

## Backgrounds to Greek Tragedy

### History of Athens

From 630 until 553, **Persia** was the home of a man called **Zoroaster** in Latin, originally **Zarathustra**, who became the founder of a new religion, full of this-worldly optimism, ethical, and sure of the triumph of good over evil after a great dualistic struggle. This new religious spirit gave confidence to the Persians in a new enterprise. Beginning in 553, **Cyrus** set out from Persia to conquer an empire. In 546 Cyrus overthrew the **Medes** and took control of **Babylonia** and the whole of the Middle East. In 536, he gave the exiled **Jewish** people in Babylon their freedom and helped them return to Jerusalem. There they rebuilt the **Temple**, which was rededicated in 516.

In 529, Cyrus the Great was killed in battle, his son **Cambyses** succeeded him and conquered Egypt, where he set himself up as Pharaoh and, perhaps, went mad. He died in 522 and was followed by **Darius** who ruled until 485. It was just at this time that Athens was discovering the strengths of true democracy thanks to Cleisthenes. In **490**, the Persians first attacked Greece, landing their army at **Marathon**, on the coast North-East of Athens. **Philippides** ran with the message, and thus established the Marathon. The Spartans were in Sparta, and the Athenian army had to face the Persians without them. The Persians were defeated in a great victory which gave new courage to Athens. Darius died in 486 and was followed by his son **Xerxes** (born 519) who was to be the "great enemy" of Greece.

In 483, Xerxes began to prepare the conquest of Greece, letting his plans be well-known. Most of the smaller cities accepted his rule in advance. In **480**, the great Persian army (200,000 men?) crossed the Dardanelles over floating bridges (taking a week) and advanced towards Greece, while other forces came along the coast in a great Phoenician fleet. The Oracle at Delphi was not encouraging: "Either Sparta or a Spartan king must die." Just when a great storm had destroyed many Persian ships, the Spartan king **Leonidas** with 300 of his Spartan elite confronted the Persians at the narrow pass of **Thermopylai**, blocking the way southward to Athens. But the Persians found another way round, and attacked from all sides. The Spartan king and all three hundred of his best men were killed in terrible fighting, in which two of Xerxes' brothers also died. The Persians marched on to Athens, all the citizens of which had fled to the nearby island of Salamis. They captured the Acropolis, killed the soldiers defending it, and set it on fire.

### Victory at Salamis

In 483 Athens suddenly became very rich when a large vein of silver was discovered in the mines it owned. It was **Themistokles**, who foresaw already the Persian threat, who convinced the city to use this to build a new fleet of 100 war-ships in a new style, "**triremes**" with 200 men rowing 150 oars arranged in three tiers. When the Persians arrived, Athens had a total fleet of 200 triremes. Although Xerxes announced the fall of Athens as a great victory, he had lost far too many ships through storms and attacks. Across the Isthmus of Corinth a huge Peloponnesian army blocked the way south. The Athenian fleet was waiting behind the island of **Salamis**, ready to attack the Persians if they tried to carry forces across to the South by sea. Then Themistokles sent a secret message to Xerxes, suggesting that the Greeks were not able to resist, that they were ready to run away, and that he himself was ready to support Xerxes. It was a trick and Xerxes fell for it.

Less than ten years later, the story of that day was told in the only Greek tragedy to deal with "modern" history, **The Persians**, written by a man who had been part of the Athenian army that day, **Aeschylus**, and watched by the people of Athens who had been waiting on the shores. The Greeks defeated the Persians at sea, soon news of other victories came, and Xerxes sailed away, never to return. Greece, in particular Athens, was left to develop in its own way. The years between the Battle of Salamis in the autumn of 480 and the death of Alexander the Great in 323 in Babylon were decisive for the future of Western civilization.

## From 480 until the Fall of Athens

The great tragedian **Aeschylus** died in Sicily in 456. He had gone there to escape the quarrels that were spreading in Athens and across Greece. Athens had just completed the democratization of its government. **Pericles** was the pupil and friend of **Anaxagoras** (the first philosopher to live in Athens), of **Phidias** the sculptor, and of **Sophocles**. He was from a "high" family, but he was a convinced democrat, and he played such an important role in Athens that this is called "The Age of Pericles", not by being a kind of dictator, but by being trusted by the people. When he spoke, people listened to him, then they voted in support of his proposals. The Assembly of Citizens (*ekklesia*) was the effective parliament and Pericles had the right to address them in just the same way as even the poorest Athenian. Only he spoke so well that he usually convinced them, for his only power lay in the power of his oratory and he was one of the great orators.

While rivalry and war divided the cities of Greece, Athens was rebuilding what the Persians had destroyed. At the same time, it had much trouble keeping the Spartans from attacking. In 445 the two great cities signed a 30-year peace treaty, under Pericles' urging. From 454 until his death in 429, the Athenians chose him as one of the Generals almost every year, in peace and in war, and in 447 he was put in charge of the rebuilding of the **Parthenon** (House of the Maiden, Athena) and the other great structures still standing (in ruins) on the **Acropolis**.

When the people of Athens returned to the ruined city in 480, a young boy of fifteen had led the singing of the victory-song (Paeon) in the celebrations. His name was **Sophocles**, and in 468 his tragedy was judged better than that of Aeschylus and won the first prize that year. **Aeschylus**, **Sophocles**, **Euripides** all wrote for the Athens of Pericles. The great statue of the Parthenos (Athene) was dedicated at the Great Panathenaia of 438, some of the carvings were still being made. Many of them can now be seen in London, in the British Museum, where they are called the "**Elgin Marbles**", about which Keats wrote a sonnet. The Greeks are demanding their return to Athens.

During those years **Euripides** and **Aristophanes** wrote most of their surviving plays, **Sophocles** his last, some of the most beautiful buildings on the Acropolis were completed, **Plato** was born (428). Most of Plato's **Dialogues** are shown as happening then too, for these are the years of **Socrates**, the culmination of the work of "pre-Socratic" philosophers and sophists.

In 431 the Peace broke down, and Athens was heading for the disaster of 404. The first part of the disaster was the **plague** that ravaged Persia, Egypt and Athens in 430-427, killing a quarter of the population. In 411, democracy broke down and an authoritarian **oligarchy** took power for two years, after which they were so divided that democracy was easily restored. Athens was by now almost completely isolated and although building and drama continued, the loss of life in the fighting also continued. The citizens were deeply divided about the responsibility for the military disasters, the system of justice was breaking down. In 405 the Spartan leader **Lysander** captured 170 ships of the Athenian fleet and executed 4,000 Athenian prisoners. All who could took shelter inside the walls of Athens, and after a long siege, when people were dying in the streets, Athens surrendered to Sparta in 404. Yet it recovered its freedom only two years later in 403 and in the following century was home to Plato and Aristotle.

## The Philosophical Background

**Xenophanes** (570 - 475) was born into a poor family in Colophon (now in Turkey). He heard Anaximandros teach, but left his native Ionia when the Persians took power in 546. He went travelling to the West, and in Sicily he may have met Pindar and Aeschylus; he too was a poet. Finally he settled in **Elea**, in the south of Italy. Perhaps this experience of life in a variety of lands taught him the relative nature of cultural phenomena. He was critical by nature, mocking in satires the luxurious and effeminate lifestyles of the Ionians; more important, he attacked the anthropomorphic gods found in Homer and Hesiod. He was also hostile to the importance people attached to athletics. He was a historian, an ethnologist, and a naturalist, but he always went

beyond mere observation to develop a philosophy in each of these areas. He considered them all to be aspects of the one Cosmos, and he looked for an underlying spiritual unity.

He examined fossils in Malta and Sicily and explained them in much the same way as we do today, as signs of great evolutions and change in the shape of land and sea. Above all, he is the first Greek to assert that the gods of Homer and Hesiod could not possibly be real. He was repulsed by their viciousness, called the stories about them 'prehistoric fables' and recommended that instead of believing them, people should strive to live in purity, piety, and justice. He affirms a pantheistic vision, declaring that everything forms a single **All-One**, in which inheres the God without beginning or end, unchanging, who is omnipresent thought. Fossils led him to believe that all things had come into being by a combination of earth and water, by natural processes. Beyond that, he had little to say about the shape or substance of the world.

Another immensely important new idea he formulated involves the development of culture and civilization. He is the first thinker to say that humanity has evolved its own culture (including religion) without the help of supernatural beings. As he says, 'in their gods, people depict themselves.' Thus Xenophanes affirms the value and capacity of the **Human** at the same time as he purifies the concept of the **Divine**. He rejected popular religion, with its superstitious sacrifices and fortune-telling. Instead, he stresses the importance in human life of moral thought and conduct. God and Nature are for him inseparable, and morality is therefore a matter of living in harmony with nature. Above all, perhaps, he is the first to perceive the distinction between **thought** and **feeling** (sense-perception), and to assert that while thought (reason) is reliable, we cannot be sure of knowing things correctly by our senses.

Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all things that are shameful and disgraceful among us, stealing, adultery, deceit of all kinds.

People think that gods are born as they are, have clothes like them, voices and shapes.

If cows, or horses, or lions had hands and could paint and produce works of art as men do, horses would portray their gods as horses, cows as cows, and make their bodies in the image of themselves.

The Ethiopians make their gods black and snub-nosed, the Thracians say theirs have blue eyes and blond hair.

One is god, the greatest among gods and men, like us neither in shape nor in thought... Seeing everywhere, thinking everywhere, hearing everywhere... Effortlessly ruling all things by thought... Remaining ever in the same place, not moving since it is not proper for him to go here and there.

## Socrates

We only know about Socrates (469 - 399) through Plato's writings, since he himself wrote nothing. We find in Plato a Socrates who has been challenged by the **scepticism** of the Sophists. He sees that much of what has been taught traditionally may not be true, and that further thought is needed. At the same time, he refuses to accept that all values are relative. His greatest contribution lies perhaps in the way he changes the focus of thought to the **definition** of certain **moral values**. For Socrates, philosophy ought to be concerned with helping people to live better lives. The *Defence* shows him enquiring about the exact definition of words such as 'justice,' 'good,' 'truth'. Socrates seems to have thought that virtue was the fruit of knowledge and that when people did wrong, it was because of their ignorance of what was right. His goal in life was to help people think more deeply, so that they could come to a better knowledge of what was good. In that way the city would become a better place.

Socrates' refusal to accept 'ready-made' and badly-thought definitions was to lay the foundation of the discipline of philosophy. His scepticism was systematic, but at the same time he claimed to hear an inner voice (his 'daemon') that told him what was the right thing to do or say. He did not share the fundamental scepticism of the Sophists, who did not recognize any need to look for ultimate answers to ethical questions. Rather he was an idealist not satisfied by anything less than the perfect answers, which he could never find. His fundamental system was to persistently

challenge what others said with questions like, "What precisely do you mean by ...?" This method of debate by brief question and answer is known as **Socratic elenchus**.

### **Aeschylus**

Born 525, died 456, he is the father of Greek tragedy. He wrote some 90 plays, of which 7 survive: "The Suppliants", "The Persians", "Seven against Thebes", "Prometheus Bound" and the "Oresteia" trilogy composed of "Agamemnon", "The Coeophori", "The Eumenides". The action of his plays is usually quite static, the tone, especially of the choral lyrics, is solemn, exalted and religious. He struggles to combine a respect for the gods, especially for Zeus, with the highest vision of human morality. The **Oresteia** leads from the news of the fall of Troy, through Agamemnon's murder by Clytemnestra to her murder by Orestes, encouraged by his sister Electra. Orestes is then pursued by the Furies for having shed his mother's blood, but is sent to Athens where he presents his defense to the citizens who justify him and dismiss the Furies' claims. The Chorus, old men of Argos, witness the events they cannot control, and pay homage to the greatness of Zeus.

### **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.

### **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.

### **Development of Greek Tragedy**

At the same time as Greek thought was developing in Ionia and Italy, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Athens gave birth to tragedy and comedy. There seems no doubt that the rise of **tragedy** in Athens is linked to the growth of the two great **Dionysia** (festivals of the god Dionysius) : the City Dionysia in January and the Lenaea in March-April. Legend says that around 540 an actor, **Thespis**, introduced the role of a single actor (called "*Hypocrite*" or "explainer") into celebrations originally consisting of lyrics sung by a dancing Chorus of citizens. There is no clear solution to the question why this serious form of drama is called "Goat-song" (*Tragodia*) although it may be because the Chorus used to be dressed as Satyrs with goats' ears. Originally the choral lyrics must have celebrated the god Dionysius but already before Aeschylus, probably, other stories were being recalled.

For the Dionysia, three writers were chosen by the city authorities and each had to prepare

the texts of a **trilogy** of tragedies and a fourth "satyr-play". A prize was awarded to the best. The authorities also named a rich citizen to be the "*Choregus*" of each writer, whose role was to pay the citizens forming the Chorus and also cover the costs of staging.

**Aeschylus** liked to offer trilogies telling related stories, his *Oresteia* is the only surviving example. Others seem not to have followed him. It was Aeschylus who introduced the second individual actor, which makes dialogue possible. **Sophocles** then introduced a third actor and Aeschylus quickly followed his example. Sophocles also introduced painted scenery, which Aeschylus adopted too. While the Chorus was always composed of citizens, the actors were professionals, like Sophocles. The main actor was called the Protagonist.

In the theatres of Greece, the play was a religious celebration, and therefore open to all citizens, free. Much debate has raged as to whether women were present at performances; modern opinion tends to think that they were. The statue of Dionysius presided over the performances from the front seats. The actors were masked, so that one actor might play several roles. The steps on which the audience sat usually follow the curve of a hillside, around the circular dance-area on which the Chorus performed, the *Orchestra*. At the back of the Orchestra was the *Skene*, a wall against which there may have been a platform (stage) and with doors that could open to reveal the result of scenes of horror that happened out of sight inside. There were also machines to allow gods to descend from above.

In Greek tragedy, violent actions are described, not presented onstage. The play is a series of lyric passages sung by the Chorus, interspersed by dialogues between actors or between actor and Chorus. Aristotle's definition of Tragedy in the "Poetics" is famous,

Tragedy is an imitation (*mimesis*) of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation (*catharsis*) of these emotions. By "language embellished," I mean language into which rhythm, "harmony," and song enter. By "the several kinds in separate parts," I mean, that some parts are rendered through the medium of verse alone, others again with the aid of song.

Now as tragic imitation implies persons acting, it necessarily follows, in the first place, that Spectacular equipment will be a part of Tragedy. Next, Song and Diction, for these are the medium of imitation. By "Diction" I mean the mere metrical arrangement of the words: as for "Song," it is a term whose sense every one understands.

Again, Tragedy is the imitation of an action; and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought; for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves, and these-thought and character-are the two natural causes from which actions spring, and on actions again all success or failure depends. Hence the plot is the imitation of the Action, for by Plot I here mean the arrangement of the incidents. By Character I mean that in virtue of which we ascribe certain qualities to the agents...

Most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality.

But he was writing when all the great tragedies had already been written and the tragedians were dead. His words had no effect on the way they wrote and may very well not represent accurately what they intended to represent in their plays, which are mostly illustrations of the arbitrary ways in which Fate or the gods bring humans to suffering and disaster for no clear fault of their own.

Greek tragedy is not a 'morality play' in which people are punished for sin. Much depends on some kind of flaw or latent characteristic of the main character but all the tragedians stress the theme of blindness; humans cannot know that they are doing is a transgression of law, but that does not protect them from the consequences. There are a number of Greek tragedies which do not end with the death of the main character, unlike Shakespearean tragedy, for example.

## Introductions to the Plays

### Antigone

When Oedipus, the wanderer who became king of Thebes after solving the Riddle of the Sphinx, realized he had married his own mother and had four children with her, he blinded himself and cursed his sons. He left Thebes accompanied by Antigone, his daughter, who cared for him until he died of old age. The two sons, Eteocles and Polynices, in order to avoid bloodshed, agreed to rule Thebes in alternate years. After the first year, Eteocles refused to step down and as a result, Polynices raised an army (led by seven heroes) to take Thebes by force. This is the story told in the *Thebaid*. Finally, the commander of the troops before the seventh gate of Thebes is revealed to be Polynices, the brother of the king. Eteocles resolves to meet and fight his brother in person. Eteocles and Polynices kill each other in battle. Creon, brother of Jocasta (Oedipus's mother and wife) becomes the new ruler of Thebes. He declares that Eteocles (the ruling king) will be honored and Polynices (the "rebel") will not be buried. Antigone and Ismene are the sisters of the dead brothers, Haimon is Creon's son and Antigone's future husband.

Another set of legends says that Adrastus, one of the Seven, escaped. Creon forbade the burial of all the dead heroes, but Antigone was able to bury Polynices, then Theseus of Athens came with an army to take back the five bodies. Later, the sons of the dead heroes (the Epigoni) attack Thebes and destroy it, after the deposition and death of Creon.

### Medea and Jason

Jason sets out on a quest to obtain the Golden Fleece, with a group of heroes, on a ship called the *Argo*. After many adventures, they arrive in Colchis where the king's daughter Medea, an expert in magic, falls in love with Jason and helps him perform various impossible tasks imposed by her father. He finally obtains the Fleece and sails away, with Medea accompanying him. Later, Jason becomes engaged to marry Creusa / Glauce, a daughter of the King of Corinth, to strengthen his political ties. Medea is humiliated.

### Phaedra and Hippolytus

Theseus captured Hippolyta, queen of the fierce Amazons, married her, and they had a son, Hippolytus. Later Theseus married Phaedra (there is no clear explanation of what became of Hippolyta). After some time, Phaedra finds herself passionately attracted to Hippolytus.

### Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Iphigenia, Electra

There are many stories, found in various places, explaining the origins of the dispute between **Troy** and the Greeks. **Helen's** birth is told in a well-known story of Zeus uniting with a human woman. Helen's mother **Leda** was married to King Tyndareus of Sparta and they had a daughter **Clytemnestra**, but Helen was the result of a visit to Leda by **Zeus** disguised in the form of a swan.

The other important background to the Trojan War depends on the link uniting **Menelaus**, the King of Sparta by his marriage to Helen, and his brother **Agamemnon**, King of Argos according to Aeschylus, king of Mycenae in Homer, to the clan of **Tantalus**. This is a family marked by some mysterious curse originating with Cadmus, the founder of Thebes. Tantalus was at first a human who was a friend of the gods, in return for their favour he offered them his son **Pelops** cooked in a stew, trying to deceive them but of course, they knew what he has done, and brought Pelops back to life. The punishment of Tantalus is famous: he stands in Hades in a pond with water up to his chin and delicious fruit dangling before his eyes, but they "tantalizingly" withdraw from him every time he tries to drink or eat. Pelops later has a son, who is kidnapped by the king of Thebes, Laius,

the father of Oedipus. Pelops curses Laius for this.

Pelops had two sons, **Atreus** and **Thyestes**. Thyestes seduced his brother's wife; Atreus, to punish him, gave him a meal of his own children, and he ate them, not knowing. Yet Atreus lived successfully, and died unpunished. His sons were **Agamemnon** and **Menelaus**, while the son of Thyestes was **Aegisthus**. For no clear reason (these things are not rational), all the curse fell upon Agamemnon, whose wife, Helen's sister Clytemnestra, took Aegisthus as her lover during the Trojan War. When Agamemnon returned, they killed him. Orestes and Electra, the children of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, later kill their mother and her lover in revenge.

This theme of the curse on Tantalus' descendants is as important in explaining the origins of the war with Troy as that, lighter and more comic, of the **judgement of Paris** and its reward. **Strife** (Eris) is always the bringer of discord. By rolling a golden apple marked "For the fairest" into the midst of the gods at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis (Achilles' parents), to which she was not invited, Eris provoked a quarrel between **Hera**, **Athene**, and **Aphrodite**, who each claimed to be the most beautiful. They agreed it should be settled by the judgement of **Paris**, the most handsome man of the day. Oddly, Paris is shown working as a simple shepherd although he is one of the many sons of **Priam**, king of Troy. The goddesses each offer him bribes; Hera offers him greatness, Athene success in war, and Aphrodite the most beautiful woman in the world as wife. He gives the apple to Aphrodite. In thanks for which Aphrodite gave him Helen. Unfortunately, she was already married to **Menelaus**, and he had become the king of Sparta, not a very impressive figure. All the kings of Greece had desired her and in the end the only way to avoid war between them was to give her to Menelaus. Stories tell that after Paris arrived in Sparta on a visit, Menelaus left on a journey, leaving him with Helen, and they duly left for Sparta together. All the kings of Greece had agreed to protect the union of Menelaus with Helen, which obliged them all to join in the expedition to Troy to bring her back. The expedition was led by Agamemnon. As the Greek fleet prepared to set out, the winds were against them until Calchas the seer told Agamemnon that he would have to sacrifice his daughter **Iphigenia** to Artemis in order to gain favourable winds. This story too is the subject of great dramas. In many version she is spirited away to **Aulis** where her brother Orestes later finds her.