Alexander the Great’s conquests produced a body of historical writings, but none of it survived except as sources for the work of other Greek and Roman historians such as Plutarch and Arrian, both of whom wrote in Greek, and Curtius Rufus in Latin—all of these date to the period of the Roman Empire. Greece in the fourth century B.C.E. also developed a taste for local chronicles; the chronicles of Athens were known as Atthides, or “Chronicles of Attica,” and two of its notable authors were Androtion and Philochorus. There is also an historian of the second century B.C.E., Polybius of Megalopolis (208–126 B.C.E.), who was exiled from Greece to Rome, where he wrote a history of Rome in forty books beginning with the first war between Rome and Carthage (265–241 B.C.E.). About a third of it survives, though there is enough to make us regret its loss. He wrote burlesques of myths: one play called Hebe’s Wedding was set in Olympus and parodied the marriage of Heracles to Hebe. Deified though he might be, Heracles was still portrayed much as he was in the comic theater: a muscle-bound lout who gobbled up his food, and drank until he was drunk. Another type of comedy that Epicharmus wrote dealt with contemporary life and introduced stock characters (that is, characters with trademark roles such as the clever slave, the boastful soldier, and the love-sick youth), and a third type that he wrote played with arguments between non-human abstractions—for instance, one seems to have hinged on a debate between women’s logic and men’s logic. The plays of Epicharmus had no chorus, unlike the comedies produced in Athens, though there was musical accompaniment. Farces were clearly popular in Sicily and “Magna Graecia,” as the Greek settlements in southern Italy were called, for the local potters used scenes from the comic theater as vase paintings. These farces look forward to the New Comedy which would displace the Old Comedy of Aristophanes on the Athenian stage more than a century later.

**GREEK COMEDY**

**BEGINNINGS.** The early history of comedy is unclear, remarked Aristotle in his *On the Art of Poetry*, because no one took it seriously. The *polis* of Megara which was sandwiched between Corinth and Athens claimed to have invented it, as did Sicily, which produced a writer of farces, Epicharmus, who was patronized by the tyrants of Syracuse Gelon (485–478 B.C.E.) and his successor Hiero (478–467 B.C.E.). Little of his work survives, though there is enough to make us regret its loss. He wrote burlesques of myths: one play called *Hebe’s Wedding* was set in Olympus and parodied the marriage of Heracles to Hebe. Deified though he might be, Heracles was still portrayed much as he was in the comic theater: a muscle-bound lout who gobbled up his food, and drank until he was drunk. Another type of comedy that Epicharmus wrote dealt with contemporary life and introduced stock characters (that is, characters with trademark roles such as the clever slave, the boastful soldier, and the love-sick youth), and a third type that he wrote played with arguments between non-human abstractions—for instance, one seems to have hinged on a debate between women’s logic and men’s logic. The plays of Epicharmus had no chorus, unlike the comedies produced in Athens, though there was musical accompaniment. Farces were clearly popular in Sicily and “Magna Graecia,” as the Greek settlements in southern Italy were called, for the local potters used scenes from the comic theater as vase paintings. These farces look forward to the New Comedy which would displace the Old Comedy of Aristophanes on the Athenian stage more than a century later.

**ATHENIAN OLD COMEDY.** Old Comedy was an Athenian theatrical development with topical allusions to Athenian politics, and its acceptance as an art form dates from either 488–487 or 487–486 B.C.E., when the archon—that is, the chief magistrate of Athens who gave his name to the year—was made responsible for providing a chorus for a day for five comedies to be produced at the City Dionysia festival each spring in the modern month of March. Shortly before 440 B.C.E. a day of comedies was included in the other great festival of...
Dionysus where dramas were presented, the Lenaea festival in January. We also know that in the fourth century B.C.E. comedies were produced at the Rural Dionysia, which were festivals in the country districts of Athens called “demes,” and it is likely that comedies were produced there earlier, too, given the physical evidence of theaters in some of these demes. Until the ascendance of Aristophanes there are only a few names and a handful of fragments from the comic poets of this era, including Cratinus—old, and notorious for his wine consumption, but still writing when Aristophanes began his career—and Eupolis, who was a worthy rival of Aristophanes and popular in his day, for he was often quoted. Other comic playwrights such as Crates, Pherecrates, Hermippus, Phrynichus, Teleclides, Ameipsias, Theopompus, and Plato—not to be confused with the philosopher Plato—are hardly more than names attached to titles of lost comedies. The eleven plays of Aristophanes are all that remains of Greek Old Comedy, and they owe their survival to the fact that Aristophanes became popular as assigned reading for Greek schoolboys of the second century C.E.

**ARISTOPHANES’ BACKGROUND.** The approximate dates of Aristophanes’ lifetime—450–385 B.C.E.—place him in one of the most turbulent periods of Athenian politics. He was a boy in the Periclean Age, when the politician Pericles dominated Athens. Pericles’ authority was based on his dominance of the popular assembly, the ekklesia, where all male citizens could vote. As a well-connected, wealthy man, Pericles was able to dominate the assembly so long as he followed popular policies, which he did. He took an imperialist approach to Athens’ neighbors, which led to the creation of an Athenian Empire profitable enough to finance a splendid building program in Athens. It also led to the Peloponnesian War with Sparta and her allies. Nine of Aristophanes’ plays were written in wartime and they belong to the period that followed the death of Pericles in the autumn of 429 B.C.E. The great man proved irreplaceable and, under the stress of war, the fissures in the body politic of Athens began to appear.

**THE FIRST PLAYS.** Aristophanes’ first comedy was *The Banqueters*, produced in 427 B.C.E., which won second prize at the City Dionysia, followed the next year by *The Babylonians*. Although *The Babylonians* won first prize, it also earned him the wrath of the politician Cleon, who successfully prosecuted him for anti-Athenian propaganda. The reason for the inflammatory nature of the work is lost in history since none of these plays survived. His next play, the *Acharnians*, was produced at the Lenaea festival in January, 425 B.C.E. A year later at the same festival he produced the *Knights*, and in 423 B.C.E. he produced the *Clouds*, a burlesque of Socrates which only won third prize. Aristophanes was bitterly disappointed; the *Acharnians* and the *Knights* both won first prizes, and since the number of comedies had been reduced from five to three during the Peloponnesian War as an economic measure, that meant that the *Clouds* took last place. Aristophanes set about rewriting it, and at least some of the surviving text is from this second edition, which was never staged. In 422 B.C.E. his play the *Wasps* won second prize, and the next year, when Athens and Sparta signed a peace treaty, Aristophanes staged his comedy *Peace* and again won second prize.

**FORMULA FOR OLD COMEDY.** The structure of the comic play was already established by Aristophanes’ heyday. First there was a prologue during which the leading character has a bright idea which gets the plot underway. Then comes the parodos: the entry of the chorus of 24 men wearing masks and fantastic costumes. Next is the agon: a debate between one character who supports the bright idea of the prologue, and an opponent who always loses. Then follows the parabasis where the chorus comes forward and sings to the spectators directly. The parabasis gave the comic poet an opportunity to
voice his views on the present state of affairs. Next comes the episodes where the bright idea is put into practice, sometimes with comic results, after which comes the exodus, which concludes the play on merry note: a marriage, or a banquet, or some happy occasion. This was not a hard-and-fast formula. The Acharnians has two episodes, the Knights three, and the Clouds two agons. The last two plays of Aristophanes lack a parabasis, but by the time they were produced, Old Comedy had given way to Middle Comedy, which did without the parabasis. It belonged to an age which preferred not to hear the personal views of comic poets.

**The Acharnians.** One of Aristophanes’ first plays, The Archarnian is a play whose theme is the foolishness of war-mongering. The Acharnians of the title of this play were citizens of the deme (constituency) of Acharnae, war hawks who made their living making charcoal. The Peloponnesian War was beginning its sixth year when this play was produced. The citizens from the countryside were suffering great hardship, for they had to evacuate their farms when the Spartan allied force invaded Attica—as it did each year when the crops were ripe—and find shelter behind the walls of Athens. Pessimism aggravated their suffering; the great plague was at its most severe in the second year of the war but it lingered on for three more years. The setting of the Acharnians is the Pnyx in Athens where the people assembled for meetings of the ekklesia. Dicaeopolis, a decent citizen, recounts his woes as he waits for the assembly to convene. When it does, Amphitheus proposes peace negotiations with Sparta but is silenced. Disgusted, Dicaeopolis recruits Amphitheus to negotiate a private truce for him with Sparta, and he returns from Sparta to offer Dicaeopolis three possibilities: a truce for five, ten, or thirty years. Dicaeopolis chooses a thirty-year peace and exits. On comes the chorus of peace-hating Acharnians, searching for the man who dared conclude a truce with Sparta. When Dicaeopolis returns, they hurl stones at him, and to save himself, he runs to the house of the tragic poet Euripides, whose works were famous for their pitiable heroes. Euripides gives Dicaeopolis a tattered costume to wear, and with his Euripidean props, Dicaeopolis delivers a clever parody of a Euripidean speech in his defense, reviewing the causes of the war and absolving Sparta. The sympathies of the chorus are divided, and the war hawks call in an ally, Lamachus, a well-known hawk. Lamachus comes on stage, magnificent in full armor, but Dicaeopolis’ arguments demolish him. Dicaeopolis proclaims the end of all war boycotts. The chorus then advances stage front and sings the parabasis directly to the audience, the subject of which is the virtues of Aristophanes. Following two more episodes, Lamachus is ordered off to a battle, and the play concludes with Lamachus returning wounded from war, and Dicaeopolis returning drunk from a feast, with a courtesan on each arm. In the final scene, Dicaeopolis roisters and Lamachus groans, and the foolishness of war-mongering is made apparent to all.

**The Knights.** The Knights was an attack on Cleon, the chief war hawk and the darling of the Athenian common man. The year before, the Athenians had defeated Sparta on Sphacteria, an island at the north end of the Bay of Navarino, where they had marooned a Spartan force, including 120 of their elite Spartiates, and forced it to surrender. Cleon was given the credit, which, in part, he deserved, though Aristophanes thought not. In the Knights, Demos is a good old man who is easily gulled, and his new slave, a tanner from Paphlagonia, has him under his thumb to the despair of two other slaves, Demosthenes and Nicias. Each character represented a real-life person: the Paphlagonian was Cleon, thinly-disguised; the two other slaves were the Athenian generals, Demosthenes and Nicias; and the old man Demos represented the Athenian people, for whom the Greek word was demos. Demosthenes and Nicias depose the Paphlagonian by putting forward an even greater rascal than he, a sausage seller who outbids the Paphlagonian for Demos’ favor and is revealed as a statesman whose real name is Agoracritus, meaning “Choice of the Agora.” In the exodus, Agoracritus announces that he has rejuvenated Demos into a young, vigorous, and highly-sexed man.

**The Clouds.** The butt of Aristophanes’ raillery in the Clouds is Socrates, who is portrayed in the play as the proprietor of a phrontisterion, a think-tank combined with a school for Athenian youth. The plot centers on Strepsiades, an elderly Athenian, and his ne’er-do-well son, Pheidippides. Pheidippides’ passion for chariot racing has landed him deeply in debt, and Strepsiades is afraid that his son’s creditors will pursue him. To avoid the creditors, he decides to enroll his son in Socrates’ school that teaches debaters how to make weaker arguments appear the better. Pheidippides refuses to go, so Strepsiades enrolls himself. Socrates’ attempt to teach poor old Strepsiades is a nice piece of buffoonery, but the upshot is that Strepsiades is expelled for stupidity and insists that his son enroll or leave home. Pheidippides is instructed by two teachers at the think-tank, Just Cause, who teaches the old-fashioned virtues, and Unjust Cause, who teaches how to find loopholes in the laws. They quarrel about the purposes of education. Unjust Cause wins on a technicality and takes over Phei-
dippides’ training. He makes such splendid progress that he is able to justify beating his father. Strepsiades realizes that the new learning that Socrates represents has ruined his son and burns down Socrates’ institute.

**The Wasps.** A citizen in Athens had the right to a trial before his fellow citizens, and in practice that meant that he was tried before a large jury of from 100 plus one jurymen to 500 plus one, who listened to the arguments of both the plaintiff and the defendant and then voted on the verdict. A jurymen’s pay was small. Yet for elderly citizens, jury service was both a welcome income supplement and also entertainment. Yet because many took jury duty as entertainment, it was often seen by many as a useless system of judgement. In *Wasps*, a farce on the jury system, there is a clash of wills between the old man Philocleon (Cleon-lover) and his son Bdelycleon (Cleon-hater). The chorus of jurymen, who are costumed as hornets, summon Philocleon to join them at jury duty, but Bdelycleon has his father locked in the house. After an argument, Bdelycleon convinces his father that jurymen are only tools in the hands of self-seeking demagogues, and promises Philocleon that he will feed him and let him play at holding trials at home if he gives up his addiction to jury duty. Then in a parody of a court case, Philocleon tries the dog Labes for stealing cheese; Bdelycleon argues for the dog so well that Philocleon acquits it. When Philocleon realizes his error—he has never voted “Not Guilty” before—he swoons and is taken off stage. Two episodes follow: in the first, Bdelycleon, on his way to a banquet with Philocleon, instructs him how to behave like an Athenian gentleman; and in the second, Philocleon returns with a piper from the banquet, very drunk, and holding with one arm a nude girl. As Philocleon tries to make love to the girl, Bdelycleon manhandles him into his house.

**The Peace.** When the *Peace* was produced, Cleon was dead, as was the chief Spartan war hawk, Brasidas. Both had died in the same battle, at Amphipolis in northern Greece. For Athens the battle was disastrous, but in both Athens and Sparta, parties supporting peace were left in control, and during the year 421 B.C.E., a peace treaty was signed. In the *Peace*, an Athenian citizen Trygaeus flies to Heaven astride a dung-beetle where he learns that the Olympian gods have moved away in disgust at the warring Greeks and have left War and Turmoil in charge of their palace. War has thrown Peace into a pit and piled stones on her. Trygaeus, with the help of a chorus of Greek farmers and laborers, frees Peace, along with Harvest and Diplomacy, two women whom Trygaeus brings with him when he returns to earth. Trygaeus prepares a wedding feast where a soothsayer appears, prophesying that the war cannot be stopped. In the Exodus, there appears a group that is hard hit by the peace: manufacturers of armor, trumpet makers, and the like. They try to unload surplus arms and armor on Trygaeus, but he will have none of it. He drives them off and the feast begins.

**The Birds.** The play the *Birds* is a good-natured spoof on the “castles in the air” that some Athenians were building as they imagined their triumph in taking over Sicily in the late fifth century B.C.E. The castles in the air would soon implode. In 415 B.C.E. Athens dispatched a great armada to Sicily, and two years later, the fleet was completely destroyed in a fruitless effort to take the city of Syracuse. When the *Birds* was produced, however, the Athenians still nursed hopes of winning an empire in Sicily that would make Athens the superpower in the Greek world. In the play, two Athenian adventurers, Pisthetaurus and Euelpides, convince birds to build a new city, to be called Cloudcuckooland, in the sky between Earth and Heaven. Cloudcuckooland cuts the gods off from the smoke rising from human sacrifices, and the gods are forced to seek a peace treaty with the birds. Pisthetaurus and Basileia (meaning “kingship”) are to wed, and they exit the stage, flying off to Zeus’ palace to take it over.

**The Lysistrata.** In the year 411 B.C.E., following the disastrous Sicilian expedition, many of the wealthier, more conservative Athenians lost confidence in the Athenian democracy’s conduct of the war. The *Lysistrata* is Aristophanes’ plea for peace. Lysistrata is an Athenian housewife who is sick of war. Women in Athens were traditionally shut out of government, but Lysistrata’s disgust with male bumbling causes her to lead a women’s revolt to seize the Athenian government and end the war. The women agree to deny their husbands sex until they make peace, while at the same time making themselves as alluring as possible in order to set their husbands’ hormones raging. They seize the Acropolis, where the Parthenon housed the state treasury. The revolution spreads to Sparta, where the women banish their husbands until peace is made. Finally in the third episode, envoys arrive from Sparta to sue for peace, and everyone calls on Lysistrata. She appears on stage bearing a statue of the goddess Reconciliation, and she makes a speech on the worth of women and the value of Panhellenism, when all the Greeks band together, rather than fight each other. The play ends with the Athenians and the Spartans feasting and dancing.

**Thesmophoriazusae.** *Thesmophoriazusae* (Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria) is a spoof on Euripides,
whose tragedies were controversial—he had the reputation of being a woman-hater because he did not idealize women in his plays. In the *Thesmophoriazusae*, the women of Athens have decided to put Euripides to death for his insults to the female sex. Euripides, along with his father-in-law, Mnesilochus, come to the tragic poet Agathon to ask for help. Agathon was famous in real-life for his effeminacy and for inventing plots for his plays rather than taking them from mythology. When Agathon consents to see his visitors, he appears lolling on his bed, surrounded by feminine toilet articles. He refuses to help but consents to lend Euripides some women’s clothing so Mnesilochus can wear them when he meets the women at the Thesmophorion, the temple of Demeter where the women’s religious festival known as the Thesmophoria is held. Finding them denouncing Euripides, he undertakes his defense, arguing that women are much worse than Euripides depicted them. He infuriates the women into attacking him, and then is exposed as a man by a well-known pederast, Clisthenes, who is also dressed as a woman. Then Euripides himself attempts to save Mnesilochus, using various dramatic devices from his own plays, and finally he succeeds in rescuing his father-in-law with a tried-and-true method: he disguises himself as a procuress—that is, a female pimp—and comes on stage with two girls. They distract the policeman who is holding Mnesilochus, allowing Euripides to release Mnesilochus.

**The Frogs.** In 405 B.C.E. the Peloponnesian War was nearing its end, but the radical democrats in Athens still did not want peace. The deaths of Sophocles and Euripides the year before lent a bittersweet tone to the *Frogs*. In the play the god Dionysus, patron of the Athenian stage, descends into the Underworld to bring back his favorite playwright, Euripides, for no tragedians still alive were as ingenious as he was. In the Underworld, there is a contest between Aeschylus, who was long dead, and Euripides, the new arrival in the Underworld. The worth of the poets is decided by bringing out a scale and putting a verse from one of the plays of each contestant into the balance and seeing which verse weighs more. Aeschylus wins in three trials, for his verses express weighty ideas whereas Euripides is an intellectual lightweight by comparison. When Dionysus decides in Aeschylus’ favor, however, Euripides reminds him that it was to bring him back that Dionysus descended into the Underworld in the first place. Dionysus replies with a famous quotation from Euripides’ tragedy the *Hippolytus* which struck the Athenians as the height of sophistry when it was first uttered on the stage: “My tongue has sworn. My heart remains unsworn.” The play ends with a feast, and Hades, the Lord of Death, sends Aeschylus back to Athens with messages for some Athenian individuals who were still alive that he wanted to see them soon. The *Frogs* is the last surviving example of Old Comedy, and it is Aristophanes at his most brilliant.

**The Ecclesiazusae.** Following the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War, Old Comedy diminished in popularity. It had flourished under the freewheeling democracy of fifth-century Athens, but after the war, the political atmosphere changed even though the democracy was restored after a group of disgruntled right-wingers known as the “Thirty Tyrants” seized power and set up a short-lived oligarchic government. The *Ecclesiazusae* (Women in the Assembly, produced in 391 B.C.E.) and *Plutus* (388 B.C.E.), the last surviving play of Aristophanes, belong to Middle Comedy. Middle Comedy differs from Old Comedy in that the parabasis is omitted, the chorus is less important, and the pointed attacks on Athenian politicians are absent. The butt of Aristophanes’ satire, *Ecclesiazusae*, is Plato’s *Republic*. While it is unclear whether the *Republic* had been published at the time of the production of *Ecclesiazusae*, Plato’s lectures had been propagating his ideas, and the idea of an ideal society without private property of the sort lampooned by Aristophanes in his play was familiar to Aristophanes’ audience. In the play, the women of Athens, led by Praxagora, dress themselves in their husbands’ clothing, go early to the *ekklesia*—that is, the assembly which held ultimate power in the Athenian democracy—and establish a new constitution in which everything is held in common, even women. The episodes that follow are commentaries on the new order. Praxagora’s husband Blepyrus is delighted at his wife’s initiative because he looks forward to a life of laziness. Another citizen wants to share in the benefits of the new order without contributing anything. A handsome young man wants to sleep with a lovely courtesan, but the law requires him to satisfy a couple old crones first who drag him off to enjoy his sexual prowess. The play ends with a communal feast. The moral of the play is that an ideal society needs ideal citizens to make it work, and none were to be found in Athens.

**The Plutus.** One of the darker comedies of Aristophanes, *Plutus* reminded audiences that a certain amount of injustice may be necessary to make the economy function. In this play, a blind old man in rags comes on stage, followed by Chremylus and his slave, Cario. Chremylus has been told by the Delphic oracle to follow the first man he met after leaving the temple, and it turned out to be this blind old man. Chremylus and Cario ask the old man who he is, and reluctantly he tells them that he
is Plutus, the god of wealth whom Zeus, jealous as ever of mankind, has struck blind. Chremylus decides to cure Plutus of his blindness, and takes Plutus into his house. Chremylus’ friend, Blepsidemus, agrees to help restore Plutus’ sight in exchange for a share of the wealth granted by Plutus. They take him to the temple of Asclepius, the god of healing, but are interrupted by a horrifying woman, the goddess Poverty. She and Chremylus debate whether Poverty or Plutus, the god of wealth, benefits mankind more. Chremylus argues that if Plutus could see, he would reward only the good, and hence eventually everyone would become good. Poverty counters that if this happened, no one would want to work. Chremylus wins the argument, and a miraculous cure restores Plutus’ sight. Then we see the results—good and bad—of giving rewards only to good and deserving persons. Not everyone is delighted with this new dispensation. A Just Man comes on stage. He is happy. An Informer enters. He is ruined. An old woman, dressed as a young girl, comes to tell Plutus that her gigolo has deserted her. Hermes arrives to report that humans are no longer making sacrifices and the gods are starving. A priest of Zeus reports that he is starving, too, and he deserts to the new god, Plutus. Then Plutus himself comes on stage, followed by the old woman that has lost her gigolo. She is assured that he will return to her. The play ends with a procession to the Acropolis to install Plutus and begin his reign.

**MIDDLE COMEDY.** Between Athens’ defeat in the Peloponnesian War in 404 B.C.E. and 321 B.C.E.—the probable date when Menander produced his first comedy Anger—comedy underwent an enormous change. The audience became more solidly middle-class as the poor could no longer afford to go to the theater. The emphasis of the plays switched from politics to courtesans, food, and sex. The chorus merely provided interludes of song and dance instead of being part of the action. Though we have the names of some fifty authors, and the titles of over 700 comedies, no Middle Comedy survived, except for the last two plays of Aristophanes. The titles range from The Birth of Aphrodite, evidently a burlesque of mythology—send-ups of myths were popular in Middle Comedy—to The Stolen Girl which sounds like a situation comedy. Characters from the fringes of polite society appear again and again as stock characters: the professional courtesan who sometimes has a heart of gold, the clever slave, the braggart soldier, and the sponger who survives by truckling to rich friends. These are international character types with panhellenic appeal, meaning they could belong to any Greek city, not just Athens. In fact, many of the playwrights producing Middle Comedy in Athens were not Athenian citizens.

**THE UNEARTHING OF MENANDER.** Until the beginning of the twentieth century the only known examples of New Comedy came from second-hand adaptations of Greek plays by the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence for the Roman stage. These adaptations provided some flavor of the New Comedy playwrights Menander, Diphilus, Philémon, and Apollodorus. In 1905 a papyrus-codex—that is, a papyrus document bound like a modern book—was found in Egypt at Aphroditopolis, modern Kom Esqawh. It contains large parts of Menander’s Girl from Samos, The Rape of the Locks and the Arbitration, plus fragments of two other plays. A little more than fifty years later, a papyrus containing the full text of the Dyskolos (The Man with a Bad Temper), more fragments of the Girl from Samos, and half of a play titled The Shield came to light. Since then, other papyrus fragments have been discovered—one, as recently as 2003, yielding 200 lines of an unspecified play—but the Dyskolos is the only complete play to be discovered.
The Dyskolos. The Dyskolos was first produced at the Lenaea festival in Athens in 316 B.C.E. It is an early play of Menander, a lightweight situation drama without the stock characters typical of New Comedy. In the play, Knemon, a misanthropic man, marries a widow with one son, Gorgias, by a previous marriage. They have a daughter, but Knemon's wife, unable to bear his bad temper, leaves him and he lives as a virtual hermit on his farm. Sostratus falls in love with the daughter and asks for her hand in marriage. Knemon refuses, but after he falls down a well and is rescued by Sostratus he becomes a changed man. He is reconciled with his wife and agrees to give his daughter to Sostratus to marry. In addition, he marries Gorgias to Sostratus' sister.

Influence of New Comedy. New Comedy set the style for Greek theater after Alexander the Great, from the third century B.C.E. onwards. Numerous theatrical festivals sprouted in cities everywhere, and troupes of professional actors traveled from place to place, staging their plays. From Greece, the New Comedy went to Rome where the playwrights Plautus and Terence crafted their plays on the New Comedy model. While the Old Comedy plays of Aristophanes were tied to one place and one time, the New Comedy had universal appeal.

Sources

Greek Tragedy
Beginnings. The evidence for the origins of tragic drama is ambiguous. The name itself is odd, for tragoidia means the "song of the male goat," or perhaps a "song for a male goat" and attempts to explain its meaning have been ingenious but never quite successful. The Roman poet Horace, a contemporary of the emperor Augustus, thought that "tragedy" got its name because the prize for the best tragedy was a goat, but this is unlikely. One fact, however, is not disputed: tragedy was intimately connected with the cult of Dionysus, and Aristotle stated that it developed from the dithyramb, a choral song in honor of Dionysus. The great age of Greek tragedy began in Athens when the tyrant Pisistratus established the festival of the City Dionysia about 536 B.C.E. where dithyrambs were presented by amateur choristers. Pisistratus hoped to use the festival to raise the profile of Athens. After he died in 527 B.C.E., his sons Hippias—who succeeded him as tyrant—and Hipparchus—who became a quasi Minister of Culture—continued his policy until Hipparchus was assassinated and Hippias was ousted from power four years later in 510 B.C.E. At the City Dionysia of 534 B.C.E., or at least between 536 and 533, the chorus leader Thespis from the village of Icaria took a solo part in his dithyramb, thus introducing an actor who played a role in the story. Tragedy, as Aristotle pointed out, was the representation of an action worthy of attention, and once there was an actor, there could be an imitation of the action, though the chorus still sang the story line. We know almost nothing about Thespis except his father's name, Themon, and that he had a pupil named Phrynichus who lived well into the fifth century B.C.E. By then the great age of tragedy had arrived, dominated by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

Age of Tragedy. The great age of tragedy was short. It began with Thespis, but the first surviving tragedy is Aeschylus' Persians, performed in 472 B.C.E. It ends with the deaths of Sophocles and Euripides just before the Athenian defeat in the Peloponnesian War. Other surviving plays include seven plays of Aeschylus, seven of Sophocles plus a satyr play (the Trackers), and seventeen of Euripides plus a satyr play (the Cyclops). There is also the Rhesus, the shortest Greek tragedy we have, which may be by Euripides. Other tragedians whose work is now lost include Phrynichus, Choerilus and Pratinas—all of whom wrote before Aeschylus—and the sons of Phrynichus and Pratinas who belonged to the generation of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Aeschylus' son Euphorion also presented tragedies.

Tragedy Before Aeschylus. Aeschylus was the first playwright to add a second speaking actor, and Sophocles added a third. Prior to Aeschylus, when there was only one actor, the chorus must have played a very important role in unfolding the plot of the drama. One