

THE STRUCTURE OF GREEK TRAGEDY

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1. Lyric vs. dialogue

Basic to the genre tragedy from its inception was the alternation of song and speech, sung lyric meters vs. spoken iambic trimeter (or trochaic tetrameter), chorus vs. actor(s). The chorus vs. actor(s) dichotomy is a general one, and crossover does occur. The head-man of the chorus (**koryphaios**) speaks iambic trimeters (esp. in couplets), and sometimes other individual members of the chorus speak iambic lines to indicate indecision (as Aesch. Ag. 1346ff., Eur. Hipp. 782-785). Actors can sing either short exclamatory lyrics or an extended **aria**. A lyric exchange or lyric dialogue (**amoiibaion**) can occur between two actors or between actor(s) and chorus. Both may be lyric voices (esp. in a **kommos**, a quasi-ritual lament: end of Persians), or one voice may be confined to iambic trimeter to provide a calmer counterpoint to the emotion expressed in the other voice's lyrics (as Soph. Ant. 1261-1346; Eur. Iphigenia in Tauris 827ff., Helen 625ff.). Sometimes the relative emotional levels of the two voices vary during the scene (as Aesch. Ag. 1072-1177 [Cassandra's emotion infects the chorus], 1406-1576 [Clytemnestra first responds in trimeters, then joins in the lyrics]; Eur. Hipp. 811-884 [Theseus and chorus]).

The main dialogue meter is the **iambic trimeter**, a spoken verse based on a twelve-syllable pattern: three iambic metra of the form x - v - (where x is a syllable either long or short metrically, - is heavy or metrically long, v is light or metrically short: Greek meters are quantitative, that is, based on syllable length or weight, not on stress or accent).

Trochaic tetrameters function as a byform of dialogue. Each line is based on a fifteen-syllable pattern: four trochaic metra of the form - v - x, but with the last shortened by omission of the final element. Trochaic tetrameters seem to have been used frequently in early tragedy, then were very little used in the mature period of tragedy, and were revived in many plays of Eur.'s last decade. In ethos the tetrameter is more dance-like and potentially less serious; it often accompanies more agitated action or emotion than is found in adjacent iambic scenes.

"Marching" **anapaests** function as an intermediary between full lyric and full dialogue. They seem to have been chanted. Anapaests consist of a sequence of metra of the form v v - v v - (or equivalents formed by substituting one long for two shorts or vice versa: e.g. - - v v - or - v v - - or - - - -). Sometimes choral anapaests serve as a long prelude to the parodos-lyric (Aesch. Ag. 40-103) or as a short prelude or transitional form leading to choral song (Aesch. Ag. 355-366), or announcing an entrance at the end of a choral song (Aesch. Ag. 783-809).

Lyric portions of the plays are normally written in **antistrophic composition**. That is, stanzas are grouped in pairs (each pair being of unique form): the first stanza of a pair is called a **strophe**, the corresponding stanza with the same metrical pattern is called

the **antistrophe**. Usually the antistrophe follows immediately after its strophe, but occasionally a short stanza called a **mesode** appears in between, or responsion occurs over a distance (as with Hipp. 362-372 = 669-679), or some unusual order occurs (as in the kommos in Choephoroi). Each parodos or stasimon may have one or more pairs of strophes and antistrophes (the commonest patterns are two or three pairs). Sometimes a choral ode will end with an additional stanza not in corresponsion (not paired), called an **epode**.

2. Divisions of a play

The basic structure can be viewed as one of acts and act-dividing songs, the beginning of a new act being apparent normally from the entry of a new character after a song. (Cf. O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* and *Greek Tragedy in Action*). Nevertheless, one needs to be aware of the terminology that has become traditional in the description of Greek plays.

Prologue: the part of the play preceding the entry of the chorus, usually two scenes (sometimes three, rarely one). The first of these scenes may be a **prologue-monologue**, esp. common in Eur. and rare in Soph. The monologue-speaker may be a god, a minor character, or a (the) major character. Such a speaker normally addresses the audience more or less directly (though not quite so informally as in comedy), and full dramatic illusion does not take hold until the conclusion of the speech. In Sophocles, the opening is usually fully dramatic from the start. In a few plays there are no prologue-scenes and the exposition begins immediately with the entrance of the chorus (Aesch. Persians).

Parodos: entry of the chorus and the name of the song they sing (or of the chanted anapaests plus song sung) as they enter. The first entry of the chorus was perhaps traditionally onto an empty "stage," but in some plays an actor is present as the chorus enters (and may or may not be acknowledged in their song). In late fifth-century tragedy, as dialogue-scenes had become more important dramatically and the chorus correspondingly less important, an amoibaion sometimes takes the place of the parodos, reducing the chorus' autonomy in the drama.

Episode: the scene(s) between the parodos and the first stasimon or between two stasimons. In fifth-century drama the length and the number of episodes vary. During the fourth century the structure of five dialogue-acts (*merê*, "parts") divided by four choral interludes became standard: it can be seen in Menander's comedies and in the Hellenistic literary theory reflected in Horace, *Art of Poetry* 189-190. An episode may contain lyric elements such as aria or amoibaion as well as dialogue-scenes.

Stasimon: any extended song of the chorus after the parodos; almost always in antistrophic form. The stasimons tend to get shorter as the play proceeds. In Aesch. a stasimon is sometimes preceded by anapaests. In late fifth-century tragedy, with the diminution of the dramatic weight of the chorus, the interval between stasimons is sometimes very long, and the number of true antistrophic stasimons may be small (e.g. Eur. Helen, Soph. Phil.).

Exodos: the scene(s) following the final stasimon. In many plays of Eur. (and in Soph. Phil.) there is a divine epiphany in the exodos. Frequently the crane was employed for the god's appearance through the air: *hence theos apo mêchanês*, *deus ex machina*, "god from the crane"), but the god could also appear on the roof of the scene-building (via a ladder or trap-door).

Epiparodos: in a few plays the chorus goes off in the middle of the play and then re-enters; scholars have given the name epiparodos ("additional parodos") to such a reappearance and to the song which accompanies it (Aesch. Eum. 244ff., Eur. Helen 515ff. [where, extraordinarily, the chorus had gone into the palace]; cf. Eur. Alcestis 861ff.).

3. Types of dialogue and dialogue-scenes

A. Rhesis

A **rhesis** is an extended speech in trimeters (or, rarely, tetrameters), often formally organized in its rhetoric. Some special forms include:

1. **agôn logôn:** the "contest of speeches" is a recognizable form in both Soph. and Eur. Generally, there are two speeches, each closed by a couplet from the koryphaios (which is sometimes negligible in content and effect). The two debaters may be performing in front of a third actor who serves more or less as "judge" (sometimes the "judge" closes the scene with his or her own rhesis). In many cases the rheses of the debate are followed by argumentative short dialogue or stichomythia which sharpens the opposition and shows that nothing positive has been accomplished.

2. **messenger-rhesis:** critical news from offstage (inside the building or at a distant location) is usually conveyed in a scene of reporting to the chorus alone or to an appropriate character along with the chorus. The **messenger-scene** usually appears about 2/3 to 4/5 of the way through the play, but earlier messenger-scenes are found (Aesch. Persae, Ag.) and some plays have two messenger-scenes (Eur. IT, Bacchae). Typically, the messenger conveys the essential news and relieves the tension in a short dialogue and then is asked to give the whole story, which he does in a rhesis extending up to 80 or even 100 lines.

3. Other long speeches usually have important dramatic impact, e.g. Medea's self-presentation to the Corinthian women (Eur. Med. 214ff.) or Hippolytus' tirade against women (Eur. Hipp. 616ff.) or the speeches in which Creon and Antigone declare their opposite views of the world and morality (Antigone 162ff. and 450ff.).

B. Irregular dialogue in short speeches

For short stretches the actors (or actor and koryphaios) may converse in speeches of varying lengths. The formality of the genre normally requires that each speech end at the end of a full trimeter. **Antilabe**, the breaking of a line between two speakers, is not found

in Aesch. (there is a possible case in Prom.) and is used only for special effect in most of Soph. and Eur. (in some of late Soph. antilabe seems to produce only informality or "naturalness," not a shock effect).

C. Regular patterns of short dialogue

Stichomythia is line-for-line dialogue, sometimes lively and compressed, sometimes casual, gradual or roundabout. Syntactic ellipsis and suspension are frequent. An extended exchange between actors usually tends toward the regular pattern of stichomythia. An extended stichomythia often begins or ends (or has its transitions marked) with an irregularity such as a couplet. Stichomythia is also found in trochaic tetrameters.

Distichomythia is an extended sequence of two-line speeches in alternation.

Continuous antilabe presents a series of trimeters in which each is divided between the two speakers (A:B :: A:B :: A:B :: etc.). This usually occurs within or at the end of a stichomythia to quicken the pace and heighten the excitement. In some passages one can see a subtle artistic effect in the gradual shortening of speaker A's portion of the line (Soph. OT 1173-1176). Continuous antilabe is not usually carried on for long; but in late Euripides it is done in trochaic tetrameters, where it is somewhat easier to write, and can be extended (e.g. Orestes 774-798).