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Origins of Tragedy

When we come to the drama, however, the realm of what Aristotle first spoke of as 'bodies in motion,' we are in a fresh new cross between 'reality' and 'fabrication.' We are thus impacted with a direct power unknown to other genres of literature! Where did this genre come from?

The origins of Greek tragedy. Unlike epic and philosophy, though not unlike the lyric, Greek tragedy seems to have grown out of dance and choral music.(The *seems* is important, because the origins of the tragic drama, though long fascinating to scholars, remain hidden in obscurity.) While the fifth century is the great period for both tragedy and comedy, there was an Archaic creative period, deep in the world of Hesiod's time and probably even older, when rural/religious dance festivals, which mesh with the origins of lyric, began to create early forms of choral action. (We see a form of this fusion, not really a drama, in the celebratory paeans of Pindar, where within the chorus there is a dramatic exchange accompanied by formal dance routines.) The goal of the Pindaric Ode was praise. The origin of the tragic drama was more nearly awe than praise. That awe expressed itself in technical developments from within the original dance formula, which was itself tightly woven into religious rites—for Dionysus. In one of the first steps in this technical development, the chief dance spokesman split off from the body of the choral dancers, and began to dialogue with them. This split-off figure became the first actor, and by century's end had been joined by a second actor. (Two actors plus chorus were the basic ingredients throughout the course of classical Greek drama, tragedy *and* comedy; but though we know such basics from our own observation, and from Greek commentators like Aristotle, we have only the sketchiest outlines of the sixth century developments that led to the great sophistication of fifth century tragedy.) We do know that significant theatrical structures were created during the sixth century B.C., and that by the time of Aeschylus the Theater of Dionysus served as a centerpiece of Athenian municipal life, built against the slopes of the Acropolis, and drawing to it large crowds on the occasion of major religious festivals.