Theatre has more direct ties to social dynamics than most other arts, a marked emphasis on embodiment and agency, and a unique conjunction of modes of communication. Paradigmatically, theatre nearly always combines speech and writing. The fact of their combination has always been front and center. Unlike film and television scripts (which are read almost solely by scholars and fans), drama has been literature essentially since theatre began; unlike music scores, which are always understood as different from and only one contributor to music itself, play texts are sometimes seen as equivalent or even superior to their performance. The combination of speech and writing makes theatre especially sensitive to changes in the relationship between the two, and their relationship to other social dynamics.

In order to show how a communication framework generates the core features of performance strategies, I will look at two examples of theatre in cultures that possessed only speech and handwriting: classical Greek tragedy, and an early play from medieval England. The comparison between them shows the inadequacy of technological determinism, because their profound differences cannot have derived from the mechanics of orality and literacy alone. By examining Greek tragedy I will of course face the question of theatre’s “origins,” for which there is scanty evidence; it would be helpful to compare classical tragedy with the comedy, but we know even less about that. There is however considerable evidence on medieval theatre (albeit not its “origins”).

The invention of Greek tragedy was once explained as a natural evolution from dithyrambs, Dionysian rituals, or cults of the dead. Although those
ideas refuse to die, they have received extensive criticism from classicists, who have shown that theories of theatre’s origins in ritual or religion don’t stand up to historical, anthropological, or logical analysis.\(^1\) Gerald Else has proposed an alternative, that tragedy was invented by two theatrical geniuses, Thespis and Aeschylus. But neither evolution nor genius explains why this innovation was needed, how it was possible, and why it was accepted. These riddles concern tragedy’s social circumstances. Two upheavals mark the sixth century BCE, the period when tragedy arose. On the one hand, the country’s political and economic structure drastically changed. On the other, literacy became increasingly central to economic, political, and cultural activities. Together, these shifts created both the need and resources for a cultural innovation, tragedy.\(^2\)

Greece’s economic and political structure was distinctive. By the eight century BCE, Greek land was owned by individuals or extended families (“tribes”). In some areas, however, the villages eventually banded together to form a *polis*, combining agricultural lands with an urban center. Compared to most other areas of the Mediterranean, the decentralization of land ownership gave the Greeks greater political and economic independence, and weaker local monarchies (Austin and Vidal-Naquet 50, 57–58; Finley 123; Hammond 72–86, 97–98).

During the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, most of the *poleis* were struggling through social conflicts, which usually involved demands for land redistribution, but the rise of increasingly wealthy merchants and manufacturers also unsettled the traditional, agrarian basis of power. Across Greece, “tyrants” (autocrats) overthrew many of the old aristocratic oligarchies to carry out the demands of the lower and especially middle classes, or at least to provide political stability. In an effort to avert tyranny, the Athenians installed Solon as archon during the years 594–91 to mediate changes in the system by legal means. Eschewing land redistribution, he chose instead to institute debt relief and eliminate the possibility of citizens becoming slaves. He also promoted a diversification of the Athenian economy by encouraging commerce and artisan manufacture. He may have obligated citizens to teach their sons a trade and offered citizenship to foreign artisans; his constitution included landless laborers as citizens. Hence it became possible to be a citizen through labor and trade as well as through land ownership. Further, Solon trimmed the aristocracy’s hold on power, expanded the role of the Assembly and included within it a judicial body in which citizens conducted their own prosecution or defense. These were the first steps through which Athens slowly placed the state’s claims above those of the tribes.\(^3\)

Tyranny eventually arose in Athens anyway: some forty-five years after Solon, Pisistratus attained power. Pisistratus respected the Solonic constitution in form, but held power behind the scenes, achieving a period of