban life [and] emerged in response to philosophical, social, and attitudinal

changes” (Nicholson 22). The theatre is significant to any culture because it inspires imagination and creativity, allows for natural development, humanizes actions morally and politically, and is an international phenomenon which promotes a cohesive experience that equalizes all participants. John Dewey “believed that education is an instrument of social change and the relational aesthetic of his experiential learning defined a social role for the arts, in which learning by doing was expected to encourage co-operation, shared understanding, and public spiritedness” (Nicholson 43). Yet storytelling cannot be neglected, especially the theatre, because it is “a kind of mirror in which the audience [can] read its shifting condition” (Winkler 326). Without theatre, the quality of interactive communication, education using expression of observations, the need to narrate, the unity created in a shared story, reflection about society (both good and bad), the influence of questioning, and inspiration of thought would greatly diminish.

FIGURES

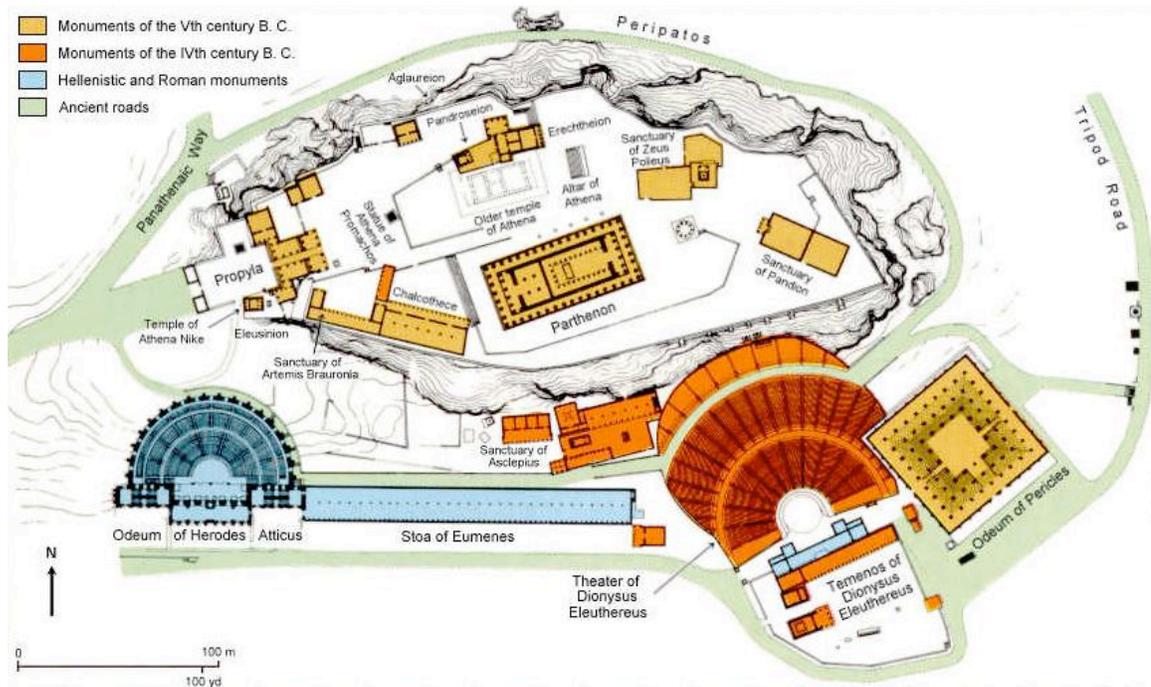


Fig. 1. Willensen's "The Acropolis of Athens."



Fig. 2. Price's "Greek Theatre Mask."



Fig. 3. “The Theatre of Dionysus.”

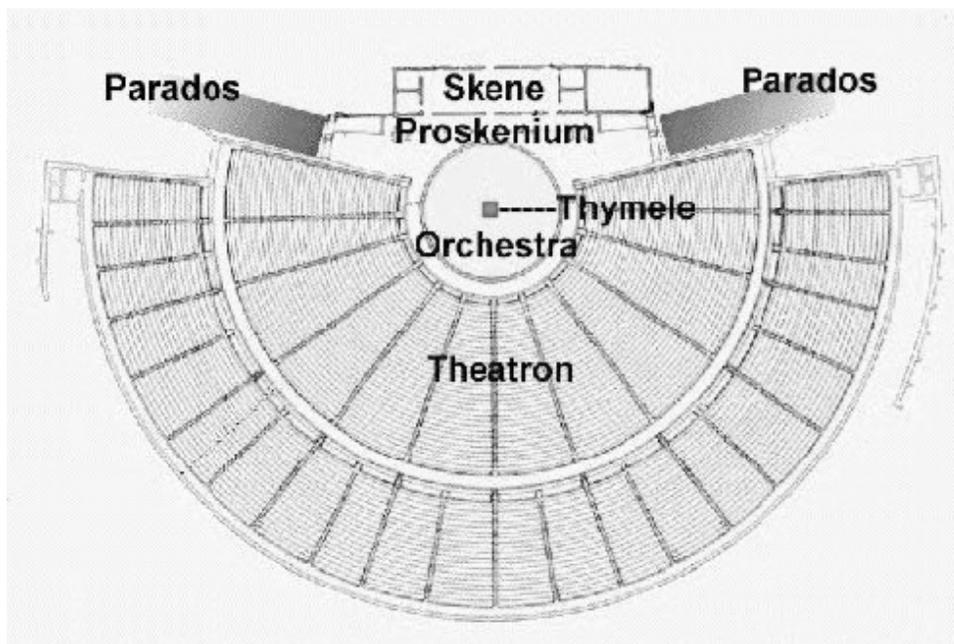


Fig. 4. Youngs’s “Diagram of the Ancient Greek Theater Plan.”



Fig. 5. Jennings's "Drawing of the Ancient Grecian Theatre from the Musée de l'Arles Antique, France."



Fig. 6. Jennings's "Roman Amphitheater Model from the Musée de l'Arles Antique, France."



Fig. 7. Jadot's "The Theatre of Pompey."

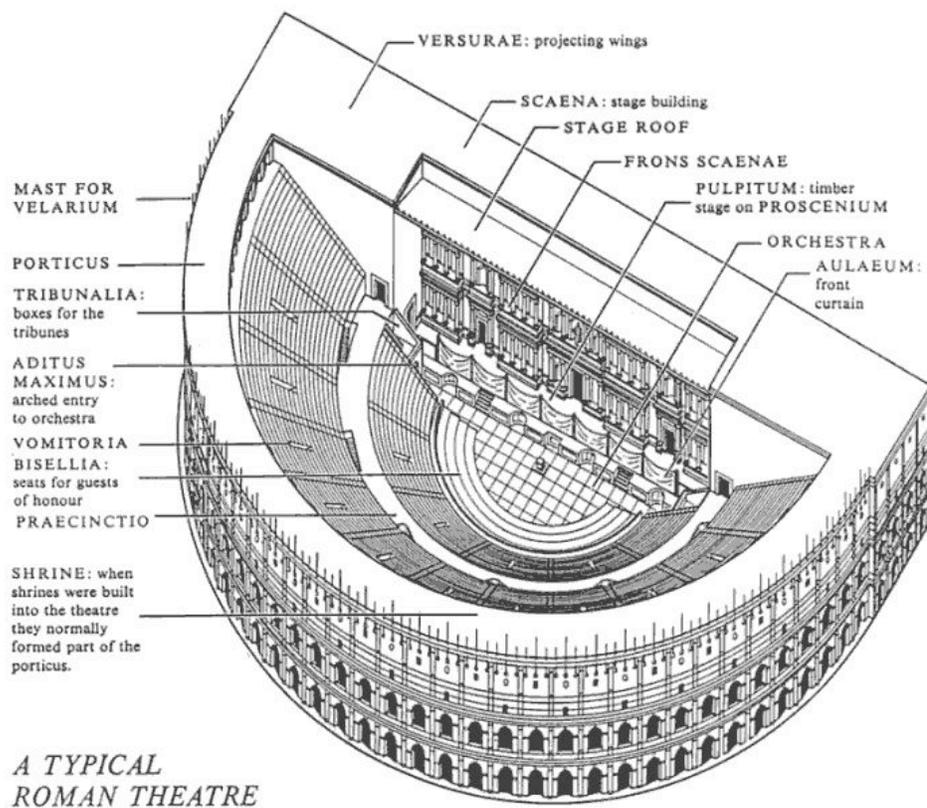


Fig. 8. Leacroft's "A Typical Roman Theatre."



Fig. 9. Jennings's "Scaenae Frons of the Arles Theatre in France."



Fig. 10. Jennings's "Statue of Julius Caesar from the Musée de l'Arles Antique, France."



Fig. 11. Jennings's "Statues from an Ancient Roman Theatre from the Musée de l'Arles Antique, France."



Fig. 12. Jennings's "Drawing of the Ancient Roman Theatre from the Musée de l'Arles Antique, France."



Fig. 13. Jennings's "Roman Theatre Drawing from the Musée de l'Arles Antique, France."

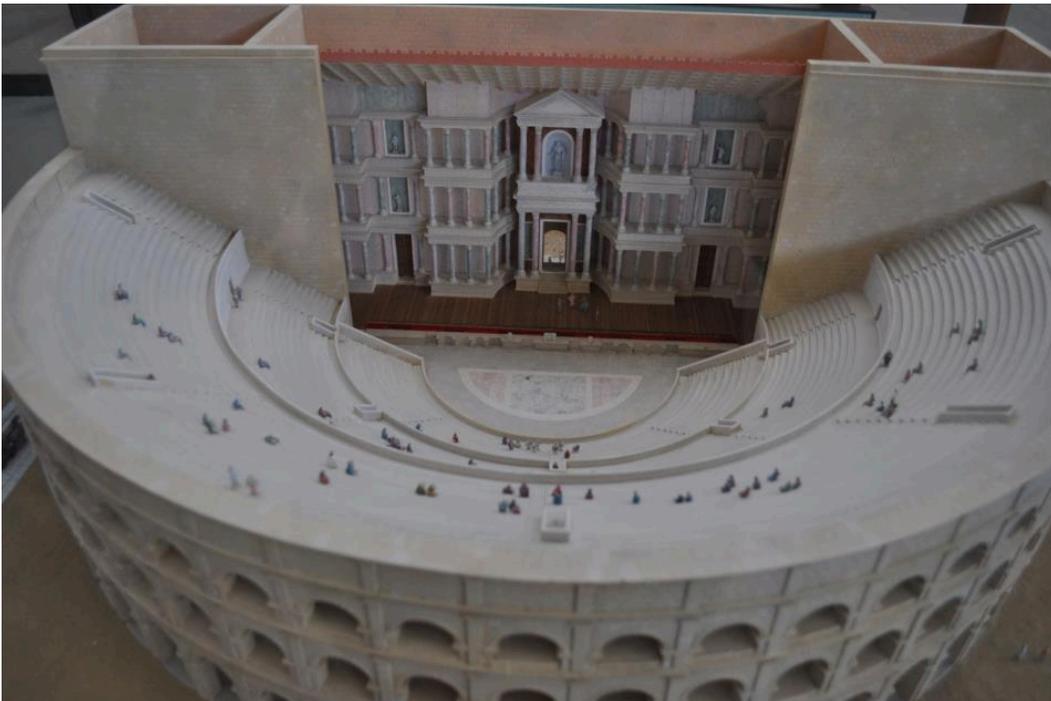


Fig. 14. Jennings's "Roman Theatre Model from the Musée de l'Arles Antique, France."



Fig. 15. Jennings's "Back Wall of the Arles Theatre in France."



Fig. 16. Jennings's "Details of the Arles Theatre in France."



Fig. 17. Jennings's "Remaining Columns of the Arles Theatre in France."



Fig. 18. Jennings's "View from the Audience of Arles Theatre in France."



Fig. 19. Jennings's "View of Arles Theatre in France into Left Audience."



Fig. 20. Jennings's "View of Arles Theatre in France into Right Audience."

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ABSTRACT

Although the specific beginnings of theatre are unknown, theatre first began to develop as an integral part of culture in the ancient Mediterranean. This research looks at the ancient history of theatre, focusing on its creation and function in Greek and Roman society. The origins of theatre, physical structures, acting, and playwriting are investigated in an examination of storytelling and the importance of the art of the theatre. The goal of such reflection is to emphasize the role of theatre as a reflection of society and demonstrate the need for its continuation, supported by ancient Occidental heritage.