

## 6 Greek Drama & Poetry

### Agamemnon

The play opens at the palace of King Agamemnon of Argos. A Watchman stands waiting, then spots a beacon in the distance signalling that the Greeks have conquered Troy. He is overjoyed and runs off to tell Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra. The Chorus speaks of the war, and of how Agamemnon had sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia in order to get a fair wind when setting off for Troy ten years before. At that time Calchas the prophet spoke of a curse.

The Chorus has doubts but a herald arrives to confirm the message. The herald speaks of the horrors of the war and of how much the men missed their homeland. Clytemnestra enters. She tells the herald to go tell Agamemnon how much she missed him and that she has been true to him.

Agamemnon enters in a chariot with Cassandra, the daughter of Priam beside him. Clytemnestra enters and pledges her love to Agamemnon before everyone. She orders her handmaidens to lay rich purple cloth before Agamemnon's feet (an honour likely to lead him into hubris / pride). Agamemnon refuses to walk on it, saying that he is merely a man, not a god. Clytemnestra convinces him to walk into his house on the cloth, but he takes his sandals off first. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra enter the house.

Cassandra stays behind in the chariot. Clytemnestra comes back out of the house and tells Cassandra to come inside. Cassandra does not respond, and Clytemnestra goes back inside. Cassandra cries out to Apollo, laments her capture and prophesies her own death together with Agamemnon at the hands of Clytemnestra. Cassandra tells the chorus of how Apollo granted her the gift of prophesy, but when she refused his advances, he ordained that nobody would ever believe her. Cassandra enters the house.

The Chorus hears Agamemnon cry out inside the house. They debate whether to rush in or wait for reinforcements. The doors open to reveal Clytemnestra standing over the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra. Clytemnestra explains that the killing of Agamemnon was revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter at the start of the war.

Aegisthus enters with his bodyguard. He is happy to see Agamemnon's body, explaining that it was justice for what Agamemnon's father (Atreus) had done to his father (Thyestes). (Thyestes had challenged Atreus for the throne. Thyestes was driven from the city. When he returned, Atreus held a feast for him and served Thyestes' children to him for dinner.)

Aegisthus admits to conceiving of the plot to kill Agamemnon and to having slept with Clytemnestra while Agamemnon was away at war. The Chorus calls him a coward. He tells them that he plans to become king then threatens the Chorus, who draw their swords, ready to fight. Clytemnestra begs Aegisthus not to shed anymore blood. The Chorus tells him that he will be sorry when Agamemnon's son Orestes returns. Aegisthus tells them they will be sorry for their insolence. Aegisthus and Clytemnestra enter the house together.

### Coephoroi (The Libation Bearers)

Agamemnon's son Orestes arrives home with his friend Pylades. They visit Agamemnon's grave. Orestes lays a lock of his hair on the grave. They hide when they see Agamemnon's daughter Electra arriving at the gravesite with the chorus. Electra asks how she should grieve. The chorus responds by telling her to pray for the health of herself and Orestes and for the death of those who killed her father. She does. The chorus prays that a strong man will come to avenge Agamemnon's death. Electra sees the hair and remarks that it is just like hers. She and the chorus decide it must be Orestes'. She also notices footprints that look much like hers.

Orestes reveals himself. Electra doesn't recognize him at first, but when she does, they speak.

Orestes tells how Apollo's oracle told him that he must avenge his father's death or die. Orestes, Electra and the chorus lament, then turn to thoughts of revenge.

Orestes and Pylades arrive at the city gates and cry to be let in as friendly visitors bearing important news. Clytemnestra asks for details. Orestes says that he has news of Orestes' death. She lets them in. Orestes' old nurse, Cilissa, enters in tears. She tells the Chorus that Clytemnestra told her the news and asked her to summon Aegisthus so that he might hear it directly from the travellers. Cilissa says that Clytemnestra feigned grief, but she could tell that she was truly happy at the prospect of Orestes' death. Cilissa tells the Chorus that she is to tell Aegisthus to bring his bodyguards with him. They tell her not to mention this, and hint that Orestes may still be alive. Cilissa exits. The Chorus pleads with Zeus to protect Orestes.

Aegisthus enters and asks the Chorus if it knows of the report of Orestes' death. They suggest that he should hear it directly from the traveller. Aegisthus exits. A cry is heard from inside the house. A servant enters, announcing that Aegisthus has been killed. Clytemnestra enters and is told that Orestes lives and has killed Aegisthus. She calls for an ax. Orestes and Pylades enter with swords drawn.

Clytemnestra

Woe, woe! Aegisthus, spouse and champion, slain!

Orestes

What, lovest the man? then in his grave lie down,  
Be his in death, desert him nevermore!

Clytemnestra

Stay, child, and fear to strike. O son, this breast  
Pillowed thine head full oft, while, drowsed with sleep,  
Thy toothless mouth drew mother's milk from me.

Orestes

Can I my mother spare? speak, Pylades.

Pylades

Where then would fall the order Apollo gave  
At Delphi, where the solemn compact sworn?  
Choose thou the hate of all men, not of gods.

Orestes

Thou dost prevail; I hold thy counsel good.  
Follow; I will slay thee at his side.  
With him whom in his life thou loved'st more  
Than Agamemnon, sleep in death, the meed  
For hate where love, and love where hate was due!

Clytemnestra

I nursed thee young; must I forego mine old age?

Orestes

Thou slew'st my father; shalt thou dwell with me?

Clytemnestra

Fate bore a share in these things, O my child

Orestes

Fate also doth provide this doom for thee.

Orestes and Pylades take her inside. The doors of the house open to reveal Orestes and Pylades standing over the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Orestes says that he feels compelled to leave. The chorus begs him to stay. Orestes leaves. The chorus wishes him well.

## Eumenides (The Kind Ones)

The play opens in Delphi before the sanctuary of Apollo. The Pythia (priestess of Apollo) enters. She enters the temple and comes back out almost immediately. She tells of a terrible vision of a man holding a bloody sword and standing before a group of sleeping hideous monsters of unknown origin. The doors of the temple open to show Orestes surrounded by the sleeping Furies (the Eumenides), Apollo and Hermes beside him.

Apollo tells Orestes that he must travel to the temple of Athena in Athens, and that there he will be judged. Until then the Furies will relentlessly pursue him. Apollo promises to protect him (as he has now by putting the Furies to sleep) since it was Apollo who made Orestes kill his mother. Apollo asks Hermes (the god who guides) to watch over Orestes on his journey. Apollo leaves, then Orestes, guided by Hermes.

The ghost of Clytemnestra enters. She wakes the Furies (who also serve as the chorus). They curse Apollo for helping Orestes to get away. The scene moves to Athens before the temple of Athena. Orestes enters, announcing that he has come to be judged. The Furies enter and see Orestes. Orestes calls on Athena to set him free. Athena enters in full armour. The chorus presents its case. Orestes presents his. Athena says that the case is too serious for her to try. She will assemble a jury of her finest citizens to judge the case.

Athena re-enters, guiding the citizens chosen as jurors. Apollo enters, announcing that he has come to testify. Orestes admits to killing his mother at the instruction of Apollo (though he does not blame Apollo). Orestes asks Apollo to defend him. Apollo says that Orestes' actions were Zeus' will. Athena announces that in the case of a tie, her vote will decide the issue, and that she votes for Orestes. The votes come out equal, so Orestes wins. Orestes thanks Apollo and Athena and vows that as long as he lives, and to the extent he can after death, he will ensure that his people are always on the side of the Athenians. Orestes and Apollo exit.

The Furies, upset at begin overruled by the younger gods, vows to cause suffering throughout the land. Athena says that she will grant them a home under the city. The Furies ask about the place she would give them. Athena agrees to give them the power that no house will be prosperous without their will. The Furies accept the offer of a home at Athena's side and the play ends in a Hymn of Blessing.

## Prometheus Bound

The strange, isolated play about Prometheus is one of the greatest works of literature that exist. The unbowed dignity of the Titan Prometheus, bound to a rock and tormented by Zeus, is equalled by some of the cries of Job in the Old Testament. Our sympathy for Prometheus is required by his role of benefactor, it is he who has given fire to men.

At the start of the play Hephaestus binds the silent Prometheus to a rock in the Scythian wilderness for having defied Zeus and given fire and hope to men, after helping Zeus overthrow his father Cronos. He speaks alone before the arrival of the Chorus composed of the Oceanides, daughters of the Titan Oceanus.

### Prometheus

O divine air Breezes on swift bird-wings,  
Ye river fountains, and of ocean-waves  
The multitudinous laughter Mother Earth!  
And thou all-seeing circle of the sun,  
Behold what I, a God, from Gods endure!  
Look down upon my shame,  
The cruel wrong that racks my frame,  
The grinding anguish that shall waste my strength,  
Till time's ten thousand years have measured out their length!  
He hath devised these chains,

The new throned potentate who reigns,  
Chief of the chieftains of the Blest. Ah me!  
The woe which is and that which yet shall be  
I wail; and question make of these wide skies  
When shall the star of my deliverance rise.  
And yet-and yet-exactly I foresee  
All that shall come to pass; no sharp surprise  
Of pain shall overtake me; what's determined  
Bear, as I can, I must, knowing the might  
Of strong Necessity is unconquerable.  
But touching my fate silence and speech alike  
Are insupportable. For boons bestowed  
On mortal men I am straitened in these bonds.  
I sought the fount of fire in hollow reed  
Hid privily, a measureless resource  
For man, and mighty teacher of all arts.  
This is the crime that I must expiate  
Hung here in chains, nailed 'neath the open sky. Ha! Ha!  
What echo, what odour floats by with no sound?  
God-wafted or mortal or mingled its strain?  
Comes there one to this world's end, this mountain-girt ground,  
To have sight of my torment? Or of what is he fain?  
A God ye behold in bondage and pain,  
The foe of Zeus and one at feud with all  
The deities that find  
Submissive entry to the tyrant's hall;  
His fault, too great a love of humankind.  
Ah me! Ah me! what wafting wings  
As of great birds of prey, is this I hear?  
The bright air fanned  
Whistles and shrills with rapid beat of wings.  
There cometh nought but to my spirit brings  
Horror and fear.

The Chorus enters, Prometheus tells of Zeus' anger.

Prometheus

I took from man expectancy of death.

Chorus

What medicine found'st thou for this malady?

Prometheus

I planted blind hope in the heart of him.

Chorus

A mighty boon thou gavest there to man.

Prometheus

Moreover, I conferred the gift of fire.

Chorus

And have frail mortals now the flame-bright fire?

Prometheus

Yea, and shall master many arts thereby.

Chorus

And Zeus with such misfeasance charging thee-

Prometheus

Torments me with extremity of woe.

Oceanus himself comes, and tries to convince Prometheus that he should submit to Zeus. He refuses, then tells the Chorus how he brought civilization to humanity:

Prometheus

In the beginning, seeing they saw amiss,  
And hearing heard not, but, like phantoms huddled  
In dreams, the perplexed story of their days  
Confounded; knowing neither timber-work  
Nor brick-built dwellings basking in the light,  
But dug for themselves holes, wherein like ants,  
That hardly may contend against a breath,  
They dwelt in burrows of their unsunned caves.  
Neither of winter's cold had they fixed sign,  
Nor of the spring when she comes decked with flowers,  
Nor yet of summer's heat with melting fruits  
Sure token: but utterly without knowledge  
Moiled, until I the rising of the stars  
Showed them, and when they set, though much obscure.  
Moreover, number, the most excellent  
Of all inventions, I for them devised,  
And gave them writing that retaineth all,  
The serviceable mother of the Muse.  
I was the first that yoked unmanaged beasts,  
To serve as slaves with collar and with pack,  
And take upon themselves, to man's relief,  
The heaviest labour of his hands: and  
Tamed to the rein and drove in wheeled cars  
The horse, of sumptuous pride the ornament.  
And those sea-wanderers with the wings of cloth,  
The shipman's waggons, none but I contrived.  
These manifold inventions for mankind  
I perfected, who, out upon't, have none-  
No, not one shift-to rid me of this shame.

Chorus

Thy sufferings have been shameful, and thy mind  
Strays at a loss: like to a bad physician  
Fallen sick, thou art out of heart: nor canst prescribe  
For thine own case the draught to make thee sound.

Prometheus

But hear the sequel and the more admire  
What arts, what aids I cleverly evolved.  
The chiefest that, if any man fell sick,  
There was no help for him, comestible,  
Lotion or potion; but for lack of drugs  
They dwindled quite away; until I taught them  
To compound draughts and healing mixtures  
Wherewith they now are armed against disease.  
I staked the winding path of divination  
And was the first distinguisher of dreams,  
The true from false; and voices ominous  
Of meaning dark interpreted; and tokens  
Seen when men take the road; and augury  
By flight of all the greater crook-clawed birds  
With nice discrimination I defined;  
These by their nature fair and favourable,

Those, flattered with fair name. And of each sort  
The habits I described; their mutual feuds  
And friendships and the assemblages they hold.  
And of the plumpness of the inward parts  
What colour is acceptable to the Gods,  
The well-streaked liver-lobe and gall-bladder.  
Also by roasting limbs well wrapped in fat  
And the long chine, I led men on the road  
Of dark and riddling knowledge; and I purged  
The glancing eye of fire, dim before,  
And made its meaning plain. These are my works.  
Then, things beneath the earth, aids hid from man,  
Brass, iron, silver, gold, who dares to say  
He was before me in discovering?  
None, I know well, unless he loves to babble.  
And in a single word to sum the whole -  
All manner of arts men from Prometheus learned.

#### Chorus

Shoot not beyond the mark in succouring man  
While thou thyself art comfortless: for  
Am of good hope that from these bonds escaped  
Thou shalt one day be mightier than Zeus.

#### Prometheus

Fate, that brinks all things to an end, not thus  
Apportioneth my lot: ten thousand pangs  
Must bow, ten thousand miseries afflict me  
Ere from these bonds I freedom find, for Art  
Is by much weaker than Necessity.

Prometheus knows the secret of a threat to Zeus, but refuses to reveal it, although Zeus will set him free if he does. Io enters, pursued by flies and ghosts, transformed into a cow by Hera's jealousy for having been loved by Zeus. Prometheus tells her of her future destiny, of long journeys and immense suffering; at the same time he hints at the secret he knows, that if Zeus marries the wrong person, the child of that marriage will overthrow him. Io pursues her journey, maddened. Hermes comes to demand Prometheus's submission, in vain. He warns of Zeus's increased punishment but Prometheus remains adamant:

#### Prometheus

These are stale tidings I foreknew;  
Therefore, since suffering is the due  
A foe must pay his foes,  
Let curled lightnings clasp and clash  
And close upon my limbs: loud crash  
The thunder, and fierce throes  
Of savage winds convulse calm air:  
The embowelled blast earth's roots uptear  
And toss beyond its bars,  
The rough surge, till the roaring deep  
In one devouring deluge sweep  
The pathway of the stars  
Finally, let him fling my form  
Down whirling gulfs, the central storm  
Of being; let me lie  
Plunged in the black Tartarean gloom;  
Yet-yet-his sentence shall not doom  
This deathless self to die!

As the play ends, he sinks into the ground to endure the punishment ordained, together with the

Oceanides. It seems that in the lost later plays of the trilogy he was free and had told Zeus how to avoid the danger threatening him, but no story tells how his punishment was brought to an end.

## Sophocles

Born in 496, died in 406, Sophocles wrote some 120 plays, won the first prize 18 times, 7 of his plays survive: "Antigone", "Oedipus", "Electra", "Ajax", "Trachiniae" (The Death of Heracles), "Philoctetes", and "Oedipus at Colonus". While Aeschylus is deeply religious, Sophocles shows a human individual at the centre, choosing to act, then assuming the consequences of that choice. The role of the Chorus is less developed than in Aeschylus, while the dialogue in Sophocles is more 'realistic' and 'psychological' than in Aeschylus; the plays offer more detailed psychology, although always of a heroic kind. Antigone and Electra are noble female figures, gentle and full of courage. Sophocles' dramas have great simplicity, all is reduced to its noblest human essence. He was much admired by Racine, by Lessing; Shelley drowned with a book of his works in his pocket. He is the most frequently acted of the three in modern times.

### Oedipus the King (c. 427 B.C.)

The play opens in front of the palace of Oedipus at Thebes. Oedipus asks a priest and his supplicants what they want. The priest thanks him for saving them from the Sphinx, but tells him that the city needs saving again from a plague that has descended. Oedipus says that he has sent a messenger to Apollo's shrine to find out what he must do to save the city. The messenger arrives and says that Apollo told him that the man who murdered former King Laius must be discovered and driven from the land. Oedipus vows to do so.

Oedipus asks anyone knowing the identity of the murderer to step forward without fear of harm. He curses those who have knowledge and do not step forth. The chorus says he should ask the prophet Teiresias. Teiresias enters. He says he knows something but refuses to speak. Oedipus accuses Teiresias of having a part in the murder. Teiresias accuses Oedipus of being the murderer. Oedipus concludes that former king Creon must have put Teiresias up to making the accusations. Teiresias tells Oedipus that his downfall will come when he learns the secret of his marriage, and asks him if he knows who his parents are. Oedipus orders him out of the house. Teiresias tells him that the murderer will be proved both father and brother to his children. Teiresias and Oedipus leave separately.

Creon enters, denying the allegations that he has heard Oedipus made. Oedipus enters and accuses Creon of being the murderer and trying to take the throne. Creon denies this. Oedipus proposes to kill Creon. Oedipus' wife, Jocasta, enters. Everyone, including Jocasta, begs Oedipus to spare Creon on the strength of Creon's oath that he is innocent. Oedipus consents, but pledges to forever hate Creon. Creon exits. Oedipus tells Jocasta that Creon had sent the prophet to accuse him of the murder.

### Jocasta

Then you may ease your conscience on that score.  
Listen and I'll convince you that no man  
Hath scot or lot in the prophetic art.  
Here is the proof in brief. An oracle  
Once came to Laius (I will not say  
'Twas from the Delphic god himself, but from  
His ministers) declaring he was doomed  
To perish by the hand of his own son,  
A child that should be born to him by me.  
Now Laius--so at least report affirmed--  
Was murdered on a day by highwaymen,  
No natives, at a spot where three roads meet.  
As for the child, it was but three days old,  
When Laius, its ankles pierced and pinned  
Together, gave it to be cast away  
By others on the trackless mountain side.

So then Apollo brought it not to pass  
The child should be his father's murderer,  
Or the dread terror find accomplishment,  
And Laius be slain by his own son.  
Such was the prophet's horoscope. O king,  
Regard it not. Whate'er the god deems fit  
To search, himself unaided will reveal.

Oedipus  
What memories, what wild tumult of the soul  
Came o'er me, lady, as I heard you speak!

Jocasta  
What mean you? What has shocked and startled you?

Oedipus  
Methought I heard you say that Laius  
Was murdered at the meeting of three roads.

Jocasta  
So ran the story that is current still.

Oedipus  
Where did this happen? Dost you know the place?

Jocasta  
Phocis the land is called; the spot is where  
Branch roads from Delphi and from Daulis meet.

Oedipus  
And how long is it since these things befell?

Jocasta  
'Twas but a brief while ere you were proclaimed  
Our country's ruler that the news was brought.

Oedipus  
O Zeus, what have you willed to do with me!

Jocasta  
What is it, Oedipus, that moves you so?

Oedipus  
Ask me not yet; tell me the build and height  
Of Laius? Was he still in manhood's prime?

Jocasta  
Tall was he, and his hair was lightly strewn  
With silver; and not unlike you in form.

Oedipus  
O woe is me! Methinks unwittingly  
I laid but now a dread curse on myself.

Jocasta  
What say you? When I look upon you, my king,  
I tremble.

Oedipus  
'Tis a dread presentiment



That in the end the seer will prove not blind.  
One further question to resolve my doubt.

Jocasta  
I quail; but ask, and I will answer all.

Oedipus  
Had he but few attendants or a train  
Of armed retainers with him, like a prince?

Jocasta  
They were but five in all, and one of them  
A herald; Laius in a mule-car rode.

Oedipus  
Alas! 'tis clear as noonday now. But say,  
Lady, who carried this report to Thebes?

Jocasta  
A serf, the sole survivor who returned.

Oedipus  
Haply he is at hand or in the house?

Jocasta  
No, for as soon as he returned and found  
You reigning in the stead of Laius slain,  
He clasped my hand and supplicated me  
To send him to the alps and pastures, where  
He might be farthest from the sight of Thebes.  
And so I sent him. 'Twas an honest slave  
And well deserved some better recompense.

Oedipus  
Fetch him at once. I want to see the man.

Jocasta  
He shall be brought; but wherefore summon him?

Oedipus  
Lady, I fear my tongue has overrun  
Discretion; therefore I would question him.

Jocasta  
Well, he shall come, but may not I too claim  
To share the burden of your heart, my king?

Oedipus  
And you shall not be frustrate of your wish.  
Now my imaginings have gone so far.  
Who has a higher claim that you to hear  
My tale of dire adventures? Listen then.  
My sire was Polybus of Corinth, and  
My mother Merope, a Dorian;  
And I was held the foremost citizen,  
Till a strange thing befell me, strange indeed,  
Yet scarce deserving all the heat it stirred.  
A roisterer at some banquet, flown with wine,  
Shouted "Thou art not true son of thy sire."  
It irked me, but I stomached for then

The insult; on the morrow I sought out  
 My mother and my sire and questioned them.  
 They were indignant at the random slur  
 Cast on my parentage and did their best  
 To comfort me, but still the venom'd barb  
 Rankled, for still the scandal spread and grew.  
 So privily without their leave I went  
 To Delphi, and Apollo sent me back  
 Baulked of the knowledge that I came to seek.  
 But other grievous things he prophesied,  
 Woes, lamentations, mourning, portents dire;  
 To wit I should defile my mother's bed  
 And raise up seed too loathsome to behold,  
 And slay the father from whose loins I sprang.  
 Then, lady, -- thou shalt hear the very truth --  
 As I drew near the triple-branching roads,  
 A herald met me and a man who sat  
 In a car drawn by colts -- as in thy tale --  
 The man in front and the old man himself  
 Threatened to thrust me rudely from the path,  
 Then jostled by the charioteer in wrath  
 I struck him, and the old man, seeing this,  
 Watched till I passed and from his car brought down  
 Full on my head the double-pointed goad.  
 Yet was I quits with him and more; one stroke  
 Of my good staff sufficed to fling him clean  
 Out of the chariot seat and laid him prone.  
 And so I slew them every one. But if  
 Betwixt this stranger there was aught in common  
 With Laius, who more miserable than I,  
 What mortal could you find more god-abhorred?  
 Wretch whom no sojourner, no citizen  
 May harbor or address, whom all are bound  
 To harry from their homes. And this same curse  
 Was laid on me, and laid by none but me.  
 Yea with these hands all gory I pollute  
 The bed of him I slew. Say, am I vile?  
 Am I not utterly unclean, a wretch  
 Doomed to be banished, and in banishment  
 Forgo the sight of all my dearest ones,  
 And never tread again my native earth;  
 Or else to wed my mother and slay my sire,  
 Polybus, who begat me and upreared?  
 If one should say, this is the handiwork  
 Of some inhuman power, who could blame  
 His judgment? But, ye pure and awful gods,  
 Forbid, forbid that I should see that day!  
 May I be blotted out from living men  
 Ere such a plague spot set on me its brand!

A messenger arrives and tells Jocasta that Oedipus' father Polybus has died and the  
 Corinthians want Oedipus as their king now. Jocasta sends for Oedipus and tells him the good news  
 -- his father is dead, and it is not at Oedipus' hand. Oedipus is comforted, but he is still afraid that he  
 is fated to sleep with Polybus' wife. He tells the messenger his fear. The messenger tells him not to  
 worry, that he has no blood-tie with his 'parents'. The messenger had received Oedipus from a  
 shepherd as an abandoned baby and had given him to them. The chorus believes the messenger is  
 referring to the shepherd that Oedipus wanted to see. Jocasta begs Oedipus not to seek the truth.  
 Oedipus sends for the shepherd. Jocasta exits.

The old shepherd enters. The messenger asks if he remembers giving him a child. The shepherd

remembers, but doesn't want to tell the tale. Oedipus has his men twist the shepherd's arm and threatens him with death if he does not tell all. He tells of how Laius' wife gave him the child to do away with. Oedipus cries out that he is cursed. All exit but the chorus.

Chorus

Races of mortal man  
Whose life is but a span,  
I count ye but the shadow of a shade!  
For he who most doth know  
Of bliss, hath but the show;  
A moment, and the visions pale and fade.  
Thy fall, O Oedipus, thy piteous fall  
Warns me none born of women blest to call.

For he of marksmen best,  
O Zeus, outshot the rest,  
And won the prize supreme of wealth and power.  
By him the vulture maid  
Was quelled, her witchery laid;  
He rose our savior and the land's strong tower.  
We hailed thee king and from that day adored  
Of mighty Thebes the universal lord.

O heavy hand of fate!  
Who now more desolate,  
Whose tale more sad than thine, whose lot more dire?  
O Oedipus, discrowned head,  
Thy cradle was thy marriage bed;  
One harborage sufficed for son and sire.  
How could the soil thy father eared so long  
Endure to bear in silence such a wrong?

All-seeing Time hath caught  
Guilt, and to justice brought  
The son and sire commingled in one bed.  
O child of Laius' ill-starred race  
Would I had never beheld thy face;  
I raise for thee a dirge as o'er the dead.  
Yet, sooth to say, through thee I drew new breath,  
And now through thee I feel a second death.

A second messenger enters and announces that Jocasta has hanged herself. When Oedipus came upon the body, he tore her brooches off and gouged them into his own eyes, crying that they will never see the crime he has committed. The messenger says that Oedipus wants to show himself to the people of Thebes, and then leave the city forever. The doors open, and blind Oedipus enters. The chorus expresses their pity. Oedipus cries out about his evil deeds and asks the chorus to lead him away from the city or kill him.

Creon enters. Oedipus asks Creon to drive him from the city. Creon wants to wait for the gods to tell him what to do. Oedipus tells Creon to bury his wife, to let him live on the mountain where he was left as a child, and to take care of Oedipus' daughters. Oedipus' two daughters enter. Oedipus laments the difficult life they will lead now that their ancestry is revealed. Oedipus says that the gods hate him. Creon and Oedipus leave together.

Chorus

Look ye, countrymen and Thebans, this is Oedipus the great,  
He who knew the Sphinx's riddle and was mightiest in our state.  
Who of all our townsmen gazed not on his fame with envious eyes?  
Now, in what a sea of troubles sunk and overwhelmed he lies!  
Therefore wait to see life's ending ere thou count one mortal blest;

Wait till free from pain and sorrow he has gained his final rest.

Antigone (c. 441 B.C.)

The play opens in Thebes, before the royal palace. Antigone and her sister Ismene, the daughters of Oedipus, enter. They are distraught over the recent death in battle of their brothers at each other's hands. Antigone tells Ismene that king Creon has decreed that their brother Eteocles will be buried and honoured in death, while their brother Polyneices will be left unburied. Antigone tries to convince Ismene to help her bury Polyneices against Creon's orders. Ismene refuses to break the law, but says that she won't tell.

Creon announces to the people his plans for the brothers. He explains that Eteocles died defending the city, while Polyneices died attempting to destroy it. He commands the Chorus not to take sides with any who may disobey his order. The Chorus agrees that it would be foolish to do so. A very human guard enters and tells Creon that someone has managed to bury the body of Polyneices. Creon sends him to uncover the body. Soon after, the guard returns, having caught Antigone re-burying the corpse.

Antigone says that she was following the law of the gods, not Creon's law. Creon calls for Ismene because he believes she helped plan the crime. Guards bring Ismene out. She says she is guilty if Antigone says she is. Antigone says Ismene had no part. Creon's son Haemon (who was to marry Antigone) tells his father that he supports him. Creon explains that he must kill Antigone to set an example for others who might disobey his laws. Haemon tells Creon that the feeling among the citizens is that the girl was wrongly condemned. He asks Creon to reconsider his decree. The two then quarrel about the justness of the decree. Creon calls to bring her out so that he may kill her in front of Haemon. Haemon leaves before she is brought out. Creon tells the chorus that he plans to leave Antigone in a cave and let her starve to death.

Antigone is led away to her death. Teiresias the blind prophet enters and tells Creon that as a result of Creon's decision, sacrificial fires will not burn, and rites cannot be performed. Creon holds to his decision. Teiresias tells him that he will be cursed by the gods for his acts and that his son will die as a result. Teiresias leaves. Creon is torn. He knows that Teiresias is always accurate in his prophecies. The chorus convinces Creon to change his mind. Creon hurries off to free Antigone.

A messenger enters and tells the chorus that Creon's son Haemon has killed himself and that it is Creon's fault. Creon's wife Eurydice enters from the palace. She has overheard the news. The messenger tells of how Creon and his party discovered that Haemon had come before them to the cave and that he was crying over the lifeless body of Antigone, who had hanged herself. Haemon then spat in Creon's face and leaned on his own sword to kill himself. Eurydice goes back inside in silence. Creon and his men enter, carrying Haemon's body. Creon laments that he has learned justice too late.

The messenger re-enters and announces that Eurydice has taken her own life. Creon cries for his servants to take him away. He wishes for his own death. Creon and his men enter the palace. The chorus comments that the gods control our destiny, that we can only be happy through wisdom, and that men of pride must often suffer greatly to earn wisdom.

Euripides

Born in Salamis in 480 (perhaps on the day of the victory), died in Macedonia in 406, Euripides was controversial in his time. He wrote some 90 plays, of which 18 survive: "Alcestis", "Medea", "Hippolytus", "The Trojan Women", "Helen", "Orestes", "Iphigenia at Aulis", "The Bacchae", "Andromache", "The Children of Heracles", "Hecuba", "The Suppliants", "Electra", "The Madness of Heracles", "Iphigenia in Tauris", "Ion", "Phoenissae"...

In almost all these plays the characters are shown in situations of great stress and conflict, torn by passions and affection. Euripides challenges traditional ideas about gods and morality. Heroism and beauty are admired; many of his finest characters are women. His plots favour surprise revelations,

the Chorus has little contact with the action. He is the dramatist who comes closest to the emotions of "ordinary life" and for Milton, he is the messenger of human liberty.

## Greek Comedy

Three or five comedies were performed at the Dionysia each time, but we have no plays other than those of Aristophanes from the Old Comedy (before 400). The New Comedy, which influenced Plautus and Terence in Italy, is mainly represented by Menander, whose works do not survive, except in fragments.

## Aristophanes

Born about 457, and dying around 385, Aristophanes wrote over thirty plays, of which eleven survive. Their titles are usually mysterious, designed to puzzle ("Birds", "Wasps", "Clouds"), or else they indicate the identity of the speakers in the chorus ("Babylonians", "Acharnians"). The Chorus plays a major role in the comedies, speaking directly to the audience.

Some of the best-known of the plays, still often acted, are:

The Birds, where the birds are persuaded to build a city, Cloud-cuckoo-land, between earth and Olympus, robbing the gods of their sacrifices. Messengers come from earth and the gods and the result is a fantasy in which the gods are the losers.

Lysistrata, produced in 411 at a time of great difficulty for Athens in the war with Sparta. The women of both sides decide to force the men to make peace by refusing to sleep with them until peace is restored. They seize the Parthenon, beating off an attack by the chorus of old men with buckets of water. At last the men give in, make peace, and all go off happy.

The Frogs, produced in 405, is about the merits of the three tragedians. All are now dead and Dionysus goes down to Hades to bring one back. He finds Euripides and Aeschylus competing for the throne of Tragedy, Aeschylus wins because his words weigh more. The "frogs" sing as Charon is ferrying Dionysus over into Hades.

The Clouds, of 423, is a satire aimed at Socrates. It was not successful, but Plato suggests that it prepared the public hostility towards Socrates leading to his condemnation later.

The humour of Aristophanes is satiric, aimed at aspects of contemporary Athens at first, made more general in the later plays. Nothing is sacred, powerful people, popular attitudes, even the gods, are made to look foolish. The sympathy goes to the "ordinary man" who wants a quiet life, the old pleasures. The plots are usually based on a single absurd idea, which offers a framework for various unrelated scenes. It is Menander and the New Comedy that introduce "situation-comedy".

Greek drama continued to be written in the years following the death of the great founders. The old classics were revived and thousands of new tragedies were written by those who wished to be "Hellenized", for the new culture, centered in Egyptian Alexandria rather than in Greece, was not one into which people were born, it was one people came to learn, from all over the world. Others imitated the New Comedy of Athens, which is mostly lost to us. Menander (343-292) is the most famous name here. His most famous line is "He whom the gods love, dies young".

A century later, in Rome and writing in Latin, Plautus (220-180?) and Terence (190-159) adapted the New Comedy, with its social comedy of manners, for their world. Their plays are usually about a young man needing the help of a clever servant to gain the girl-friend's hand against the father's unwillingness and the villainies of brothel-keepers etc. Often the girl is found to be the unrecognized daughter of a high-class person, kidnapped or lost in childhood. These two writers were studied and acted in the Renaissance, they inspired Shakespeare and Jonson, as well as Moliere, and English Restoration comedy.