

CHAPTER 20

“ SOPHOCLES

“ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE”

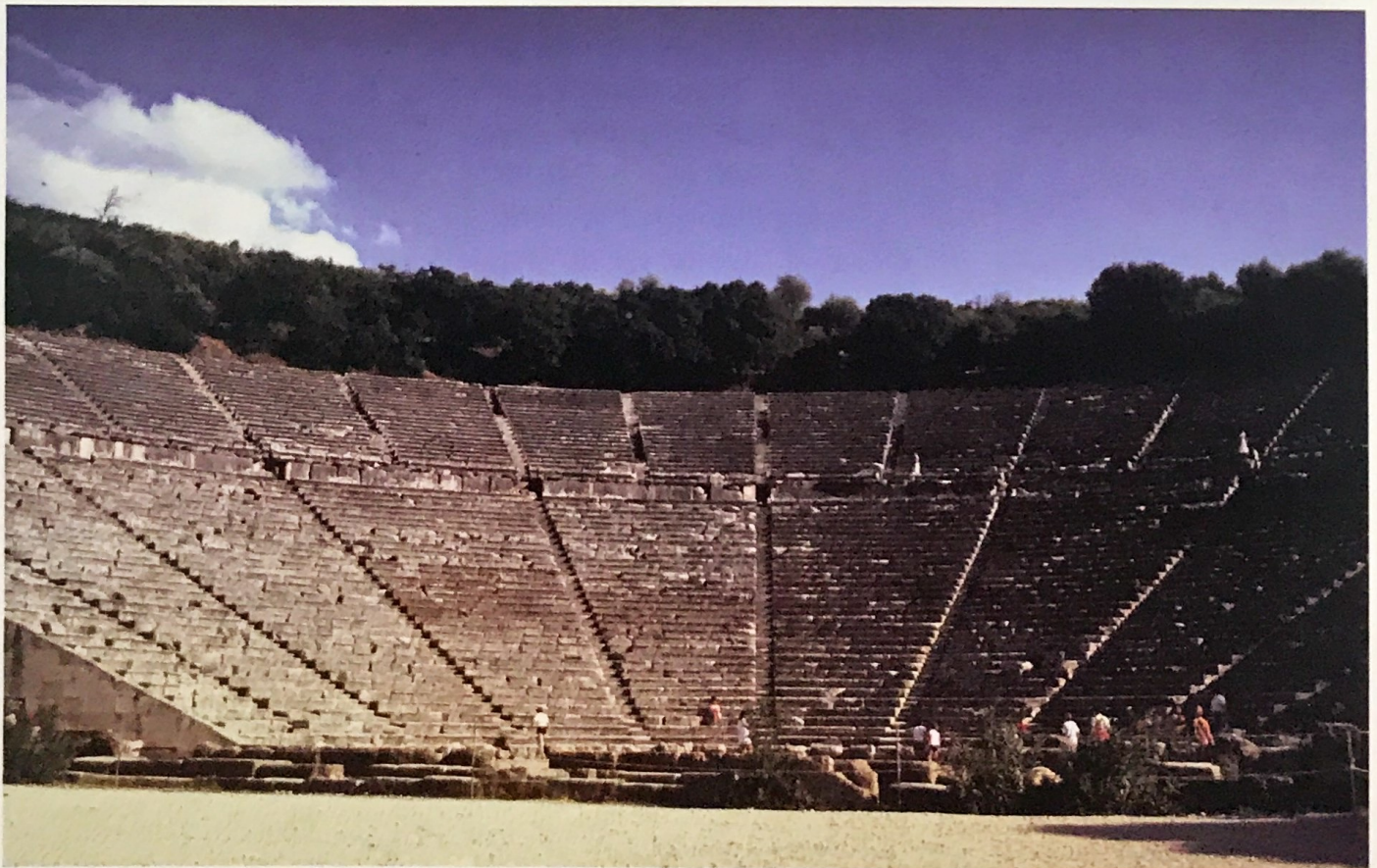
GREEK DRAMA

What’s your favorite kind of movie: village songs, or songs about goats? In other words, do you prefer comedies or tragedies?

“Comedy” originally meant a song sung by the village minstrel. These songs were probably funny, so our use of the word “comedy” makes sense.

About those goats, though—“tragedy” means “goat-song.” Nobody’s sure what goats have to do with it. There’s nothing particularly tragic about a goat, after all. It’s possible that goats were once sacrificed as part of a ritual at a play

The theater at Epidauros holds about 14,000 people and is still used for staging plays.



(which would certainly be tragic for the goat). So "tragedy" could be a kind of shorthand for "performance where a goat is sacrificed."

Very few Greek comedies are left for us to read today. Most of the surviving comedies are by one playwright, Aristophanes. They're pretty wild. In his play *The Birds*, some people get fed up with Athens, so they grow wings and set up a new society in the sky, called Cloudcuckooland. Actors in *The Wasps* wear wasp costumes as they play jurors, showing that juries can sting painfully. In *Lysistrata*, women all over Greece go on strike. They seize the Acropolis and refuse to have anything to do with their husbands until the men agree to end the Peloponnesian War (some of the comedies have a serious side, too).

The comedies are mostly about current events. This might explain why people of later generations lost interest in them and stopped making copies of them (which is why so few are left). If you hear a joke about a politician of your parents' time, you'll probably wonder why anyone ever found it funny.

More tragedies than comedies remain, but we have only a tiny fraction of the tragedies that were written. And that's a shame because even today Greek tragedies are powerful and moving. Unlike Greek comedies, the tragedies were about universal themes: love, hatred, revenge, morality, duty—these are issues that people still grapple with today.

Did you ever feel that no matter what you did, you were going to get in trouble? This kind of no-win situation was the specialty of the Greek tragedians. They managed to get their heroes and heroines into a situation where any action would be punished and lack of action would be punished.

Sometimes it was the character's own fault that he (sometimes she) wound up in this fix. Usually if the main character, called the *protagonistes*, was at fault, it would turn out to be his *hubris*—arrogant pride—that got him there. But sometimes people found themselves in a mess because human relationships are complicated. Relationships between humans and the gods could get even more complicated. Trying to do the right thing, you sometimes

Sophocles's best-known plays are based on the mythical characters King Oedipus and his loyal daughter Antigone. In the myth, Oedipus is exiled and Antigone accompanies him. Here Antigone visits the tomb of her father.



have to choose the lesser of two evils. This means that you wind up avoiding doing the worse thing, but you're still doing something bad. The problem is that it's not always easy, or even possible, to tell which is the less-bad action.

For example, in *Antigone* by Sophocles, a young woman has a tough choice to make. Her brother was involved in a rebellion against King Creon and was killed. The king is so furious at the rebels that he orders that nobody bury them.

Remaining unburied was a terrible punishment for a Greek. It meant that the dead person would never be able to go to the underworld and rest. So the religious law said firmly that people whose relatives died had to make sure that they were properly buried.

But Creon is determined to make an example of these people so that his land will remain secure. This is why he made such a harsh law.

So Antigone has to decide whether to obey the king's law or the gods' law. A further complication is that she's engaged to Haemon, the son of the king. It's a classic no-win situation.

Antigone's sister isn't as independent-minded as she is. Her sister tells her:

No, we must remember two things; first, we were Born women, and women are not to get into conflicts With men; and second, we are ruled by people who Are stronger than we are, so that we must obey in This, and even in worse things than this.

But Antigone isn't going to take the easy way out and let someone—either her sister or the king—make up her mind for her. She decides that the gods' law is more important, so she sprinkles dirt over her brother's body. She is captured

66 Sophocles, *Antigone*, about 442 BCE

and brought to face the king, whom she calls a tyrant. Creon declares that she must be put to death.

Even though this play is taking place in a kingdom, Sophocles and his audience lived in democratic Athens, where the people's opinion was important. Behaving like citizens of democracy, the people in the play get angry at Creon's decision. "Death?" they say. "No, she deserves a glowing golden crown!"

The king ignores the people and has Antigone locked up in a rocky chamber to starve to death. But when a prophet warns Creon that something terrible will happen to his family if he allows Antigone to die, he changes his mind and has the vault opened. Too late (otherwise, it wouldn't be a tragedy)—she has committed suicide.

Her fiancé, Haemon, commits suicide in front of his father. Haemon's mother, the queen, also commits suicide. Creon has to live out the rest of his life knowing that all this death is his fault. He is stricken with grief and guilt:

“” Sophocles, *Antigone*, about 442 BCE

Woe for my crimes, so senseless, so insane,
Stubborn and deadly! See the two of us,
A father murdering, a son the murdered one.
My wretched notions, blind, that killed my son
While still so young, lost to the world this day
Not through his foolishness but through my own.

“” Sophocles, *Antigone*, about 442 BCE

But was it really the king's fault? Or was it the rebels' fault for daring to rise against their ruler? Or Antigone's, because she didn't let her king decide the right way to behave? The chorus has the last word:

By far the greatest part of happiness
Is plain good sense. Right treatment of the gods
Is all-important. Boastful words,
Spoken by boastful people, bring no good:
Great blows will always fall upon the proud,
And in the end these mighty blows bring wisdom.

But who are they talking about—Creon or Antigone? Creon tried to make his law more powerful than the gods' laws. But he had a good reason: protecting his people.

Antigone had a good reason to do what she did, too: she was obeying religious laws. But she was also stubborn and ignored the fact that her brother had committed a terrible crime. Theatergoers must have had lively conversations and arguments on their way home.

Since the plots of most tragedies came from myths that the audience already knew quite well, there wasn't much suspense about how they would end. People would still get caught up in the story, though, just the way you can watch a movie about the *Titanic* and care what happens to the people in it even though you know the ship is going to sink. Similarly, the audience of Aeschylus's *The Persians* would get involved in the story even though they knew that the Greeks were going to win the war.

Both comedies and tragedies were performed at the twice-yearly festivals celebrating Dionysus, the god of the grapevine. The plays were a competition. Originally, they didn't look very much like plays as we know them today. Instead of people playing different characters, two groups of 12 men would compete against each other for singing and reciting the best play in the best way. Later, someone thought of having one actor step out from the group to make a solo speech. Since he usually was responding to the chorus, he was called a *hypokrites*, or answerer.

The tragedian Aeschylus then introduced a second character, and before you knew it, full-fledged plays as we know them today were being performed. Greek plays were still performed in a competition among playwrights, though, and they still had groups of singers. This chorus would serve as a kind of a narrator or as a voice representing public opinion, not an individual with a personality.

The regular actors didn't show their personalities very much, either. Each wore a mask. Its expression would tell the audience what kind of person the actor was portraying. The masks served other purposes, too. Since women weren't allowed to act (they probably weren't even allowed to watch the plays), the man or boy who played a female role could hide his true identity. In Aristophanes' play *The Congress-women*, the Athenian women dress up as men and take over

WHY YOU SHOULD WEAR A HAT ON THE BEACH

Supposedly, the playwright Aeschylus was walking along a beach when a seagull happened to fly overhead carrying a turtle. The hungry bird was looking for a stone where it could drop the turtle to crack its shell.

Unfortunately for the tragedian, his shiny bald head looked just like a rock, so the gull dropped the turtle on him. Both the turtle and the man died.

the assembly. But the people in the audience knew that the actors were really men playing women. So they were watching men pretending to be women pretending to be men!

Also, the mask's mouthpiece was shaped like a megaphone. Although the acoustics in Greek theaters were generally excellent, a huge audience could attend the performance. The actors had to speak loudly enough to be heard over the crowd and the mask would help. And on a practical note, it was rare for more than three actors to participate in a play. By putting on a different mask, an actor could play a different character.

The theater was a semicircle built on the side of a hill. Since the seats were on a slope, everyone could see the action. Behind the actors, on the straight side of the semicircle, a screen or curtain (called the *skene*, or tent) served as a backstage.

Since the plot of the play would rarely be a surprise, playwrights had to come up with different ways of keeping the audience on the edge of its seat. A trapdoor could open



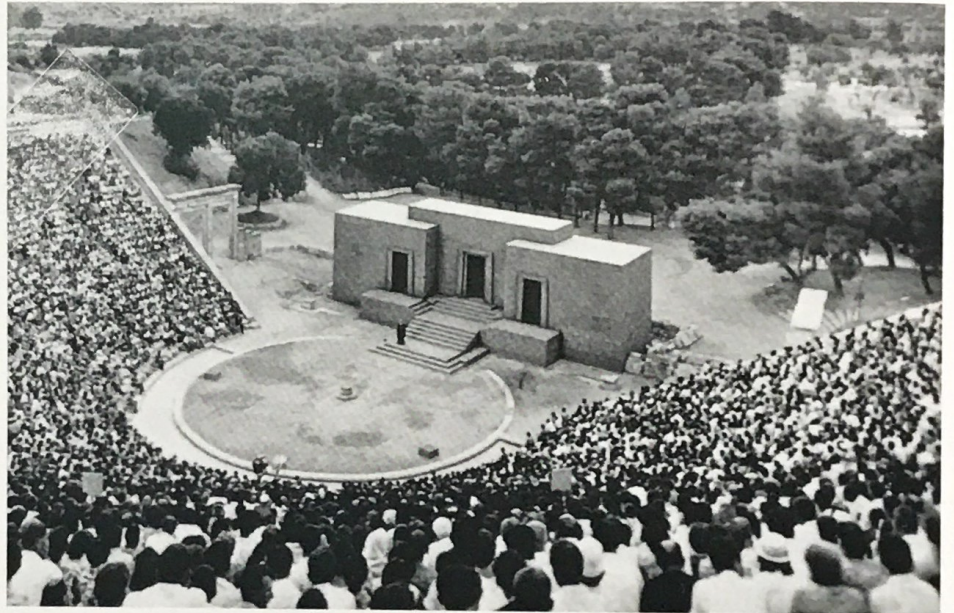
A member of a Greek theater audience would have no difficulty recognizing what kind of character each actor's mask represented.

You're Never Too Old to Learn

Many of the speeches in Greek tragedies can stand alone as poems. Here Haemon tries to convince his father to stop being so angry at Antigone:

*“There isn't any shame
when a wise man
Allows himself to learn more
things.
If you're too rigid and you
never bend—
Well, think of trees you've
seen in wintry storms:
The ones that let themselves
be swayed this way and
that
Will keep their branches,
small as well as big;
The ones that will not bend,
the flood rips out,
Down to the very root.
You bend, or else you break.”*

Sophocles, *Antigone*



The theater of Epidauros was so well designed that spectators in all the seats could hear what was said on the stage far below them.

and a god or demigod like Heracles could suddenly pop up into the action. An ingenious contraption called a *mechanē*, a kind of crane, could swing an actor (usually portraying a god) out over the stage, as though he were flying.

People loved the theater. Playwrights would compete to be chosen to supply the plays. For each festival, each of the three playwrights chosen would write three plays, sometimes with similar themes, and judges would award prizes for the best ones.

Comedies, tragedies, and musical concerts were performed over the space of several days. Beautiful songs performed by the different choruses were always part of the drama. Some people would go to all the plays, hearing actors discuss difficult ideas, provide political commentary, and shake up their ideas of right and wrong. Others would laugh themselves silly over the comedies and avoid the more serious dramas. For much of the time, theater tickets were free and people of all sorts would watch the same drama at the same time. It was really democracy in action.