6 Greek Drama & Poetry

At the same time as Greek thought was developing in Ionia and Italy, 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 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 on-stage. 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, 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.

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 Coephori", "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.

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:

"Bless the sign we saw today!
Cancel all its presaged ill,
all its promised good fulfil!
Next my anxious prayers entreat
Lord Apollo's hearing power,
that his sister may not plan
winds to chain the Hellene fleet;
that her grievance may not crave
  blood to drench another grave
from a different sacrifice
  hallowed by no festal joy,
blood that builds a tower of hate,
mad blood raging to destroy
its self-source, a ruthless Fate
warring with the flesh of man;
bloodshed bringing in its train
kindred blood that flows again,
anger still unreconciled
poisoning a house's life
with darkness, treachery and strife,
wreaking vengeance for a murdered child."
So Calchas, from that parting prodigy
auguring the royal house's destiny,
pronounced his warning of a fatal curse,
with hope of better mingling fear of worse.
Let us too, echoing his uncertain tale,
cry Sorrow, Sorrow, yet let good prevail!

Let good prevail!
So be it! Yet what is good? And who
is God? How name him, and speak true?
If he accept the name that men
give him, Zeus I name him then.
I, still perplexed in mind,
for long have searched and weighed
every hope of comfort or of aid:
still I can find
no creed to lift this heaviness,
this fear that haunts without excuse,
no name inviting faith, no wistful guess,
save only Zeus.

Zeus, whose will has marked for man
the sole way where wisdom lies;
ordered one eternal plan:
Man must suffer to be wise.
Head-winds heavy with past ill
stray his course and cloud his heart:
sorrow takes the blind soul's part,
man grows wise against his will.
For powers who rule from thrones above
by ruthlessness commend their love.
The scale of Justice falls in equity:
The killer will be killed.
But now, farewell foreboding!
Time may show, but cannot alter, what shall be.
What help, then, to bewail troubles before they fall?
Events will take their way
even as the prophet's words foreshadowed all.
For what is next at hand,
let good prevail!

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.

Clytemnestra:

Now hear what is just – my oath!
I swear by the goddess, Judgement, that I accomplished this for my daughter –
And also by Ate and Erinys for whom I slit his throat.

Thus could I hope to enter, without fear, that dwelling
Until Aegisthus makes the fire on my hearth:
He who has previously been well-disposed toward me.
For, there, is that not insignificant shield who gave us courage
There lies he who dishonoured this woman,
He who while near Ilion was the delight of those like the daughter of Chryseis
And she whom he won by his spear – that observer of omens
With whom he had intercourse, that prophetess who loyally slept with him

Even when his ship was under sail at sea!
And such conduct was not without dishonour!
For thus things are: he was laid out here while she,
As is the custom with swans, wailed her last call for her loved one
While she died, serving me additional dish -
Sensuous and spicy - because they had been lovers!

Chorus:

If only something, neither excessively painful
Nor which makes me bed-ridden - some fate - would swiftly arrive
To convey me to that everlasting endless sleep,
Since he, our protector, well-disposed toward us, has been tamed
Having endured much from a woman
And having that woman end his life.
Helen - you who went beyond what is proper -
Because of you alone that multitude, that great multitude,
Lost their lives near Troy!
Now you have crowned that long-to-be-recalled achievement
By this blood you cannot wash away -
For you were in that dwelling,
You, Strife - who by an affliction vigorously tamed a man!

Clytemnestra:

Because of these grievous things, no one should invoke a fatal curse upon
Nor turn their wrath toward, Helen
As if she was some man-killer who alone destroyed
The lives of those many Danean men
By having wrought such a festering wound!

Chorus:

You - daimon - who has befallen that family
And those two descendants of Tantalus:

Your strength is in those women whose natures are the same -
So strong, you gnaw at my heart!
And, as is customary among hostile ravens, you stand
Upon that body, calling your invoking unnatural call!

Clytemnestra :

What you spoke of knowing is now put right
By you calling upon the thrice-fed daimon of this family:
For there was in him a lust to feed on fresh food by sucking new blood
Before this most ancient affliction was over.

Chorus:

What you praise in indeed for that family
a mighty and wrathful daimon -
But it is an ill-omened praising of a still unsatisfied, injurious misfortune.

It is Zeus who causes everything, who cultivates all things –
For what can mortals achieve without Zeus?
What of this has been done without some god?
My Chief – how may I make lament for you?
What can I say so that others can judge our friendship?
But you are there – within what that spider wove,
Having breathed out your life: killed, with no respect shown,
By that ignoble embrace –
Tamed by death through a cunning hand
With a double-edged weapon

Clytemnestra:

So you affirm that it was me who did that work?
But do not add to those words that it was me who was the mistress of Agamemnon
Since the wife of this corpse presents herself here
As that most ancient fierce Avenger.
It is Atreus, he is of that cruel feast,
Who, in payment for that, has added to his young victims
This adult one.

Chorus:

Is there anyone who will bear witness
That you are blameless in this killing?
But – how can that be? Perhaps, because of that one's father,
The Avenger might have helped you –
Dark Ares compelled
By the blood flowing from those sharing the same seed
To go to where he will give satisfaction
For those stains left behind after those boys
Had been made into food.
My Chief – how may I make lament for you?
What can I say so that others can judge our friendship?
But you are there – within what that spider wove,
Having breathed out your life: killed, with no respect shown,
By that ignoble embrace –
Tamed by death through a cunning hand
With a double-edged weapon.

Clytemnestra:

But do not suppose that his killing was ignoble
For did he not by his cunning set Misfortune upon this family?
Since he to that young shoot which I raised –
My Iphigenia, of the many laments –
Did what merited him suffering what he did,
Then he cannot, before Hades, make great boasts,
Having been killed by a sword-wound to pay for what he began!

Chorus:

I lack a plan – robbed of reasons,

I am divided about the right means:
What to do now this family has fallen?
I fear blood thundering-down during a storm
Which will shake this settlement!
The drizzle has ceased – and for another deed of injury,
Fate sharpens another sword for the goddess, Judgement.
Gaia! – Would that you had consumed me
Before I was shown him laid low while in his silver-walled bath!
Who will bury him? Who will give his eulogy?
Will you – having killed your own man – dare
To make lament for his life, unfairly granting him
Such a thankless favour for his mighty deeds?
Who over his cairn will utter the praises
Of he who, descended from a god, was a hero?
Who, through such a labour, will reveal his heart?

Clytemnestra:

It is not fitting for you to trouble yourself with such concerns.
It was by me that he fell, that he died –
And so I shall bury him, with no family lamenting him,
Although his daughter, Iphigenia – as she ought to –
Will welcome her father
After he is ferried over the swift-flowing Acheron,
Embracing him with a kiss.

Chorus:

This rebuke has arisen because of the other rebukes:
And it is difficult to choose which side to fight on.
He who carried things away, is carried away – having killed, he has paid;
For this remains, while the aeon of Zeus remains:
There is adversity in deeds, for that is his law.
Who in that family can expel the seed of that curse?
For Misfortune has fastened herself onto that brood.

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 any more 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.

Coephori (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.

Electra

Hear me, O father, once again hear me.
Lo! at thy tomb, two fledglings of thy brood-
A man-child and a maid; hold them in ruth,
Nor wipe them out, the last of Pelops' line.
For while they live, thou livest from the dead;
Children are memory's voices, and preserve
The dead from wholly dying: as a net
Is ever by the buoyant corks upheld,
Which save the flax-mesh, in the depth submerged.
Listen, this wail of ours doth rise for thee,
And as thou heedest it thyself art saved.

Chorus

In sooth, a blameless prayer ye spake at length-
The tomb's requital for its dirge denied:
Now, for the rest, as thou art fixed to do,
Take fortune by the hand and work thy will.

Orestes

The doom is set; and yet I fain would ask-
Not swerving from the course of my resolve,-
Wherefore she sent these offerings, and why
She softens all too late her cureless deed?
An idle boon it was, to send them here
Unto the dead who recks not of such gifts.
I cannot guess her thought, but well I reckon
Such gifts are useless to atone such crime.
Be blood once spilled, an idle strife he strives
Who seeks with other wealth or wine outpoured
To atone the deed. So stands the word, nor fails.
Yet would I know her thought; speak, if thou knowest.

Chorus

I know it, son; for at her side I stood.
'Twas the night-wandering terror of a dream
That flung her shivering from her couch, and bade her-
Her, the accursed of God-these offerings send.

Orestes

Heard ye the dream, to tell it forth aright?

Chorus

Yea, from herself; her womb a serpent bare.

Orestes

What then the sum and issue of the tale?

Chorus

Even as a swaddled child, she lulled the thing.

Orestes

What suckling craved the creature, born full-fanged?

Chorus

Yet in her dreams she proffered it the breast.

Orestes

How? did the hateful thing not bite her teat?

Chorus

Yea, and sucked forth a blood-gout in the milk.

Orestes

Not vain this dream-it bodes a man's revenge.

Chorus

Then out of sleep she started with a cry,
And through the palace for their mistress' aid
Full many lamps, that erst lay blind with night,
Flared into light; then, even as mourners use,
She sends these offerings, in hope to win
A cure to cleave and sunder sin from doom.

Orestes

Earth and my father's grave, to you I call-
Give this her dream fulfillment, and through' me.
I read it in each part coincident
With what shall be; for mark, that serpent sprang
From the same womb as I, in swaddling bands
By the same hands was swathed, lipped the same breast,

And sucking forth the same sweet mother's milk
Infused a clot of blood; and in alarm
She cried upon her wound the cry of pain.
The sense is clear: the thing of dread she nursed,
The death of blood she dies; and I, 'tis I,
In semblance of a serpent, that must slay her.
Thou art my seer, and thus I read the dream.

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:

With loyalty we lead you; proudly go,
Night's childless children, to your home below!
O citizens, awhile from words forbear!

To darkness' deep primeval lair,
Far in Earth's bosom, downward fare,
Adored with prayer and sacrifice.
O citizens, forbear your cries!
Pass this way, ye powers of Dread,
With all your former wrath allayed,
Into the heart of this loved land;
With joy unto your temple wend,
The while upon your steps attend
The flames that feed upon the brand-
Now, now ring out your chant, your joy's acclaim!
Behind them, as they downward fare,
Let holy hands libations bear,
And torches' sacred flame.
All-seeing Zeus and Fate come down
To battle fair for Pallas' town!
Ring out your chant, ring out your joy's acclaim!

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), "Philoc-tetes", 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. The Chorus sings:

Chorus

Sore perplexed am I by the words of the master seer.
Are they true, are they false? I know not and bridle my tongue for fear,
Fluttered with vague surmise; nor present nor future is clear.
Quarrel of ancient date or in days still near know I none
Twixt the Labdacidan house and our ruler, Polybus' son.
Proof is there none: how then can I challenge our King's good name,
How in a blood-feud join for an untracked deed of shame?

All wise are Zeus and Apollo, and nothing is hid from their ken;
They are gods; and in wits a man may surpass his fellow men;
But that a mortal seer knows more than I know--where
Hath this been proven? Or how without sign assured, can I blame
Him who saved our State when the winged songstress came,
Tested and tried in the light of us all, like gold assayed?
How can I now assent when a crime is on Oedipus laid?

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 thou mayest ease thy conscience on that score.
Listen and I'll convince thee 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 thee speak!

Jocasta

What mean'st thou? What has shocked and startled thee?

Oedipus

Methought I heard thee 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 thou 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 thou wast proclaimed
Our country's ruler that the news was brought.

Oedipus

O Zeus, what hast thou willed to do with me!

Jocasta

What is it, Oedipus, that moves thee 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 thee in form.

Oedipus

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

Jocasta

What say'st thou? When I look upon thee, 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
Thee 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 thy heart, my king?

Oedipus

And thou shalt not be frustrate of thy wish.
Now my imaginings have gone so far.
Who has a higher claim that thou 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 venomed 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!

Chorus

We too, O king, are troubled; but till thou
Hast questioned the survivor, still hope on.

Oedipus

My hope is faint, but still enough survives
To bid me bide the coming of this herd.

Jocasta

Suppose him here, what wouldst thou learn of him?

Oedipus

I'll tell thee, lady; if his tale agrees
With thine, I shall have 'escaped calamity.

Jocasta

And what of special import did I say?

Oedipus

In thy report of what the herdsman said
Laius was slain by robbers; now if he

Still speaks of robbers, not a robber, I
Slew him not; “one” with “many” cannot square.
But if he says one lonely wayfarer,
The last link wanting to my guilt is forged.

Jocasta

Well, rest assured, his tale ran thus at first,
Nor can he now retract what then he said;
Not I alone but all our townsfolk heard it.
Even should he vary somewhat in his story,
He cannot make the death of Laius
In any wise jump with the oracle.
For Loxias said expressly he was doomed
To die by my child’s hand, but he, poor babe,
He shed no blood, but perished first himself.
So much for divination. Henceforth I
Will look for signs neither to right nor left.

Oedipus

Thou reasonest well. Still I would have thee send
And fetch the bondsman hither. See to it.

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 prophesies. 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", "Phoenis-sae"...

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 contem-porary 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 thou-sands of new tragedies were written by those who wished to be “Hel-lenized”, 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 Renais-sance, they inspired Shakespeare and Jonson, as well as Moliere, and English Restoration comedy.

Greek Lyric Poetry

Archilochus c. 650 wrote iambic, elegiac verse.
Stesichorus c.600 Lyric poet, heroic ballads
Sappho b.612 First great lyric poet(ess)
Anacreon 580 - 495 Light lyric poetry
Aesop d.564 Fables
Hipponax c.540 Satiric iambic poet
Pindar 522 - 440 Odes

Archilochus

One of the first named Greek lyric poets, Archilochus is said to have lived in great poverty. He wrote poems exploiting the iambic meter, which sounds close to natural speech. He was reputed for his sharp wit, and composed satires as well as elegies.

On Friends Lost at Sea
Blaming the bitterness of the sorrow, Pericles, no man
in all our city can take pleasure in festivities:
Such were the men the surf of the roaring sea washed under,
all of us go with hearts aching against our ribs
for misery. Yet against such grief that is past recovery
the gods, dear friend, have given us strong endurance to be
our medicine. Such sorrows are variable. They beat now
against ourselves, and we take the hurt of the bleeding sore.
Tomorrow it will be others who grieve, not we. From now on
act like a man, and put away these feminine tears.

Eclipse of the Sun

Nothing will surprise me any more, nor be too wonderful
for belief, now that the lord on Olympus, father Zeus,
has dimmed the daylight and made darkness come upon us in the noon
and the sunshine. So limp terror has descended on mankind.
After this, men can believe anything. They can expect
anything. Be not astonished any more, although you see
beasts of the dry land exchange with dolphins, and assume their place
in the watery pastures of the sea, and beasts who loved the hills
find the ocean's crashing waters sweeter than the bulk of land.

Sappho

One of the great Greek lyrists and few known female poets of the ancient world, Sappho was born some time between 630 and 612 BC. She was an aristocrat who married a prosperous merchant, and she had a daughter named Cleis. Her wealth afforded her with the opportunity to live her life as she chose, and she chose to spend it studying the arts on the isle of Lesbos.

In the seventh century BC, Lesbos was a cultural center. Sappho spent most her time on the island, though she also traveled widely throughout Greece. She was exiled for a time because of political activities in her family, and she spent this time in Sicily. By this time she was known as a poet, and the residents of Syracuse were so honored by her visit that they erected a statue to her.

Sappho was called a lyrist because, as was the custom of the time, she wrote her poems to be performed with the accompaniment of a lyre. Sappho composed her own music and refined the prevailing lyric meter to a point that it is now known as sapphic meter. She innovated lyric poetry both in technique and style, becoming part of a new wave of Greek lyrists who moved from writing poetry from the point of view of gods and muses to the personal vantage point of the individual. She was one of the first poets to write from the first person, describing love and loss as it affected her personally.

Her style was sensual and melodic; primarily songs of love, yearning, and reflection. Most commonly the target of her affections was female, often one of the many women sent to her for education in the arts. She nurtured these women, wrote poems of love and adoration to them, and when they eventually left the island to be married, she composed their wedding songs. While she still lived, coins of Lesbos were minted with her image. Plato elevated her from the status of great lyric poet to one of the muses. Upon hearing one of her songs, Solon, an Athenian ruler, lawyer, and a poet himself,

asked to be taught the song, “Because I want to learn it and die.”

Given the fame that her work has enjoyed, it is somewhat surprising that only one of Sappho’s poems is available in its entirety--all of the rest exist as fragments. At one time, there were perhaps nine complete volumes of her poetry, but over the centuries her work was lost.

I have not had one word from her

Frankly I wish I were dead
When she left, she wept

a great deal; she said to me, “This parting must be
endured, Sappho. I go unwillingly.”

I said, “Go, and be happy
but remember (you know
well) whom you leave shackled by love

“If you forget me, think
of our gifts to Aphrodite
and all the loveliness that we shared

“all the violet tiaras,
braided rosebuds, dill and
crocus twined around your young neck

“myrrh poured on your head
and on soft mats girls with
all that they most wished for beside them

“while no voices chanted
choruses without ours,
no woodlot bloomed in spring without song...”

(Translated by Mary Barnard)

Anacreon

Anacreon (580 - 495) wrote light verse in elegant meter, celebrating the delights of love and the pleasures of wine. Little of his work survives but he had many imitators, both in the Classical period and in more recent times. Such verse is sometimes known as ‘Anacreontic’.

An Ode of Anacreon

My Hairs are hoary, wrinkled is my Face,
I lose my Strength, and all my Manly Grace;
My Eyes grow dim, my Teeth are broke or gone,
And the best part of all my Life is done;

I’m drowned in Cares, and often sigh and weep;
My Spirits fail me, broken is my Sleep;
Thoughts of the gaping Grave distract my Head;
For in its Paths ‘wake or asleep we tread;

None can from it, by Art their Feet restrain;
Nor back, tho' wide its Gates, can come again.
Then since these Ills attend the Life of Man,
Let's make their Burden easy as we can.

Cares are no Cares, but whilst on them we think,
To clear our Minds of such dull Thoughts, let's drink.

(Translated by Philip Ayres, 1687)

Ode 51

Flee not thus my brow of snow,
Lovely wanton! fly not so.
Though the wane of age is mine,
And the brilliant flush is thine,
Still I'm doomed to sigh for thee,
Blest, if thou could'st sigh for me!
See – in yonder flowery braid,
Culled for thee, my blushing maid,
How the rose, of orient glow,
Mingles with the lily's snow;
Mark, how sweet their tints agree,
Just, my girl, like thee and me!

(Translated by Thomas Moore, 1800)

Pindar

Pindar (522 - 440) was born near Thebes, and lived in Athens, where he knew Aeschylus. He was very highly admired. Of all Pindar's writings, only the four books of "Epinicians" (poems written to commemorate athletic victories at the greatest contests in the Greek world) have survived intact. Our perception of Pindar as a poet thus necessarily overemphasizes this category of poetry, distorting in some measure our view of his work. Nevertheless, epinician poetry seems to have been immensely popular at the time, and the victories celebrated in these poems should not be seen as objects of ephemeral interest. Pindar tried to elevate his odes by introducing many mythical elements; some of these he may have invented himself.

Pindar's poetry was aimed at an international audience, but this audience consisted of a small elite. Pindar's work is openly complex and difficult to appreciate. He challenges his listeners to follow his meaning, for the ability to appreciate Pindar was itself a sign that one belonged to the Greek elite.

From The First Nemean Ode of Pindar

6

How early has young Chromius begun
The Race of Virtue, and how swiftly run,
And born the noble Prize away,
Whilst other youths yet at the Barriere stay?
None but Alcides ere set earlier forth than He;
The God, his Father's, Blood nought could restrain,

‘Twas ripe at first, and did disdain
The slow advance of dull Humanity,
The big-limbed Babe in his huge Cradle lay,
Too weighty to be rocked by Nurse’s hands,
Wrapped in purple swaddling-bands.
When, lo, by jealous Juno’s fierce commands,
Two dreadful Serpents come
Rolling and hissing loud into the room.
To the bold Babe, they trace their bidden way,
Forth from their flaming eyes dread Lightnings went,
Their gaping Mouths did forked Tongues like Thunderbolts present.

7

Some of th’amazed Women dropped down dead
With fear, some wildly fled
About the room, some into corners crept,
Where silently they shook and wept.
All naked from her bed the passionate Mother leapt
To save or perish with her Child,
She trembled, and she cried, the mighty Infant smiled.
The mighty Infant seemed well pleased
At his gay gilded foes,
And as their spotted necks up to the Cradle rose,
With his young warlike hands on both he seized;
In vain they raged, in vain they hissed,
In vain their armed Tails they twist,
And angry Circles cast about,
Black Blood, and fiery Breath, and poisonous Soul he squeezes out.

8

With their drawn Swords
In ran Amphitryo, and the Theban Lords,
With doubting wonder, and with troubled joy
They saw the conquering Boy
Laugh, and point downwards to his prey,
Where in death’s pangs, and their own gore they folding lay.
When wise Tauruses this beginning knew,
He told with ease the things t’ensue,
From what Monsters he should free
The Earth, the Air, and Sea,
What mighty Tyrants he should slay,
Greater Monsters far than They.
How much at Phlegra’s field the distressed Gods should owe
To their great Offspring here below,
And how his Club should there outdo
Apollo’s silver Bow, and his own Father’s Thunder too.

(Translated by Abraham Cowley, 1656)