

WEEK 3 / 6-8

Where do the Comedy & Tragedy Masks Come from?

TRAGEDY

Melpomene is charged with dominion over tragedy. Unlike the common use of the term today, her realm of tragedy refers to the literary and theatrical genre of drama, rhetoric, and serious subjects. This also included today's idea of tragedy as a profoundly unfortunate or sad circumstance, but we must remember that as a genre it includes much more. Depictions of Melpomene usually showed her holding the mask of tragedy, the one we still see today in contemporary theater, and a sword or club. She also wore cothurnus boots, a style of boots common to tragic actors in Greek theater, and a wreath of ivy or grape vines on her head. Melpomene "to sing" or "the one that is melodious") was initially the Muse of Chorus, she then became the Muse of Tragedy, for which she is best known now.

COMEDY

Thalia "the joyous, the flourishing" was the Muse who presided over comedy and idyllic poetry. In this context her name means "flourishing", because the praises in her songs flourish through time. She was the daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the eighth-born of the nine Muses. She was portrayed as a young woman with a joyous air, crowned with ivy, wearing boots and holding a comic mask in her hand. Many of her statues also hold a bugle and a trumpet (both used to support the actors' voices in ancient comedy), or occasionally a shepherd's staff or a wreath of ivy.

Instructions:

Research a tragic and a comedic play and explain why you think they are tragic or comedic. What qualifies them to be either? Are they a little of both? How?

Reflection:

How did learning about the masks shed light on comedies and tragedies?

Which do you prefer: comedies or tragedies?