

# 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.

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## **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 iambs (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
- dithyrambos are choral performances, often with a soloist
- few individual characters, sometimes none



Fig. 15. Dithyrambic chorus and flute-player  
Bell-krater in Copenhagen

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## **Aristotle and Dithyramb**

- by the later Classical Age, dithyrambos became a vehicle for innovative music
- only a few dithyrambos have survived
- all of them are from the early Classical Age
- and all of the extant dithyrambos 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.

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## **Bacchylides, *The Theseus Dithyramb***

### **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)?

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## **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 **ecstasy** (“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?

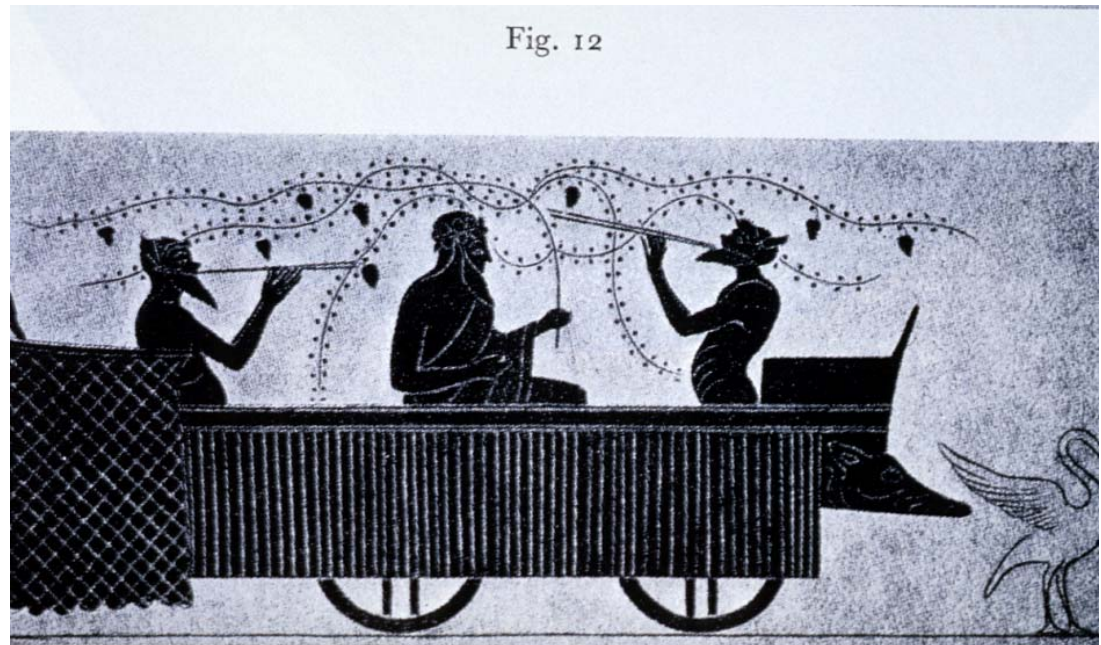


Fig. 13

Dionysiac processions

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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



PLATE 6. Red-figure column-krater in the Mannerist style, ca. 500–490 B.C.E.  
Six choristers and muffled figure at tomb.

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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