

English 9

Agamemnon

History of Drama

Aeschylus

Mythological Background of *Agamemnon*

I. History of Drama

Greek drama comes from religious ritual, with its origin in Dionysian cults.

Over time, the ritual took place in the spring, became more symbolic, leading to the development of the theatre. The etymology of the word “tragedy” is *tragos* + *odos*, or “goat song.”

The ritual involved worshipers singing a *dithyramb*, a narrative hymn in honor of the life of Dionysus. Some scholars believe the leader of the *dithyramb* put on the skin of the goat and assumed the character of the animal—this is the origin of costumes and masks in drama. At first the dances were free-form; later they were choreographed and an actor was introduced.

Related is the *rhapsode* competition during which the epics were performed, expanding the mythological content available.

Thespis of Icaria adopted the *dithyramb* and expanded it by drawing on mythology. Thespis added the first actor, allowing for dialogue. He painted the actors’ faces and added masks that showed characteristics and emotions.

The Great Dionysia originated in 534 BC; it was a week-long festival in which trilogies were performed in competition. The *Oresteia* is the only surviving trilogy; it was performed in 538 BC and won first prize.

The theatre itself was built outside into the hillside. Parts are the *theatron*, where the audience sat; the *orchestra*, where the chorus sang and danced; with the *thymele* at the center.

The dancers processed from either side of the orchestra on the *paradoi*; their song while processing is called the *parados*. The *skene* was at first a changing house but later became a place to put scenery; the *proskenion* was a ledge that ran in front of the *skene* on which the participants could act.

Actors wore a raised boot called a *buskin* to increase their height; a mask called a *prosopon* would establish the character’s identity.

II. Major Ancient Greek Tragedians

A. Aeschylus

- Considered the father of Greek tragedy
- Won first prize at the Great Dionysia 13 times
- Seven of his ~90 plays survive

- Introduced the second actor and began to reduce choral parts so that dialogue between characters can exist.
- Fought in the Persian wars; understood war, the costs of war, the fragility and importance of civilization

B. Sophocles (c. 497-406 BC)

- Also very successful in the competitions
- Best known for *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*
- Added the third actor

C. Euripides (c. 480-406 BC)

- Used more women characters
- More interested in psychology

III. Mythological background for *Agamemnon*: The House of Atreus

- A. Tantalus offends the gods by feasting them on his son's flesh, and they sentence him to starve in Hades, *tantalized* by food just out of reach.
- B. Pelops, the son, is restored by the gods, and has two sons, Atreus and Thyestes.
- C. Thyestes seduces Atreus' wife and threatens Atreus' right to the throne.
- D. Atreus first banishes Thyestes and then brings him back to feast him on his children's flesh.
- E. Thyestes curses Atreus and his descendants; escapes with his own son, Aegisthus.
- F. Atreus has two sons, Menelaus and Agamemnon.
- G. The rest is the subject matter of *Agamemnon*.

When you encounter material in *Agamemnon* that is difficult, consult the summary contained in your book, pp. 23-52.

For a summary of the whole *Oresteia*, see https://public.wsu.edu/~hughesc/oresteia_summary.htm