



The Greek Theatre

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The Greeks have invented the theatre, besides democracy, but its origin in Greece is lost in the dark of early history. The fifth-century Greeks themselves could not have explained the properties of the Greek drama. However, by the time of Sophocles the Greek drama was flourishing and became a regular part of the communal life. It is clear that Greek drama began as a dance and its oldest element was chorus. The chorus was a group of dancers-chorus, and in Greek it means “dance” and not “song.” This meaning is still preserved today in the word “choreography.” So it is certain that the Greek drama began as a dance connected with the worship of the god Dionysus. It was a ceremony of worship, performed on a circular dancing floor. The original dance was a fairly primitive affair performed in honor of god. Such dances are common among primitive people all over the world but only in Greece they turn into drama.

The chorus, which is one of the properties of Greek drama, wore the mask and dance and sing at the same time. The subject of this performance was some story about Dionysus. At some time somebody added to the dancing chorus another masked performer who didn't dance or sing. His role in the chorus was to give new information or to answer questions. He was the first actor whom the Greeks called *hypokrites*- it is a term from the Greek originally meant “to answer.” The name of the experimental genius who added the first actor, according to the Greek, is Thespis. In the process of time, two actors were added and with this addition we have the beginning of drama. The two actors actually represent Dionysus and one of his companions, or even these two characters are not connected with Dionysus at all. Again in the process of time the number of actors became three and the dramatist who added the actor is Sophocles.

In Greece the drama was a mode of worship and even in the late fifth century, when *Oedipus the King* was first produced, the Greek theatre was still a religious. The performance of the drama was still an act of worship of the god Dionysus- the god of all living things, especially of the vine. The annual festival was held once in a year in the early spring where the plays were presented. It was the three-day festival of Dionysus during which the Greek theatre was active and not all time. For the Athenians going to the theatre, the drama was a serious affair. They go to the theatre at sunrise and sit through three



tragedies, a short farcical play and a comedy. This was done for three days in succession. The three tragedies and the satyr play performed were by the same poet. At the end of the festival, a board of judges award prizes on the basis of their perception of reactions of the audience. The three tragic and the three comic poets were awarded first, second and third prizes.

The first prize was a crown of ivy because the playwright did not expect to make any money out of performance of his play. Even the producer did not make money; he being a wealthy man pays the expenses of the performance as a public service. The audience was charged but it was very small and citizens, who could not afford to pay it, were given free tickets. The audience was not a select group but consisted of the Athenian people as a whole. It was all Athenians who could get away from obligations or military service. The Greek theatre had a capacity of fourteen thousand. The audience start coming to the theatre before dawn. The old men came leaning on their sticks as they walked; the soldiers entered from the walls; the young men came on horses; the working people came from just outside the city; sailors from ships in the harbor; the women from houses; the boys from the wrestling school. All of them brought a cushion to sit on and food to munch during the intervals between the plays. This group was a very lively audience, likely to burst into tears if the play was powerful and well acted, or to whistle if they didn't like it.

The audience sat on the marble benches built in the open air. There was the circular dancing floor and behind it was the stage building with doors and perhaps columns representing a palace or a temple. From this structure the masked actors would make an entrance. There was no curtain, no lighting except the simple scenery consisting mostly of props- a statue or an altar. A trumpet call was sounded as the signal for silence and attention and after it the play began with the appearance of a masked actor or with the chorus marching on the dancing floor. There was no program was to be conveyed to the audience about dramatic time and place and no list of the cast of characters. The opening lines of the play made clear the identity of the characters, the place and time, and the situation. Such introduction was done easily and economically because the play was based on a story already known to the audience. In such condition a few hints would be enough to set the stage action in the framework of the story as the audience already knew it.

The masks worn by the chorus and actors were fairly standardized. The masks were of recognizable type consisting of old man, middle-aged man, youth, old woman, etc. For example, in *Oedipus the King* a special mask was required for the entry of Oedipus after he



has put out his eyes. The masks were like all full-face masks naturally exaggerating the size of the face but they were not the grotesque exaggerations. Since the actor/chorus wore the mask, they were deprived of their facial expression which today is the actor's one of the most important skills. But in the Greek theatre, facial expression could not have been seen because even the front row of spectators was sixty feet away from the stage. The masks had a practical value; they provided the same actor a facility to play two or even three or four different parts in different scenes of the play. This was a useful arrangement in Greece where play trained actors having big voice reaching the rear rows of the audience were scarce and expensive.

The scarcity and the expensiveness of the actors decide their numbers in the play. For example, in *Oedipus the King* all the speaking parts were played by three actors: one actor for Oedipus, another for the priest, Jocasta, the shepherd and the messenger from inside the house, and the third actor for Creon, Tiresias and the Corinthian messenger. The dress of the actors was ornate and magnificent. The ideas that the Greek dramatists observed the classical unities of place and time, and that they avoided blood and horror on the stage "have no basis in fact" (Knox xxiv). Change of scenes is abundant in Greek plays like *Ajax* by Sophocles and the *Eumenides* by Aeschylus. Similar is the case of time; there are many places in the Greek plays where long intervals of dramatic time separate one scene from another. As far the horror and bloodshed, the Greek plays contain many a violent and horrific spectacle: Ajax spears himself on his sword, Evadne throws herself on the burning funeral pyre of her husband, and Oedipus comes out with his face running with blood.

Strange aspect of the Greek drama is the use of chorus in it. Early in the play a group of twelve or fifteen masked dancers came out on the circular dancing floor. They remained there until the end of the play. At intervals when the actors were not there, they danced and sang a choral ode at the same time. These odes were written in complex lyrical language and their content was reflective. The choral odes were, like the masks, a legacy from the original form of worship out of which the drama evolved. With Euripides, the choral odes took the form of musical interludes between the scenes. Sophocles used them for dramatic purpose to illustrate, discuss and set the actions and speeches of the characters in a broader social and religious context.

The stories used in the Greek plays were familiar to people. These stories they learned from their parents and would pass on to their children in their turn. Consequently,



the element of novelty was missing from the story. These stories were rich in variants and flexible in detail thus able to provide minor surprises. The novelty that the dramatist lost in using the familiar story is gained in other ways. The use of myths gave to his plays larger dimensions of authority which is not possible for the modern dramatists. The myths had the authority of history; it is the only history of an age that kept no records. They served typical patterns of the conduct of man and the manifestation of the gods. Myths were “stories in which the historical, moral and religious experience of the whole race was distilled” (Knox xxvii).

The myths gave the Greek dramatist the advantage of exposition- the indication of the background his characters and their situation. For the modern dramatists exposition is the most difficult problem but for the Greek dramatist, it was not a problem at all. He had to indicate the identity of the characters and the point in the story where his play began. He could limit his exposition to the particulars details of the background and the audience once recognized the story, knew what had preceded the action of the play. The audience knew even more or less what was going to happen in the play. This fact enabled the Greek dramatists to use dramatic irony. Everything said by the characters means more to the audience than it does to the speaker. It is because the audience knows more than the character does. It knows the truth about the past and the truth about the future. The audience during the performance of the play is in fact in the position of the gods, and is able to see the struggles, hopes and fears of the characters against the background of the truth –past, present and future.

Such a situation as this gives to the dramatic action as a whole an *intensity* and *complication*- the hallmark of Greek tragedy. The audience understands everything on two different levels at once. It is involved emotionally in the blind heroic efforts of Oedipus and it is detached from those efforts by its superior knowledge. The dramatic irony shows itself not only in the frame of action but in details. One speech after another in the play provides a dramatic shock because the audience has knowledge of the story. With all these dramatic properties and techniques the Greek plays stand unique in itself.

Work Cited

Knox, Bernard M. Introduction. *Oedipus the King: Sophocles*. Trans. Bernard M. Knox. New Haven: A Washington Square Press Book, 1958. Print.