



ANCIENT GREEK PLAYWRIGHTS

Ancient Greek playwrights often come up as tossups and, sometimes, as bonus parts. Here are a few of the most commonly asked playwrights with brief descriptions of each.

(Study Guide by Jacob O'Rourke)

Key Terms from Greek Theatre:

- **City Dionysia:** Annual theatre festival in honor of the God of Wine and Theatre, Dionysus.
- **Satyr Play:** A brief comic play that features a chorus of half-men, half-goats (men dressed up as goats). These typically parodied mythological and heroic tales.
- **Chorus:** Group that comments on the action in a Greek play. In Oedipus, the chorus is the townspeople.
- **Deus ex machina:** literally “God out of a box.” With this, a character (usually a god) would come down and resolve the issues of the play so that everyone ended up happy usually.
- **Agon:** scene in Old Comedy when both sides discussed the issues of the play.
- Most Greek plays began near the climax, with the characters already in the midst of their struggles.
- Before Sophocles, there were never more than 2 actors on the stage at the same time.
- All Greek plays tend to take place in a short amount of time (24 hours or less).

Aeschylus:

- The first of the three great Greek tragedians, he was born in Eleusis in 545 BC. One story about his early life is that Dionysus appeared to him in a dream and ordered him to write drama.
- He doesn't tend to come up as much as his counterparts Sophocles and Euripides, however.
- Famous for his *Oresteia*, a trilogy about the house of Atreus, which focuses mainly on the family of Agamemnon.
- *Agamemnon* (part 1 of the trilogy) tells about Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon with the help of Aegisthus. One scene shows that Cassandra, brought back by



Agamemnon as a prize, **knows that Clytemnestra will murder her** in the palace, but **she goes into the palace anyway.**

- *The Libation Bearers* (part 2) tells of how **Orestes** and Electra **kill Clytemnestra** and Aegisthus in **revenge of their father.**
- *The Furies* (part 3) tells about **the trial of Orestes** for the murder of his mother Clytemnestra **by the gods, and ends with Athena casting the deciding vote** in favor of **Orestes' innocence.**
- *Prometheus Bound* was said to have been written by him.
- Other works include *Seven against Thebes* and *The Persians*.

Sophocles:

- Born in Athens in 496 BC, he is easily the Greek playwright that comes up the most; just behind him in importance are Euripides and Aristophanes. He was the first playwright to add a third actor to the stage.
- Two of his early works are *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*.
- Most famous for his trilogy about the family of Oedipus.
- *Oedipus Rex* (or *Oedipus Tyrannus*) tells of how **Oedipus** discovers his identity and **committed the crime of marrying his mother** after **killing his father.**
- Jocasta starts to suspect the truth after **a shepherd tells** of how **he rescued a baby with a chain on his ankle**, which was **how Oedipus got his name** (Oedipus literally means swollen ankle).
- Whenever he finds out the truth (that he killed his father and married his mother), **Jocasta hangs herself** and **Oedipus blinds himself**, so that **he cannot look upon his wretched self** anymore.
- *Oedipus at Colonus* tells of how **Oedipus and his daughters Ismene and Antigone reach Colonus** and encounter **Theseus, king of Athens; Oedipus dies** and **strife begins between Polyneices and Eteocles**, Oedipus' sons, **for the throne of Thebes.**
- *Antigone* centers on **Antigone's desire to give her brother Polyneices a proper burial;** Ismene tries to get herself killed along with her sister, but Antigone refuses to allow Ismene to die with her; **Creon orders her killed**, and his son **Haemon** (Antigone's fiancé) **protests; Creon tries to rescue Antigone** after being convinced by his counsel that he needs to heed the wishes of the people of Thebes.
- The play ends with the **deaths of Antigone, Haemon** (by falling on his sword while aiming for his father), **and Eurydice**, Creon's wife, and **Creon leaving Thebes.**



Euripides:

- Born in Athens in 484 BC, he is the last of the Three Great Dramatists (he comes up more than Aeschylus and less than Sophocles, however).
- Famous plays include the *Bacchae*, *Trojan Women*, and *Medea*.
- *Medea* centers on **the revenge of Medea on her husband Jason** after Jason takes a new wife; Medea **kills Jason's bride, Creon** (the bride's father), and the **2 sons she had with Jason. Medea, in the last scene of the play, refuses to give Jason the bodies of the sons, as she insists that they do not belong to him, but rather to her, their mother.** One key theme debated throughout the play is whether Medea is evil or not. Jason accuses Medea of being a devil and says that the gods will punish her, but Medea replies by saying that **the line between good and evil has been blurred so much that the gods will not punish her.**
- *Trojan Women* is about the **fate of Cassandra, Andromache, and the other women of Troy**; in the play, Hector's infant son is killed, and **the women of Troy are all taken off to Greece** so they can suffer.
- *Bacchae* shows how **Dionysus punished King Pentheus** of Thebes and his mother **Agave for refusing to worship him.**

Menander:

- Menander, born in 342 BC, was a writer of what was called New Comedy.
- New Comedy was a style of comedy that took inspiration from the daily life happening in Athens, as after the Macedonian conquest, no playwrights felt safe to continue writing in the daring and satirical style of Aristophanes.
- New Comedy has had fewer works survive into our time than Old Comedy and Tragedy writers; therefore, they tend to get less exposure in quiz bowl.
- Known for *Aspis* (the Shield), *Dyskolos* (The Grouch), and *Perikeiromene* (the Girl who has her hair cropped)-said to be an inspiration for Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*.
- *Dyskolos* is about **the mischievousness of the god Pan**, who makes **Sostratos fall in love with a young peasant girl** he has just seen. He tries to get the girl's father, the title grouch, to grant him permission to marry her. In the end, **he marries her after Knemon (the grouch) nearly drowns** in his own well **and realizes the error** of his ways.
- Popular among Roman writers; Terence combined two of his works in *Eunuchus*.



Aristophanes:

- Born in 448 BC in Athens. His work is the only representation we have of the Old Comedy style.
- Famous for *The Birds*, *The Frogs*, and *Lysistrata*.
- *The Birds* focuses on **the intervention of communication** of the humans and gods **when Pisthetaerus goes into the sky** to build a city among the birds. One comment made famous is how the **two Athenians (Pisthetaerus and Euelpides)** make **similarities between humans and the birds**.
- In *The Frogs*, **Euripides is brought back** from the underworld by **Dionysus and Aeschylus is left** in his place, as Dionysus **judges Euripides to be the finest** and most important of the **Greek playwrights**. The **namesake characters** say “**Bre-ke-ke-kex-koax-koax.**”
- *Lysistrata* is about how the titular female and other **women conspire to keep sex from their husbands to speed up the end of the Peloponnesian War**.
- The scheme actually ends up working as both Athenian and Spartan women have joined the plot, and the men end the Peloponnesian War.
- One key scene is when **the men and women debate** the causes of the war and **which side is right** (The Agon was actually used a lot in Greek theatre, as playwrights often wanted to put their own thoughts about an issue into this-e.g. the Peloponnesian War).

