



GREEK THEATER, SOPHOCLES, AND TRAGEDY

Why read Antigone...?

“In reading *Antigone*, we who live this side of the Enlightenment... see that our ethical struggles and debates, both political and spiritual realms, are not all that different from those of fifth-century B.C. Athens. In America today, the legal and judicial battle over the nature of choice, whether it relates to homeschooling and school vouchers, abortion and euthanasia, ...ultimately pits the wants and needs of the individual against those of society as a whole. Even issues like states’ rights, gun control and social security are framed in a family-versus-*polis* paradigm that bears comparison with the central dilemma of Sophocles’ play.

--- Louis Markos

**WONDERS ARE MANY ON
THE EARTH, AND THE
GREATEST OF THESE IS
MAN.**

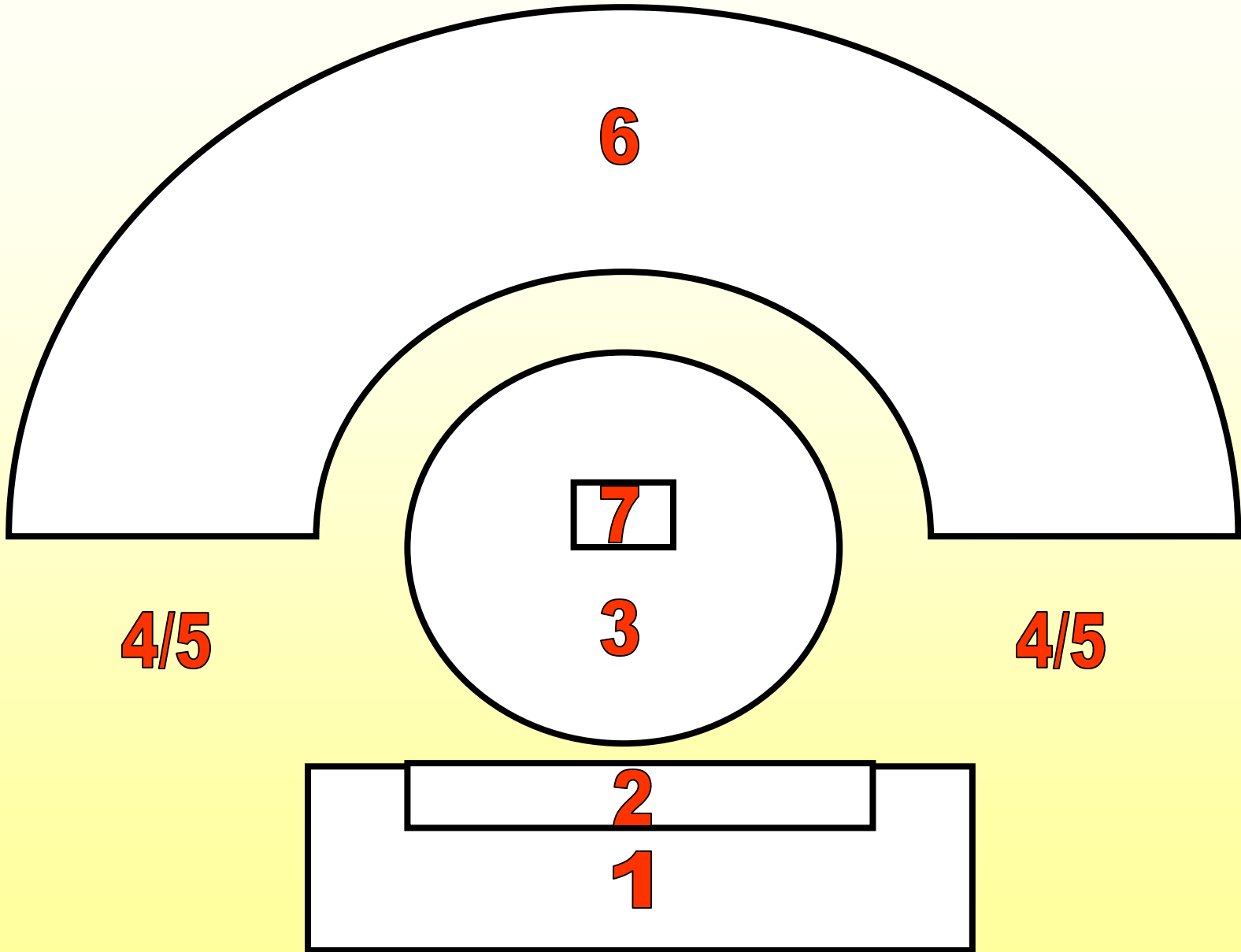
- SOPHOCLES

(FROM ANTIGONE)

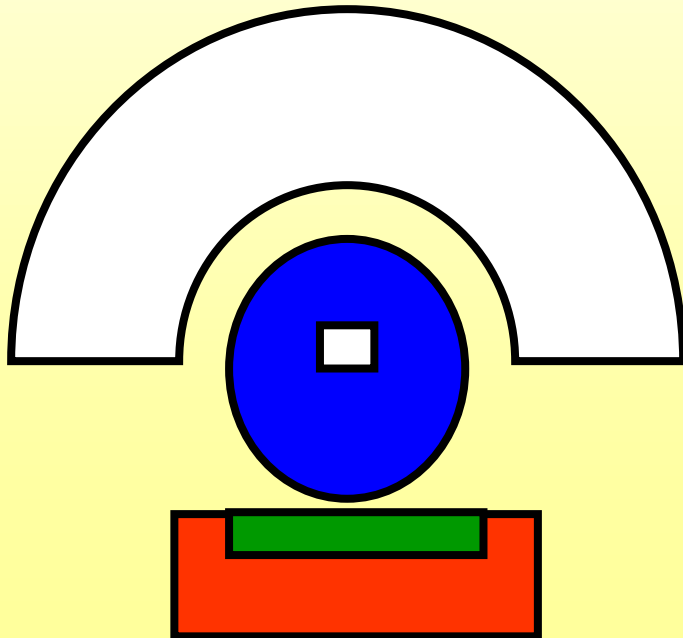


I. GREEK THEATER





- 1. SKENE** – Ski-NAY/SKAY-nay (Greek: tent)
Building behind the orchestra originally used for storage but provided a convenient backing for performances, changing costumes and masks. It later developed into a large stage-building that provided a permanent backdrop
- 2. STAGE** – the porch of the skene; central characters often spoke from this porch.

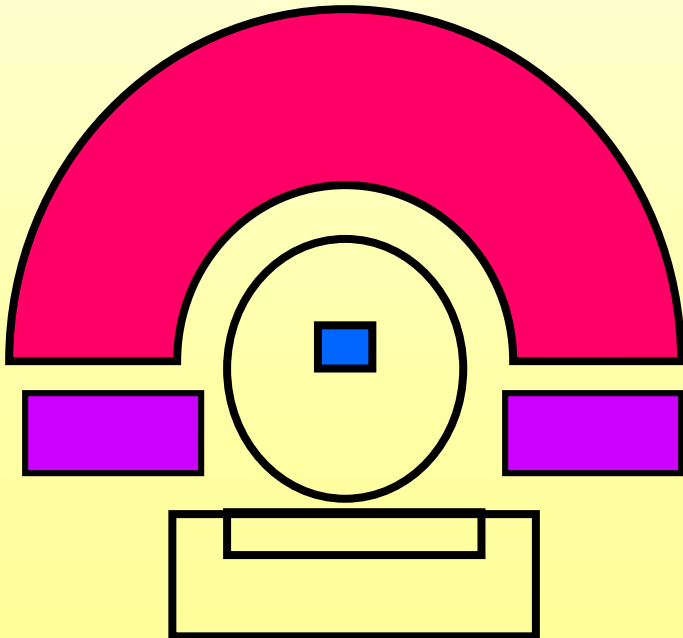


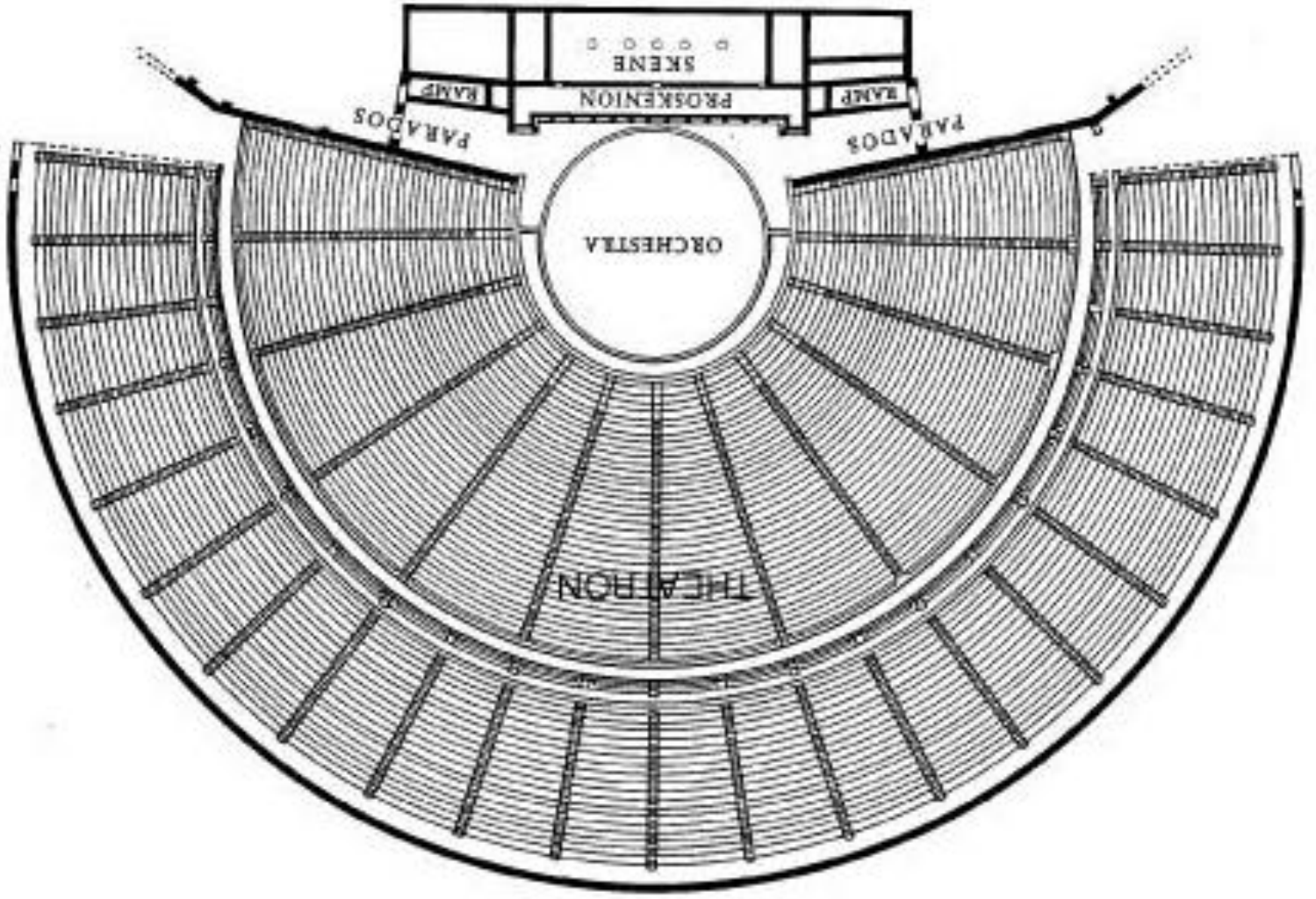
- 3. ORCHESTRA** –
(Greek: dancing place)
The whole circular performing space between the audience and stage

4. **PARADOS** - PÆ-roh-dawss (Greek: A passageway) Side entrance into the orchestra of a Greek theater where the chorus made its grand entrance
5. **EXODOS** – the side of the grand exit of the chorus

6. **THEATRON** – thay-AH-tron (Greek: viewing-place) Refers to the audience space of the Greek theatre

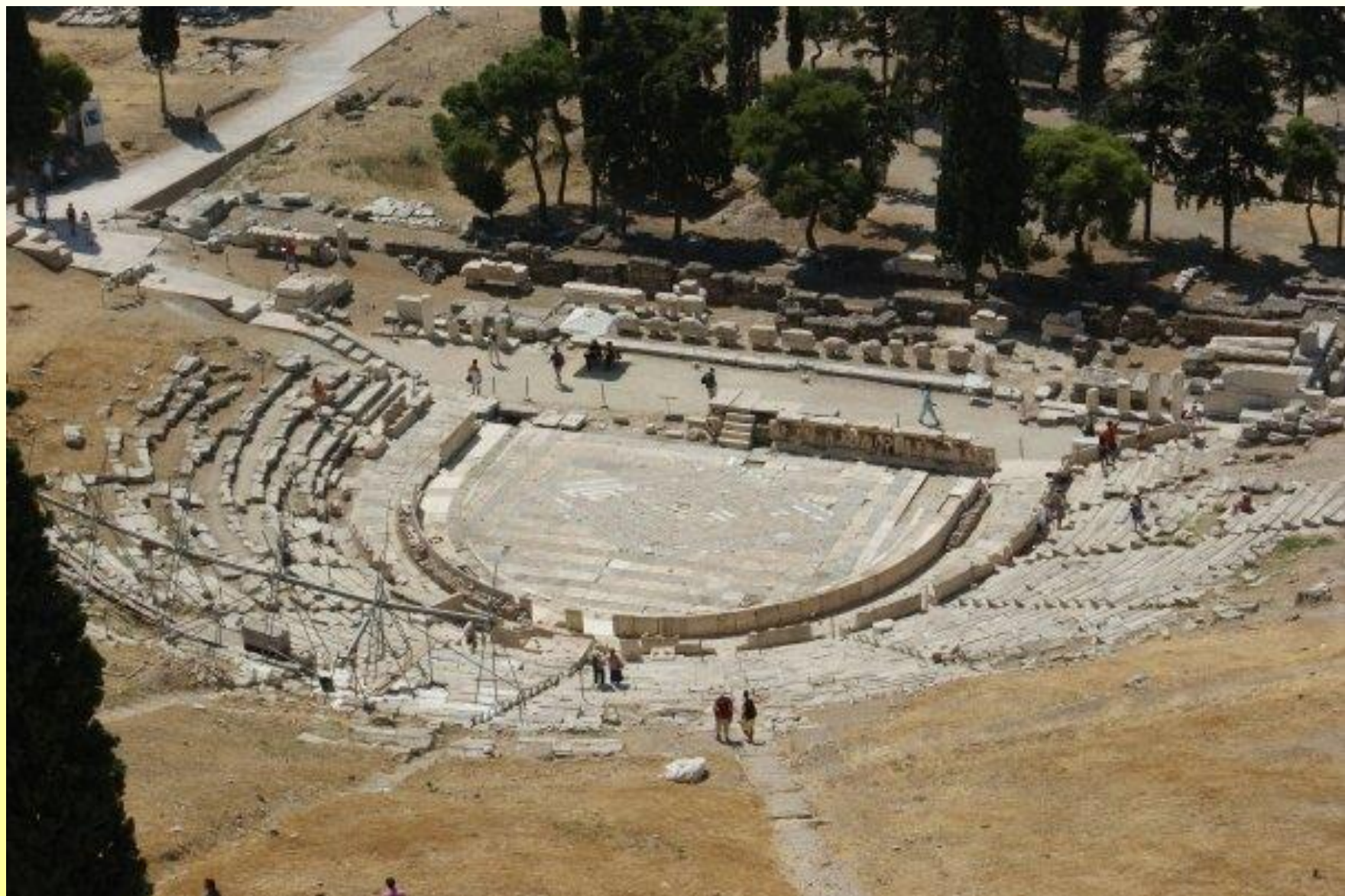
7. **THYMELE** – THIH-meh-lay Altar to the god Dionysos; ceremonies at this altar came before each performance





THEATER OF DIONYSOS



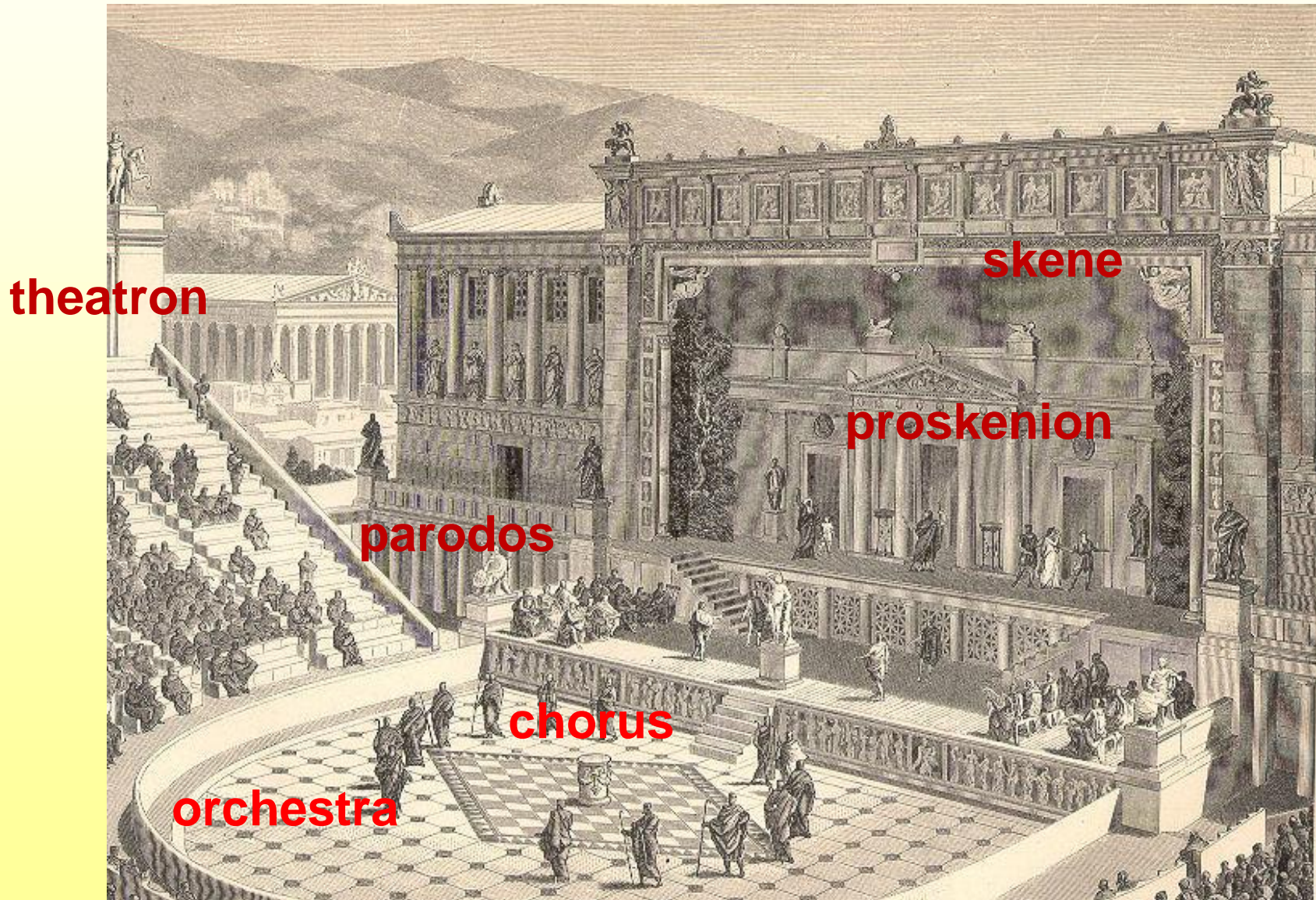


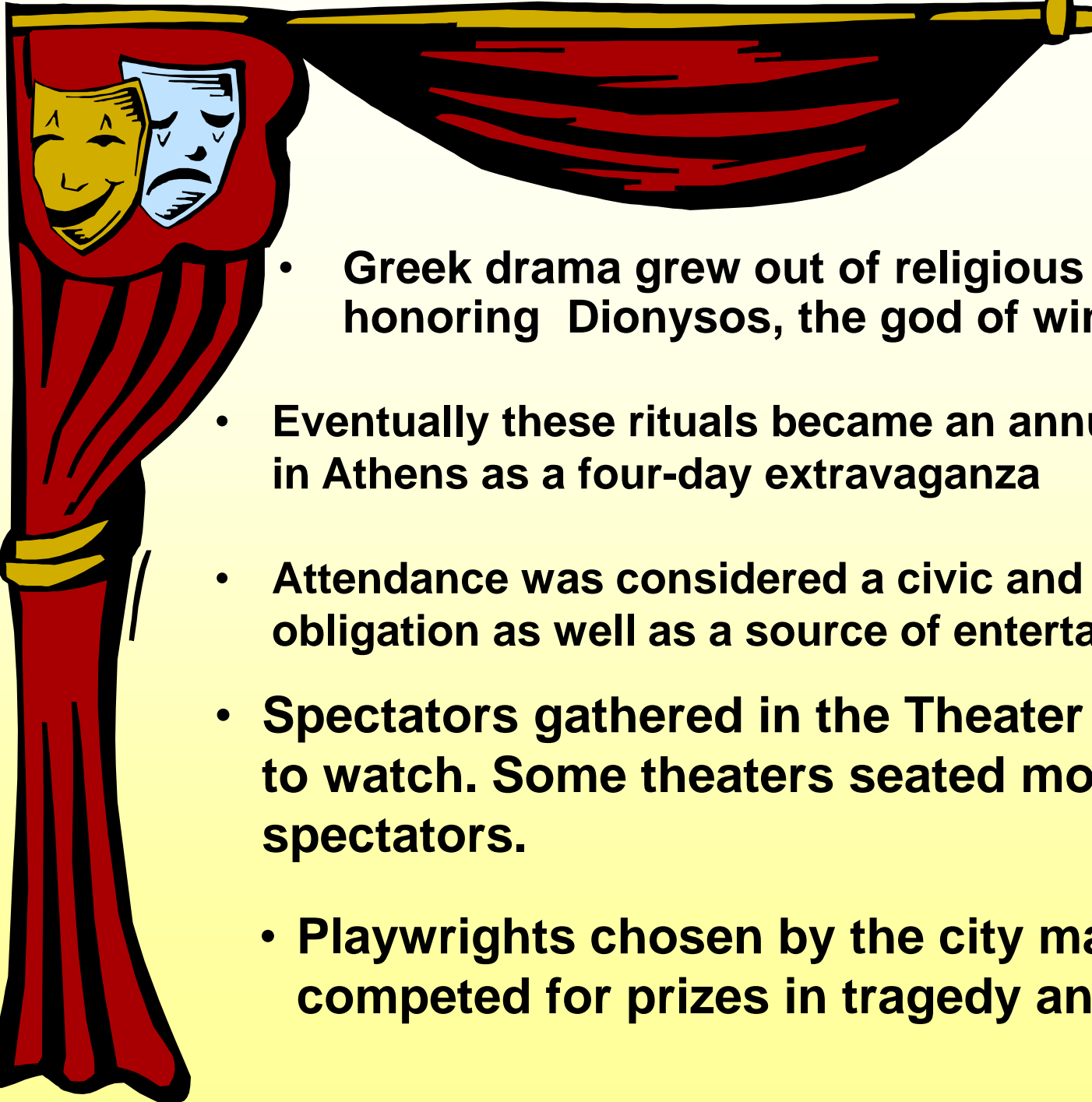
Epidaurus



Epidaurus, Greek Theatre
Epidaurus (modern Epidauros, Greece). Cavea width: 119 m, orchestra width: 24.65 m; capacity: 11,750-14,700; ca. 300-340 BC. Photo: T. Hines 2004

GREEK THEATER





- **Greek drama grew out of religious rituals honoring Dionysos, the god of wine and fertility.**
- **Eventually these rituals became an annual festival held in Athens as a four-day extravaganza**
- **Attendance was considered a civic and religious obligation as well as a source of entertainment**
- **Spectators gathered in the Theater of Dionysos to watch. Some theaters seated more than 17,000 spectators.**
- **Playwrights chosen by the city magistrates competed for prizes in tragedy and comedy**

- **All actors were men; the choruses were well-trained boys.**

- **Masks with exaggerated mouthpieces were used to amplify the actor's voices.**



- **By changing masks, one actor could play multiple parts.**

- To emphasize the dominant traits of the character they were impersonating, they wore masks



Acting ranked as high in importance as athletic competitions

The Chorus

- Usually 15 men (but up to 50)
- Dressed the same, including masks
- Follow the dramatic action closely, react to it emotionally and comment on it.
- Gives background, informing audience of preceding events.
- The chorus often acted as the “ideal spectator” or the conservative spokesman of the community
- **Tragedians used the chorus to create a psychological and emotional background to the action... it established facts and affirmed the outlook of society.**
- **Chorus often suggests important themes**



II. TRAGEDY



WHAT IS TRAGEDY?

Theatrical term meaning “a drama in verse or prose and of serious and dignified character that typically describes the development of a conflict between the protagonist and a superior force (such as destiny, circumstance, society) and reaches a sorrowful or disastrous conclusion.”

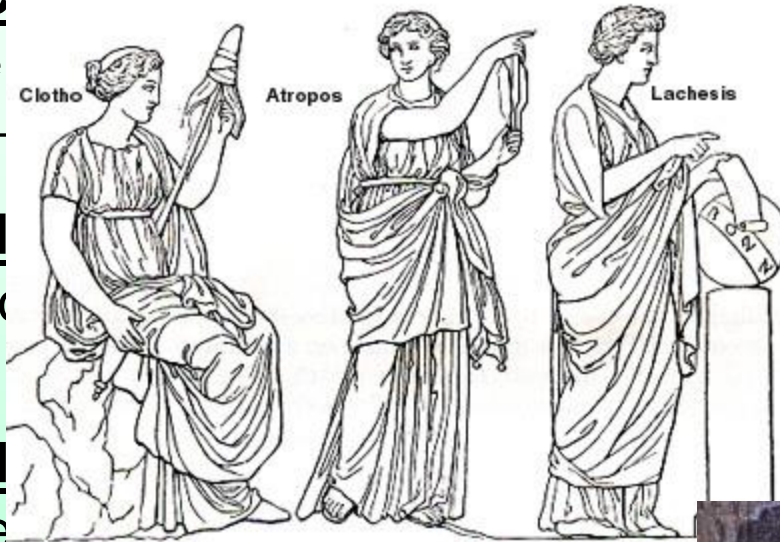
Greek Tragedy

- Early Greek myths usually served as the basis for the plot of the dramas
- Tragedies, in particular, tend to focus on pride, loss of power, relationship b/tw men and gods, vengeance, severe punishment, exile, or death
- In Greek tragedy the main protagonist often commits a terrible crime without realizing how foolish and arrogant he has been. Then, as he slowly realizes his error, the world crumbles around him.
- Drama depicted ideas/situations that were considered to be important in Greek society (e.g. burial of the dead)

- **Aristotle asserts that the purpose of TRAGEDY is:**
 - “to arouse pity and fear in the audience so that we may be purged or cleansed of these unsettling emotions”
- The subject matter of the Ancient Greeks’ plays did not have to be “tragic” in the modern sense.
- Most of them do feature sad or disastrous events – this is where the modern usage comes from.

TRAGEDY TERMS TO KNOW

- **CATHARSIS:** the release of the play's tension or strong



ar following the catastrophe in the play)

- **HUBRIS:** confidence; a belief that one is in control of destiny

- **HUBRIS:** or unwitting mistake that

- **MOIRA:** one's portion in life; in Greek mythology: the Moirae are the three goddesses of destiny: the Moirae are the three goddesses of destiny in Greek mythology



- **TRAGIC FLAW:** a flaw in the character of the protagonist in a tragedy that brings the protagonist to ruin, sorrow, or death. The error usually stems from a character flaw, usually pride (hubris)

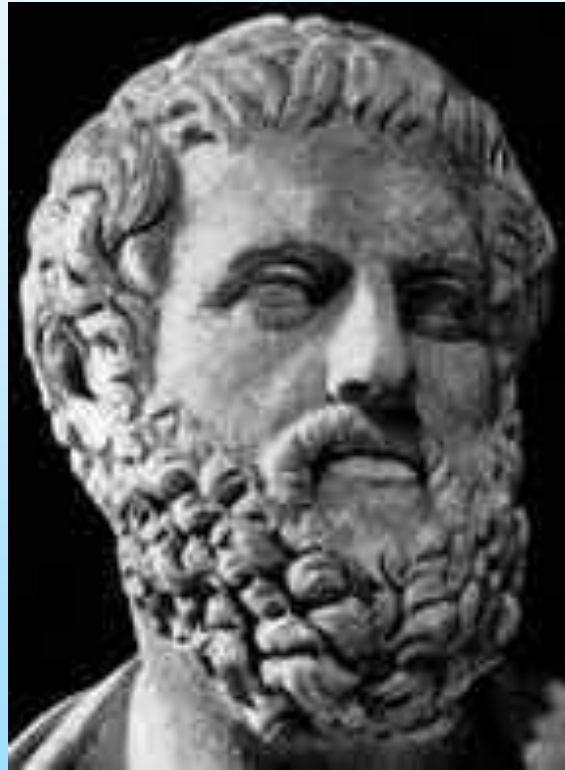
THE TRAGIC HERO IS...

- Born into nobility
- Responsible for his own fate
- Endowed with a tragic flaw
- Doomed to make a serious error in judgment (hamartia)

EVENTUALLY THE TRAGIC HERO...

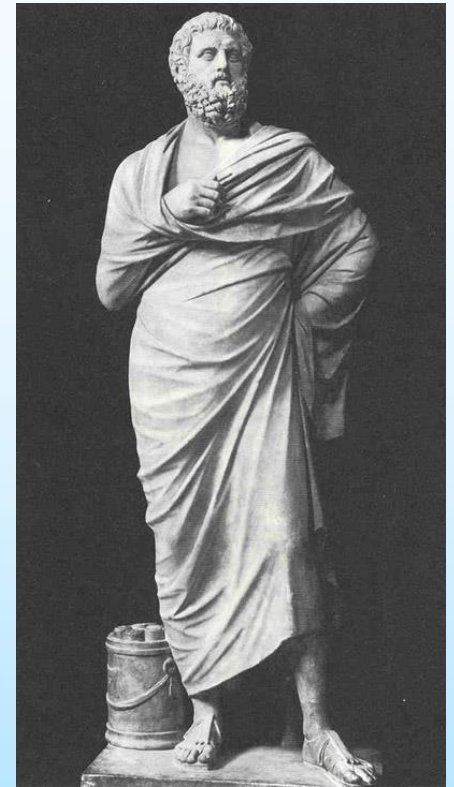
- Falls from great heights or high esteem
- Realizes he has made an irreversible mistake (after it's too late)
- Faces and accepts death with honor and humility
- May meet a tragic death

III. SOPHOCLES



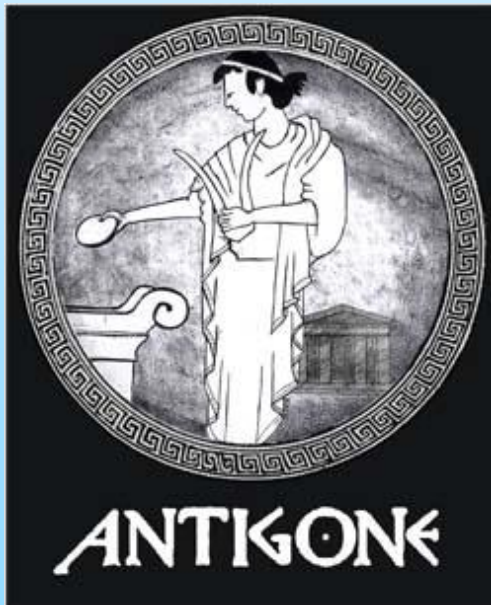
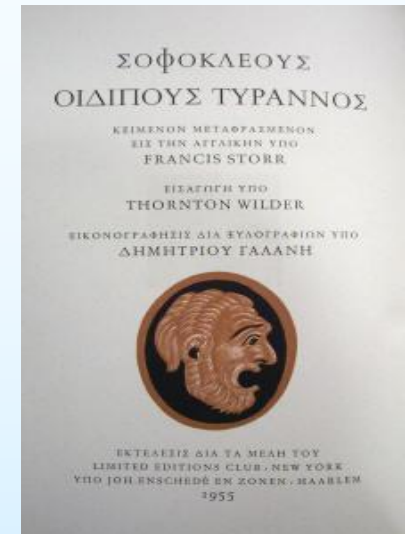
Σοφοκλής

- Lived from approximately 496 – 406 B.C.
- Most famous Greek playwright / tragedian
- General, political leader, and priest
- The three “great tragedians” were Aeschylus, Euripides, & Sophocles. Sophocles was ultimately the most popular.
- Sophocles wrote over 120 tragedies. Yet only **SEVEN** survive! (*Ajax*, *Antigone*, *The Women of Trachis*, *Oedipus the King*, *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*)
- He introduced a third actor, painted sets, and increased the size of the chorus (from ~12 to 15 men).



• At the Festival of Dionysos, where playwrights competed to have their plays performed...

- Sophocles won first prize 24 times and second prize 7 times out of the 31 times he entered.



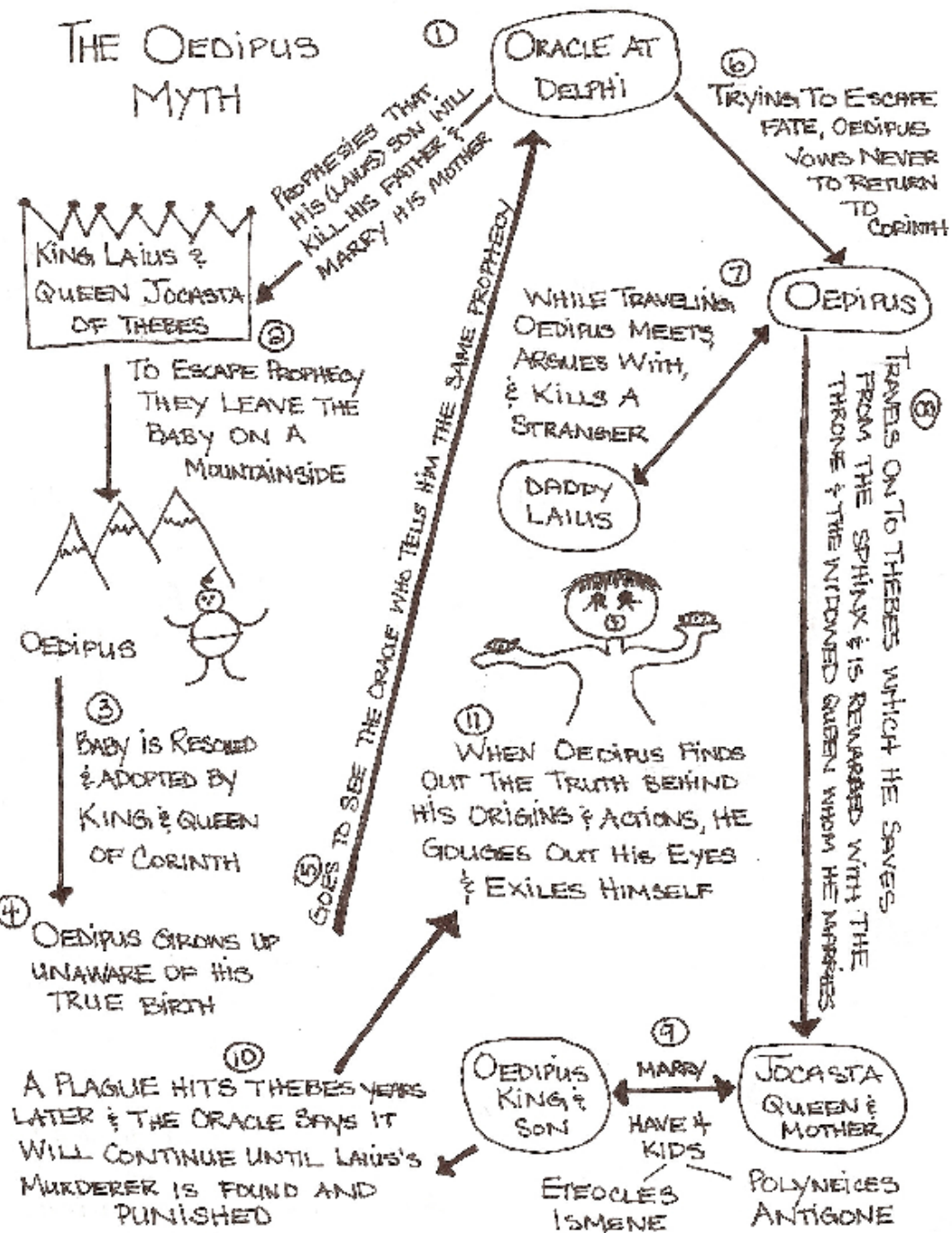
- Dying at the age of 90, Sophocles' writing examines his concerns about life, including:
 - Finding one's place in the moral and cosmic orders
 - Being cautious towards pride and religious indifference
- Aristotle's *Poetics* repeatedly cites *Oedipus the King* as the most perfect example of a tragedy.
- Famous Trilogy: *Oedipus the King* (*Oedipus Rex*), *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*

The Oedipus Myth



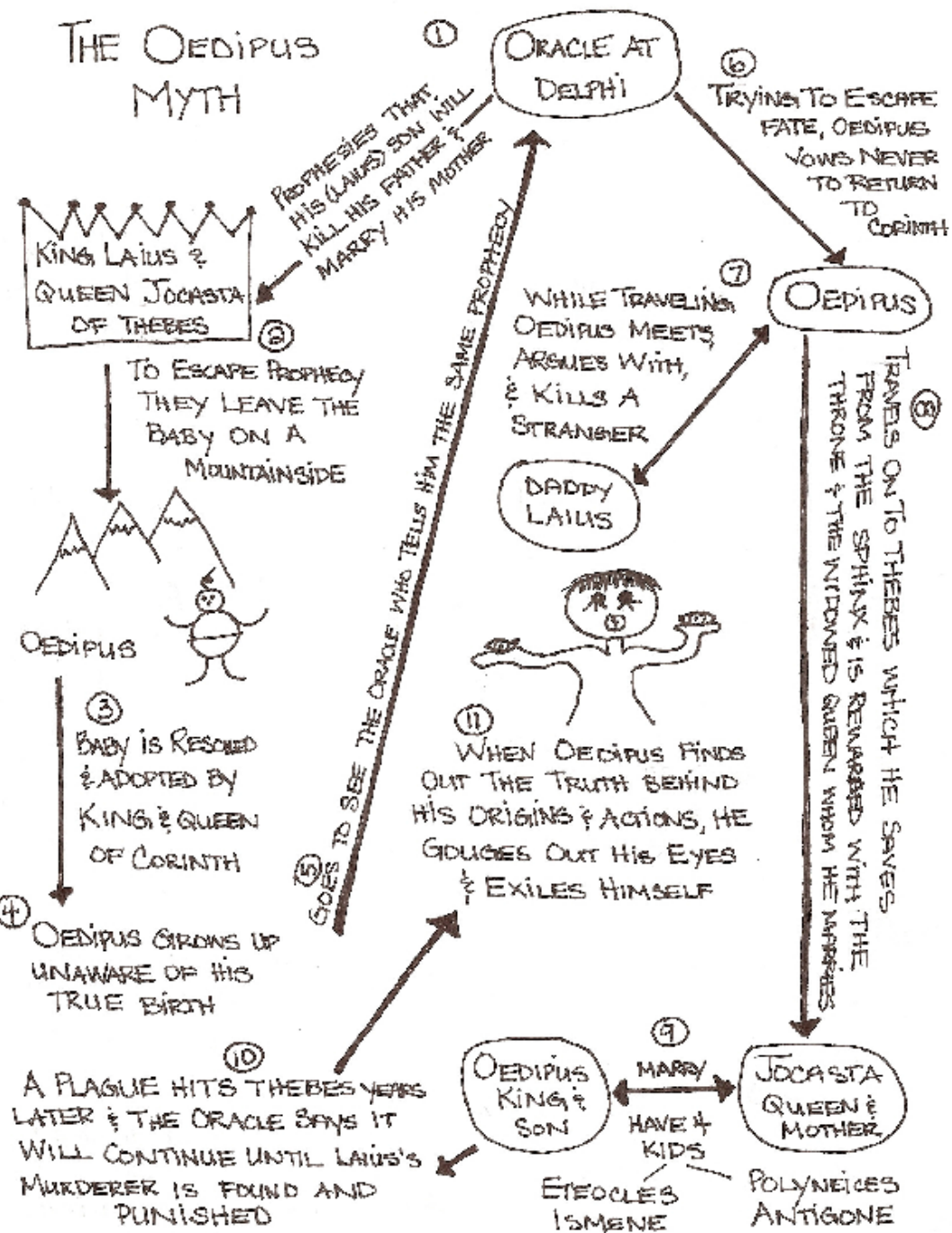
Oedipus and the Sphinx

THE OEDIPUS MYTH



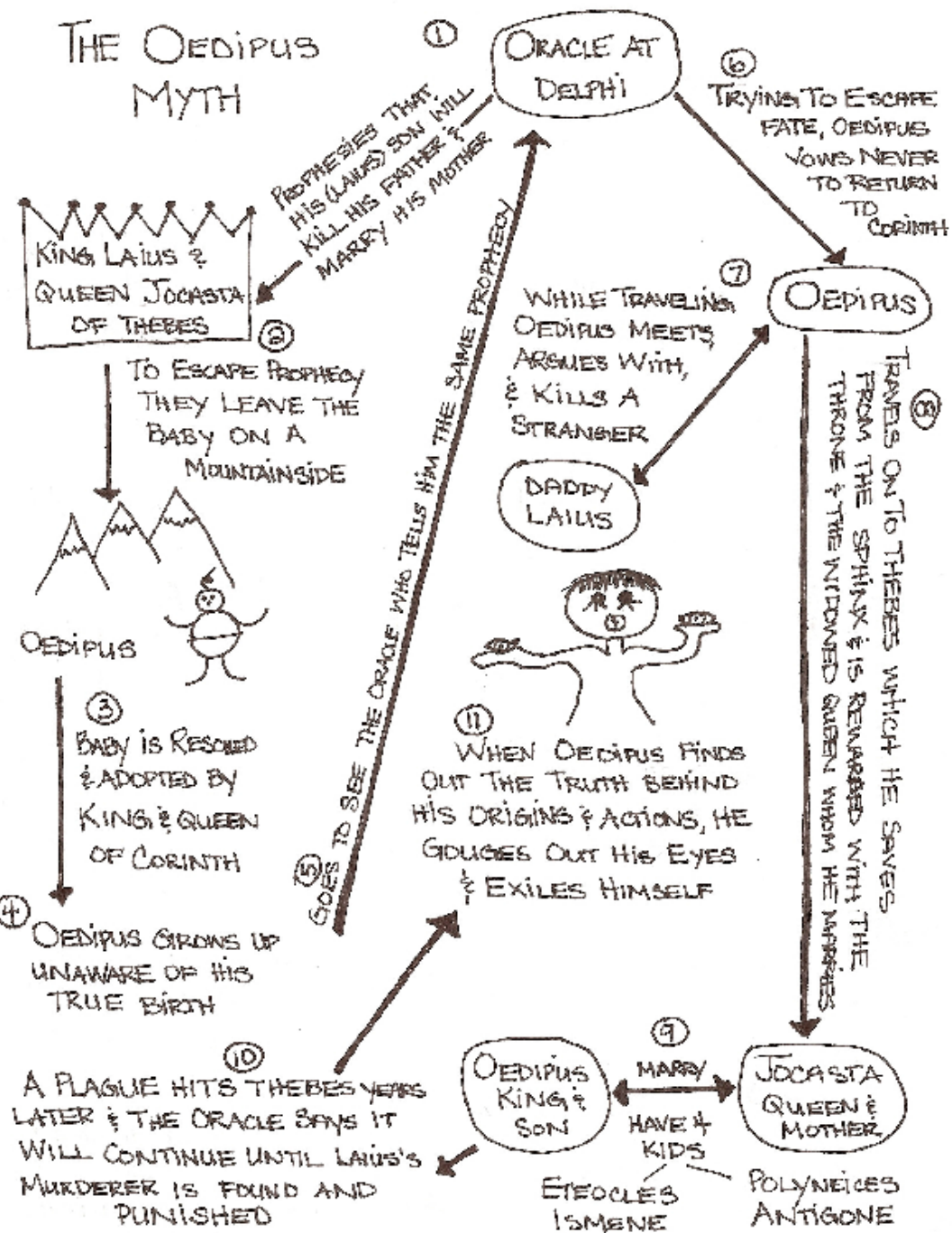
1. Oracle at Delphi prophesies that Laius' son will kill his father and marry his mother
2. To escape the prophecy, they leave their baby on a mountainside
3. Baby is rescued and adopted by the king and queen of Corinth
4. Oedipus grows up unaware of his true birth
5. Oedipus goes to see the Oracle, who tells him the same prophecy
6. Trying to escape, Oedipus vows never to return to Corinth
7. While traveling, Oedipus meets, argues with, and kills a stranger on the road (that stranger was Laius)

THE OEDIPUS MYTH



8. Oedipus travels to Thebes and solves the riddle of the Sphinx (who had a plague on Thebes)
 - "What goes on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?"
9. Oedipus offered the Throne of Thebes and the hand of Jocasta, the queen, for solving the riddle and saving Thebes from the Sphinx
 - 4 children: Eteocles, Polyneices, Ismene, & Antigone
10. A plague hits Thebes years later and the Oracle says it won't end until Laius' murder is found and punished
11. Oedipus sends for Tiresias (the blind prophet), who refuses to tell Oedipus what he knows... Oedipus curses him, and finally provokes him to reveal the truth.

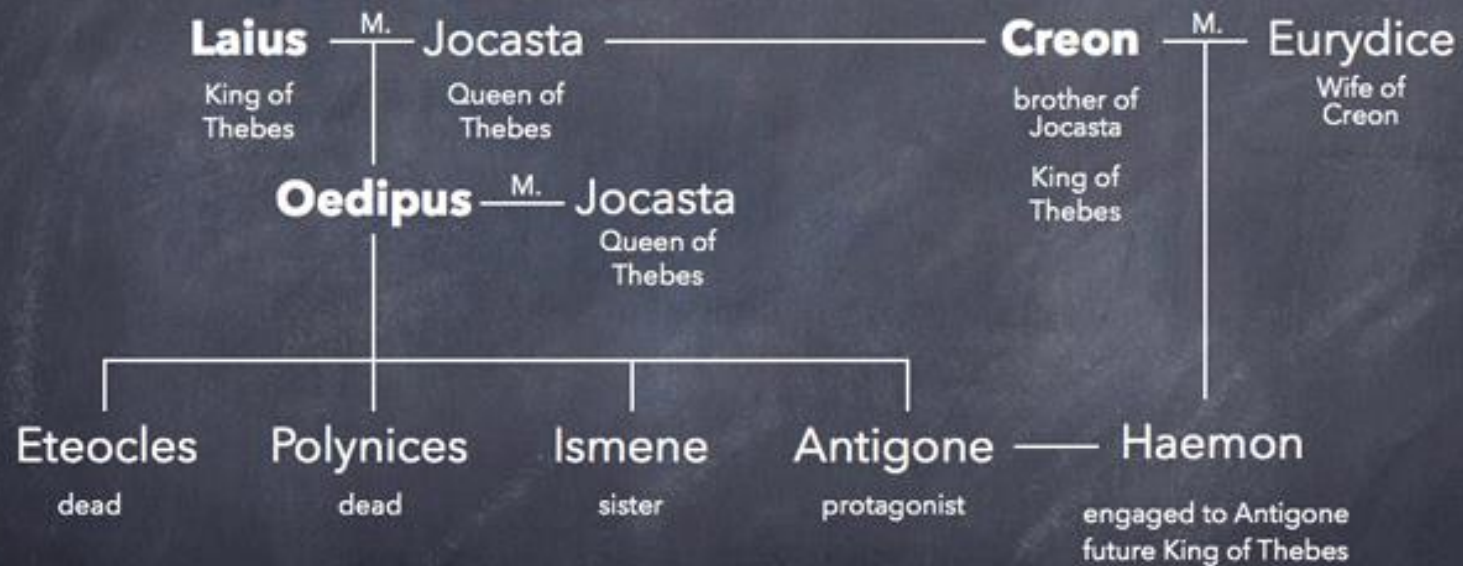
THE OEDIPUS MYTH



11. Oedipus finally learns the truth, gouges his eyes out (saying he was blind to the truth) and exiles himself from Thebes

12. When Jocasta hears of the news, she commits suicide, and Oedipus' two sons grow up and fall into a dispute over the throne. To avoid a feud, a deal is made that they will each rule during alternating years.

THE FAMILY TREE







Oedipus and Antigone leaving Thebes





Oedipus cursing Polyneices

... the two brother ultimately engage in war and eventually kill one another, making Creon (Oedipus' brother-in-law & Antigone's uncle) king. Creon ordered Eteocles buried in honor and left Polyneices to rot, unburied (since he attempted to take Thebes by force with an army of Argives). And so begins *Antigone*...



Greek Burial Rituals

- The Greek culture was loaded with rituals and ceremonies. One of their most important was the Death ritual.
- This ritual was performed to prepare the body and the soul for the journey to the afterlife. Any faults would result in someone's spirit being lost forever, and curses placed on the living family members.
- For the living, if you failed to perform the ceremony for your honored dead, the Gods would curse you and your house for all eternity.
- This ritual was *divine writ*. Meaning the Gods demanded that the living take care of the dead or suffer unholy punishment

