Chapter 4.1: Origins of Greek Theatre

• The Standard View of the Origin of Greek Drama
  – Thespis
  – *Tragoidia*
  – Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Chpt. 4.1-6 (1449a)

• The Theseus Dithyramb by Bacchylides

• The Few Facts Known about Early Greek Drama
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- Modern Theories
  - Murray and the “Year-Spirit”
  - Ridgeway and the “Tomb Theory”
  - Else’s “Creationist” Theory
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Thespis

- virtually, a mythological figure
- not cited by any source in the Classical Age
- mentioned first by later (post-Classical) sources, e.g. Horace
- he may have been created to simplify the early history of Greek drama by giving it a "founder"
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*tragoidia*

- “goat-song”
- where are the goats?
- goats are probably not prizes or the nickname of Dionysus worshippers
- “goating”? (the cracking of young men’s voices)
- or a joke name whose origin is now lost
  - cf. soap operas
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Aristotle, *The Poetics* 4.1-6

Arising from a beginning in improvisation, both itself (tragedy) and comedy, the former (arising) from those leading the dithyramb, and the latter from those (leading) the phallic songs which still even now in many of our cities remain customary, little by little it (tragedy) grew making advances as much as was obvious for it to do, and after having undergone many changes, tragedy came to a stop, when it attained its own nature.
Aristotle, *The Poetics* 4.1-6

Aeschylus increased the number of actors (literally, "interpreters" or "answerers") from one to two for the first time and he reduced the chorus' business and prepared the dialogue to take prominence. Sophocles (introduced?—there is no verb here) three (actors) and scene-painting. And also the grandeur (or "length" of tragedy; was increased? by Aeschylus? Sophocles?—again, no verb!).

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Aristotle, *The Poetics* 4.1-6

From slight (or "short") stories and joking expression, since it evolved out of satyric forms, it became reverent (only) rather late, and the meter changed from tetrameter (comical, fast-paced) to iambic (normal, conversational). At first they used tetrameter since drama was satyric and more dance-related, but with the rise of speech (as opposed to "song") the nature (of tragedy) on its own found its proper meter.
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Aristotle, *The Poetics* 4.1-6

Indeed, the most conversational of meters are iambics. The evidence of this, we speak iambics (daDUM daDUM) most of all in conversation with one another; (we speak) hexameters (the meter of epic, DUMdada DUMdada), on the other hand, infrequently and when we depart from a conversational tone. And also the number of episodes (or "acts"; was increased? —no verb).
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Aristotle, *The Poetics* 4.1-6

And as to the other matters, as each is said to have been set in order, let that be said by us. For it would be perhaps a great task to explain each thing individually.
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How right is Aristotle?

• Is Aristotle in a better position historically to make judgments about early drama than we are?

• Is he prone to see cultural “relics” in the customs of his own day?
  – cf. "which still even now in many of our cities remain customary“
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How right is Aristotle?

• Is he susceptible to positivism, justifying his conclusions about early Greek history by invoking the state of modern culture?
  – cf. "[tragedy] grew making advances as much as was obvious for it to do, and after having undergone many changes, tragedy came to a stop, when it attained its own nature."
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**Aristotle and Dithyramb**

- Aristotle claims that tragedy arises out of dithyramb
- Dithyrambs are choral performances, often with a soloist
- Few individual characters, sometimes none
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Aristotle and Dithyramb

- by the later Classical Age, dithyrambs became a vehicle for innovative music
- only a few dithyrambs have survived
- all of them are from the early Classical Age
- and all of the extant dithyrambs are by one author (Bacchylides)
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Bacchylides, *The Theseus Dithyramb*

CHORUS

O King of holy Athens,
Lord of rich-living Ionians,
Why now does the bronze bell ring,
The trumpet sound the song of war?
Has someone evil overleaped
The boundaries of our land,
A general, a man?
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Bacchylides, The Theseus Dithyramb

CHORUS

Or bandits planning harm
Against our shepherds' will to steal
Their herds of cattle forcibly?
Why then do you tear your heart?
Tell us! For I think that if to any mortal
The aid of able men there was,
Of young men, it is to you,
O son of Pandion and Creusa!
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Bacchylides, *The Theseus Dithyramb*

**KING**

Just now there came the windy way
A messenger on foot, up the path from Corinth.
Unutterable deeds he tells of a mighty
Man: he slew that arch-criminal
Sinis who was greatest of mortals
In strength, offspring of Kronos
And son of the Lytaean earthshaker.
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Bacchylides, *The Theseus Dithyramb*

**KING**

And that sow, the man-eater, in the meadows
Of Cremmyon and that reckless man
Sciron he slaughtered.
The wrestling-school of Cercyon
He closed, and Polypemus' mighty
Hammer Procoptes now has
Dropped, meeting a better
Man. It is this I fear, how it will end!
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Bacchylides, *The Theseus Dithyramb*

**CHORUS**

Who is this man? From where? What does
He say? What company does he keep?
Is he with hostile forces,
Leading an army immense?
Or alone with his servants
He comes, like a merchant, a wanderer
To other people's land,
Strong and mighty as well, . . .
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Bacchylides, *The Theseus Dithyramb*

**CHORUS**

... And so bold that he has a strength
Greater than men like
These? Or perhaps a god rouses him,
To bring suit on unsuitable men?
You know, it's not easy always to
Act and not to run into injustice.
Everything in the long run will end.
KING

To him two men alone accompany,
He says, and about his gleaming shoulders
Hangs a sword . . . <the end of the line is missing>,
And in his hands two polished spears,
A well-made dog-skin cap from
Sparta on his head and tawny mane,
A shirt of purple . . .
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Bacchylides, *The Theseus Dithyramb*

KING

. . . Around his chest, and a sheep-skin Thessalian jacket. His eyes Reflect volcanic Etna, Blood-red flame. He's said a boy Of tender years; the toys of Ares Own his thoughts, and War and Crashing brass and battle. He's said to seek the love of splendor, Athens!
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Aristotle and Dithyramb

• Was Aristotle drawn into seeing an evolutionary relationship by the seeming similarities between tragedy and dithyramb?
  – both center around choral performance
  – they look alike on paper (papyrus)

• but must this relationship be one of progenitor (dithyramb) and offspring (tragedy)?
The Few Facts Known About Early Greek Drama

• drama is first institutionalized at the rites of the eastern deity Dionysus – a relatively recent import to Greece

• in Athens at the City Dionysia

• Dionysus worship entails ecstacy ("standing outside oneself") – cf. impersonation
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The Few Facts Known About Early Greek Drama

• Is the Dionysus cult the “only one in antiquity in which dramatic plays would have developed”? (Bieber)

• Classical axiom about Greek tragedy: “Nothing to do with Dionysus”
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The Few Facts Known About Early Greek Drama

• finally, how did tragedy evolve from licentious revelry to serious reflection?
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Modern Theories about the Origin of Greek Drama

• Gilbert Murray (and later F.M. Cornford): the *eniautos daimon* ("year spirit")
  – religious celebrations arise from seasonal rites
  – but the City Dionysia takes place in spring, when Murray associates "tragedy" with autumn
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Modern Theories about the Origin of Greek Drama

• Wm. Ridgeway and the “hero-cult theory” (or “tomb theory”)
  – Herodotus 5.67.4-5 says there were choral performances at the tombs of heroes
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Modern Theories about the Origin of Greek Drama

• Herodotus 5.67.4-5:

So, in other respects the Sicyonians used to honor Adrastus but particularly with respect to his sufferings (or "experiences") they held celebrations with tragic choruses, honoring not Dionysus but Adrastus. Cleisthenes (i.e. the older) returned (or "delivered over") the choruses to Dionysus and the other sacrifices to Melanippus.
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Modern Theories about the Origin of Greek Drama

• Gerald Else (The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy [1965]):
  Greek drama is “the product of two successive creative acts by two men of genius”

• the “creationist” theory of the evolution of Greek drama