

# WORLD LITERATURE CRITICISM

Supplement

*A Selection of  
Major Authors from  
Gale's Literary  
Criticism Series*

1

Aeschylus-King

# WORLD LITERATURE CRITICISM

## Supplement

*A Selection of  
Major Authors from  
Gale's Literary  
Criticism Series*

1

江苏工业学院图书馆  
藏书章

**Aeschylus-King**

**POLLY VEDDER, Editor**



DETROIT • NEW YORK • TORONTO • LONDON

## STAFF

Polly Vedder, *Editor*

John P. Daniel, Pamela S. Dear, Christopher Giroux, Josh Lauer, Patricia Onorato,  
Deborah A. Stanley, Kathleen Wilson, and Janet Witalec, *Contributing Editors*

Jeffrey W. Hunter and Thomas Wiloch, *Associate Editors*

Tim Akers and Timothy White, *Assistant Editors*

Jennifer Daniels and Andrew Spongberg, *Editorial Assistants*

Susan M. Trosky, *Permissions Manager*

Margaret Chamberlain, Maria Franklin, and Kimberly F. Smilay, *Permissions Specialists*  
Sarah Chesney, Edna Hedblad, Michele Lonoconus, and Shalice Shah, *Permissions Associates*  
Stephen Cusack, Kelly Quin, Andrea Rigby, and Jessica Ulrich, *Permissions Assistants*

Victoria B. Cariappa, *Research Manager*

Barbara McNeil, *Research Specialist*

Laura C. Bissey, Julia C. Daniel, Tamara C. Nott,  
Tracie A. Richardson, and Cheryl L. Warnock, *Research Associates*

Mary Beth Trimper, *Production Supervisor*

Shanna Heilveil, *Production Assistant*

Barbara J. Yarrow, *Graphic Services Manager*

Mikal Ansari, *Macintosh Artist*

Randy Bassett, *Imaging Database Supervisor*

Robert Duncan and Michael Logusz, *Imaging Specialists*

Pamela A. Reed, *Photography Coordinator*

Because this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, Gale Research neither guarantees the accuracy of the data contained herein nor assumes any responsibility for errors, omissions, or discrepancies. Gale accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

This book is printed on acid-free paper that meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—  
Permanence Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

This publication is a creative work copyrighted by Gale Research and fully protected by all applicable copyright laws, as well as by misappropriation, trade secret, unfair competition, and other applicable laws. The authors and editors of this work have added value to the underlying factual material herein through one or more of the following: unique and original selection, coordination, expression, arrangement, and classification of the information.

Gale Research will vigorously defend all of its rights in this publication.

Copyright © 1997 by Gale Research  
835 Penobscot Building  
Detroit, MI 48226

All rights reserved including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

ISBN 0-7876-1696-6 (2-volume set)  
Vol. 1: ISBN 0-7876-1912-4  
Vol. 2: ISBN 0-7876-1913-2

Printed in the United States of America  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



# Introduction

## A Comprehensive Information Source on World Literature

**W**orld Literature Criticism Supplement presents a broad selection of the best criticism of works by major writers from the pre-Christian era to the present. Among the authors included in *WLC Supplement* are ancient Greek poet Homer; Chinese philosopher Confucius; Greek philosophers and dramatists such as Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes, and Euripides; Roman poet Vergil; Christian apologist St. Augustine; Muslim prophet Muhammad; Italian poet Dante Alighieri; English poet Geoffrey Chaucer and prose writer Thomas Malory; Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli; American philosopher and autobiographer Benjamin Franklin; and major nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors including Robert Browning, Kate Chopin, Sean O'Casey, Nadine Gordimer, Seamus Heaney, Martin Luther King, Jr., Czesław Miłosz, N. Scott Momaday, Salman Rushdie, Leslie Marmon Silko, Elie Wiesel, and August Wilson.

## Coverage

This two-volume set extends the coverage of *World Literature Criticism: 1500 to the Present* (1992), a six-volume collection designed for high school, college, and university students as well as for the general reader interested in learning more about literature. *WLC* was developed in response to strong demand by students, librarians, and other readers for a one-stop, authoritative guide to the whole spectrum of world literature from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. *WLC Supplement* broadens the coverage to important pre-Christian authors and influential first- through fifteenth-century writers and works, adds widely read authors who could not be included in the first volumes, and updates the set with additional twentieth-century writers whose works are increasingly studied in modern classrooms.

## Inclusion Criteria

Authors were selected for inclusion in *WLC Supplement* based on the advice of leading experts on world literature as well as on the recommendations of a specially formed advisory panel made up of high school and undergraduate teachers and high school and public librarians from throughout the United States. Additionally, the most recent major curriculum studies were closely examined, notably Arthur N. Applebee, *A Study of Book-Length Works Taught in High School English Courses* (1989); Arthur N. Applebee, *A Study of High School Literature Anthologies* (1991); and Doug Estel, Michele L. Satchwell, and Patricia S. Wright, *Reading Lists for College-Bound Students* (1990). All of these resources were collated and compared to produce a reference product that is strongly curriculum driven. To ensure that *WLC Supplement* will continue to meet the needs of students and general readers alike, an effort was made to identify a group of important new writers in addition to the most studied authors.



## Scope

Each author entry in *WLC Supplement* presents a historical survey of critical response to the author's works. Typically, early criticism is offered to indicate initial responses, later selections document any rise or decline in literary reputations, and retrospective analyses provide modern views. (In a handful of entries, early views were favored over more contemporary ones, since the early material was judged more likely to be useful to students.) Wherever possible, the editors strove to include seminal essays on each author's work along with commentary providing broad perspectives on major issues. Interviews and author statements are also included in many entries. Thus, *WLC Supplement* is both timely and comprehensive.

## Organization of Author Entries

Information about authors and their works is presented through ten key access points:

- The **Descriptive Table of Contents** guides readers through the range of world literature, offering summary sketches of authors' careers and achievements.
- In each author entry, the **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and, where appropriate, death dates. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Name variations, including full birth names when available, are given in parentheses in the caption below the **Author Portrait**.
- The **Biographical and Critical Introduction** contains background information about the life and works of the author, clearly divided into sections: 1) brief summary of the author's achievements and reputation; 2) **Biographical Information** that helps reveal the life, character, and personality of the author; 3) descriptions and summaries of the author's **Major Works**; and 4) commentary on the **Critical Reception** of the author's works. The concluding paragraph of the **Biographical and Critical Introduction** directs readers to other Gale series containing information about the author.
- Every *WLC Supplement* entry contains an **Author Portrait** or manuscript illustration.
- The **List of Principal Works** is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies the genre of each work. Ancient works are usually given in the more familiar English versions, but well-known foreign titles such as *Oedipus Rex* also appear in some listings. For non-English-language authors whose works have been translated into English, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance rather than first publication.
- Many entries contain an **Adaptations** section listing important treatments and adaptations of the author's works, including feature films, TV miniseries, and radio broadcasts. This feature was specially conceived for *WLC* to meet strong demand from students for this type of information.
- **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each author entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. Most entries contain a detailed, comprehensive study of an author's career as well as book and performance reviews, studies of individual works, and comparative examinations. To

ensure timeliness, current views are most often presented, but not to the exclusion of important early pieces. For the purpose of easy identification, the critic's name and source citation are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Within the criticism, titles of works by the author are printed in boldface type. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and certain numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of works) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.

- Critical essays are prefaced by **Explanatory Notes** as an additional aid to readers of *WLC Supplement*. These notes may provide several types of valuable information, including: 1) the reputation of the critic; 2) the importance of the work of criticism; 3) the commentator's approach to the author's work; 4) the purpose of the criticism; and 5) changes in critical trends regarding the author. In some cases, **Explanatory Notes** cross-reference the work of critics within an entry who agree or disagree with each other.

## Other Features

*WLC* contains three distinct indexes to help readers find information quickly and easily:

- The **Cumulative Author Index** lists all the authors appearing in *WLC Supplement* as well as all those who appeared in the original six-volume set. Users need only consult the *Supplement* index to locate information on any author included in either set. To ensure easy access, name variations and changes are fully cross-indexed.
- The **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *WLC Supplement* and the original *WLC* by nationality. For expatriate authors and authors identified with more than one nation, multiple listings are offered.
- The **Cumulative Title Index** lists in alphabetical order all individual works by the authors appearing in *WLC*. English-language translations of original foreign-language titles are cross-referenced so that all references to a work are combined in one listing.

## Citing *World Literature Criticism Supplement*

When writing papers, students who quote directly from *WLC Supplement* may use the following general forms to footnote reprinted criticism:

### For material drawn from periodicals:

Roger Dickinson-Brown, "The Art and Importance of N. Scott Momaday," *The Southern Review*, Vol. XIV, No. 1 (January 1978), 30-45; excerpted and reprinted in *World Literature Criticism Supplement*, ed. Polly Vedder (Detroit: Gale Research, 1997), pp. 625-31.

### For material reprinted from books:

Mona Knapp, *Doris Lessing* (Frederick Ungar, 1984); excerpted and reprinted in *World Literature Criticism Supplement*, ed. Polly Vedder (Detroit: Gale Research, 1997), pp. 491-95.

## **Acknowledgments**

The editor wishes to acknowledge the valuable contributions of the many librarians, authors, and scholars who assisted in the compilation of *WLC Supplement* with their responses to telephone and mail inquiries. Special thanks are offered to the members of *WLC's* advisory board, whose names are listed opposite the title page.

## **Comments Are Welcome**

The editor hopes that readers will find *WLC Supplement* a useful reference tool and welcomes comments about the work. Send comments and suggestions to: Editor, *World Literature Criticism Supplement*, Gale Research, Penobscot Building, Detroit, MI 48226-4094.



# WORLD LITERATURE CRITICISM

Supplement

# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	ix
<b>Aeschylus 525 B.C.-456 B.C.</b> .....	1:1
Considered the father of tragedy, Aeschylus has influenced the entire history of Western drama. He was recognized by his contemporaries as the leading figure in Attic drama, and his plays are still widely respected.	
<b>Dante Alighieri 1265-1321</b> .....	1:19
Dante is regarded as the finest Italian poet and a major influence in Western culture. His masterpiece, <i>La divina commedia</i> ( <i>The Divine Comedy</i> ), is known as one of the greatest poems of world literature.	
<b>Isabel Allende 1942-</b> .....	1:39
Blending realism and fantasy into her fiction, Allende examines the social and political heritage of South America. Her most notable work, <i>The House of Spirits</i> , is typical of her writing, which draws upon her own experiences.	
<b>Maya Angelou 1928-</b> .....	1:54
Angelou is one of the most admired contemporary African-American authors. She has received critical acclaim for her poetry as well as for autobiographical books such as <i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> .	
<b>Aristophanes 450 B.C.-385 B.C.</b> .....	1:71
Widely considered the greatest comic dramatist of ancient Greece, Aristophanes is admired for his imagination, earthy and irreverent style, and critical insight. His eleven complete plays represent the largest surviving body of work of any classical Greek writer.	
<b>Aristotle 384 B.C.-322 B.C.</b> .....	1:88
One of the greatest intellectuals in Western history, Aristotle has influenced the development of philosophy, theology, and science. Additionally, his <i>Poetics</i> has set the standard for theoretical approaches to literature.	
<b>St. Augustine 354-430</b> .....	1:105
A Roman theologian and philosopher, St. Augustine became a champion of Christianity. His literary genius is most evident in his <i>Confessions</i> , the chronicle of his conversion.	
<b>Toni Cade Bambara 1939-1995</b> .....	1:122
Bambara, a writer and social activist, first gained critical acclaim for her short fiction, which has been praised for its insights into youth and the human condition, politics and music, and African-American culture.	
<b>Amiri Baraka 1934-</b> .....	1:137
Having written in a wide variety of genres, Baraka is a prolific and influential African-American writer. His controversial work is designed to shock audiences into awareness of the political concerns of black Americans.	
<b>Beowulf c. 8th century</b> .....	1:156
The oldest surviving English poem, <i>Beowulf</i> concerns the virtue and exploits of a Scandinavian hero. Linguists, historians, and literary critics have treasured it for its insight into early medieval life and thought as well as its poetic beauty.	
<b>Bible</b> .....	1:175
The Bible is regarded as the most influential collection of writings in human history. It contains the sacred writings of Judaism and Christianity and has been translated into more than 1,800 languages.	

<b>Robert Browning 1812-1889</b> .....	1:197
A prominent Victorian poet, Browning is regarded as the master of the dramatic monologue. His versatile approach and innovations in language helped bring the form to new levels of technical sophistication and are evident in much of his work, including "Fra Lippo Lippi" and his masterpiece, <i>The Ring and the Book</i> .	
<b>Geoffrey Chaucer 1340?-1400</b> .....	1:217
Chaucer's <i>Canterbury Tales</i> is one of the most widely known pieces of Middle English literature. It is a unique blend of the poet's humor, satire, linguistic style, and knowledge of the human condition.	
<b>Kate Chopin 1851-1904</b> .....	1:235
In the nineteenth century, Chopin received harsh criticism for her frank depictions of feminine independence, sexuality, and adultery in her short novel <i>The Awakening</i> and short stories such as "The Story of an Hour." Today she is praised for her realistic depiction of the plight of women in modern society.	
<b>Confucius 551? B.C.-479 B.C.</b> .....	1:252
Confucius influenced the development of both Eastern philosophy and Western thought with his short sayings collected in the <i>Lun-yu (The Analects)</i> . The collection comments on subjects ranging from politics and war to personal conduct and family.	
<b>Countee Cullen 1903-1946</b> .....	1:271
A leading poet of the Harlem Renaissance, Cullen strove to write literature that transcended race, blending traditional style and contemporary racial issues in his poetry.	
<b>Euripides 485 B.C.-406 B.C.</b> .....	1:288
Euripides modified the structure of classical Greek drama in innovative ways. The Peloponnesian War influenced Euripidean tragedy, filling it with uncertainty, injustice, and suffering.	
<b>Benjamin Franklin 1706-1790</b> .....	1:310
Franklin is often remembered as a scientist, inventor, and colonial American statesman, yet he was also widely known for his <i>Poor Richard</i> almanacs, satires, and political essays. Perhaps his best work is his <i>Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin</i> , published after his death.	
<b><i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> c. 14th century</b> .....	1:333
Though little is known about its author, <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> is considered the best and most intriguing of the English medieval romances. It receives steady critical review from a variety of perspectives.	
<b>Nikki Giovanni 1943-</b> .....	1:350
Giovanni became popular in the 1960s with her revolutionary poems. Her work is influenced by rhythm and blues and concentrates on the themes of family, race, womanhood, and sexuality.	
<b>Nadine Gordimer 1923-</b> .....	1:367
Writing mostly about the effects of apartheid, Gordimer captures the intricate human tensions in South Africa. She produces powerful fiction anchored by authentic portrayals of apartheid's effects on both whites and blacks.	
<b>Seamus Heaney 1939-</b> .....	1:385
Heaney has been lauded as the greatest Irish poet since William Butler Yeats. His Nobel Prize-winning poetry, which explores self-discovery, spiritual growth, and issues related to Irish history, is characterized by sensuous language, sexual metaphors, and nature imagery.	
<b>Homer c. 8th century B.C.</b> .....	1:403
The <i>Iliad</i> and the <i>Odyssey</i> created the framework for Western literary epics. With his relatively simple narrative technique, Homer wove together the themes of heroism, fate, honor, loyalty, and justice with ancient myths and folk motifs.	
<b>A. E. Housman 1859-1936</b> .....	1:424
Housman was a popular success in the early 1900s. Written in the pastoral tradition, his poetry is marked by emotional force and classical beauty and often deals with religious disillusionment and the loss of youthful dreams.	
<b>Zora Neale Hurston 1903-1960</b> .....	1:439
Hurston's place as an important writer of the Harlem Renaissance has been	



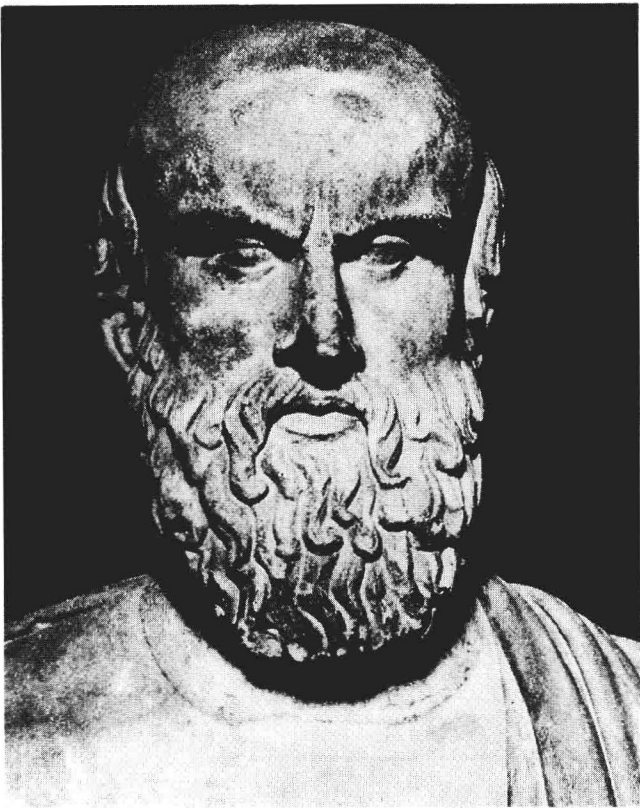
- only recently revived after decades of neglect. She wrote novels, short stories, and various works of nonfiction, and one of her most important contributions was the collection and publication of African-American folklore.
- Martin Luther King, Jr. 1929-1968** ..... 1:455  
King's "I Have a Dream" speech has become symbolic of the civil rights movement. An inspirational speaker who called for equality and social reform, King wrote essays with a sermon-like quality and often used biblical references.
- Maxine Hong Kingston 1940-**..... 2:473  
Kingston melds Asian legend with autobiographical elements and fictionalized history to show the cultural conflicts faced by Americans of Chinese descent.
- Doris Lessing 1919-** ..... 2:485  
Widely considered one of the most important writers of the postwar era, Lessing focuses on major social issues such as racism, communism, and feminism in her works.
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow 1807-1882** ..... 2:501  
Longfellow was the first American poet to gain favor with the international literary community. He is credited with introducing European culture to the American readers of his day.
- Niccolò Machiavelli 1469-1527** ..... 2:518  
Perhaps one of the most controversial political figures in history, Machiavelli is best remembered for his political treatise *The Prince*.
- Malcolm X 1925-1965** ..... 2:537  
As national minister of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X was one of the most influential African-American leaders of the twentieth century. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written with Alex Haley, chronicles his search for identity.
- Sir Thomas Malory 1410?-1471?** ..... 2:553  
Malory's masterpiece, *Le Morte Darthur*, which was based on French prose romances, is regarded as the best-known treatment of Arthurian legend in English.
- Edgar Lee Masters 1868-1950** ..... 2:572  
Though he was a prolific writer in several genres, Masters is primarily remembered as a poet. He shattered the myth of traditional American values with his classic collection of poetry, *Spoon River Anthology*.
- Edna St. Vincent Millay 1892-1950** ..... 2:588  
Millay employed traditional poetic devices to convey nontraditional ideas about the role of women in society. Her early volumes of poetry boldly asserted an independent perspective rarely expressed by female authors of her time.
- Czesław Miłosz 1911-** ..... 2:605  
Miłosz's writings are concerned with metaphysical issues such as good and evil, identity, and the nature of existence. He was the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1980.
- N. Scott Momaday 1934-** ..... 2:622  
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1969 for his novel *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday focuses primarily on the plight of Native Americans in the modern world. His unique narrative style weaves native myth, history, and contemporary experience.
- Marianne Moore 1887-1972** ..... 2:638  
One of America's foremost literary figures, Moore is noted for her close attention to detail and observation of human character. Her poetry often displays a preoccupation with the relationships between the common and the uncommon.
- Muhammad 570?-632** ..... 2:655  
Muhammad, the founder of Islam, provided the divine revelations that were later transcribed to create the Koran, the sacred text of Islam. The Koran has dictated Islamic religious practices for over 1,300 years.
- Alice Munro 1931-** ..... 2:673  
Munro is one of Canada's most critically acclaimed contemporary authors. Her works juxtapose the mundane with the fantastic in an effort to allow readers fresh insight into the familiar.

<b>Gloria Naylor 1950-</b> .....	<b>2:689</b>
Naylor's portrayal of the black woman's condition in America has won her critical acclaim. Her most popular novel, <i>The Women of Brewster Place</i> , has been adapted for television.	
<b>Sean O'Casey 1880-1964</b> .....	<b>2:706</b>
O'Casey is best remembered for dramas such as <i>The Shadow of a Gunman</i> and <i>The Plough and the Stars</i> , which deal with the tragedy of political violence in Ireland. His later plays are characterized by a formalistic style that highlights his poetic and ideologic sensibilities.	
<b>Plato 428? B.C.-348? B.C.</b> .....	<b>2:724</b>
Many consider Plato the father of philosophical idealism and the preeminent writer of Greek prose. His words and ideas serve as the foundation for Western philosophy.	
<b>Salman Rushdie 1947-</b> .....	<b>2:742</b>
Rushdie's style is characterized by a blend of history, myth, politics, and fantasy. His most famous work, <i>The Satanic Verses</i> , touched off an international furor for its controversial treatment of people, places, and objects sacred to Islam.	
<b>Leslie Marmon Silko 1948-</b> .....	<b>2:757</b>
One of the foremost authors to emerge from the Native American literary renaissance of the 1970s, Silko blends contemporary narrative style with the oral traditions of her heritage.	
<b>Sophocles 496? B.C.-406? B.C.</b> .....	<b>2:772</b>
Over 2,000 years after his death, Sophocles remains one of the greatest figures in world literature. His tragedies, which include his masterpiece, <i>Oedipus Rex</i> , initiated several theatrical conventions that have influenced drama throughout the Western world.	
<b>Jean Toomer 1894-1967</b> .....	<b>2:789</b>
Even though he was noted for his exploration of African-American culture, Toomer rejected the label of "black author"; instead, he considered himself part of a new "American" race made up of elements of all humanity. His major work, <i>Cane</i> , reflects this universalist philosophy.	
<b>Vergil 70 B.C.-19 B.C.</b> .....	<b>2:806</b>
Drawing from Greek literary traditions, Vergil produced a body of work that has influenced virtually all subsequent Western literature. His writings, which include the <i>Aeneid</i> , provide the most insightful perspective on the anxieties of the Augustan Age.	
<b>Alice Walker 1944-</b> .....	<b>2:827</b>
Walker's writing explores racial, sexual, and political issues, particularly as they relate to the lives of African-American women. Walker won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel <i>The Color Purple</i> .	
<b>Elie Wiesel 1928-</b> .....	<b>2:841</b>
A survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, Wiesel attempts to comprehend the apparent indifference of God as suggested by the horror of the Holocaust. He won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1986.	
<b>August Wilson 1945-</b> .....	<b>2:858</b>
Wilson has been a major figure in the American theater since the 1980s. His plays—including an ambitious cycle devoted to twentieth-century African-American experience—have won enormous critical acclaim, including two Tony Awards and two Pulitzer Prizes.	
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>2:877</b>
<b>WLC Cumulative Author Index</b> .....	<b>2:883</b>
<b>WLC Cumulative Nationality Index</b> .....	<b>2:889</b>
<b>WLC Cumulative Title Index</b> .....	<b>2:893</b>

---

# Aeschylus

525 B.C.-456 B.C.



Greek poet, dramatist, and composer.

---

## INTRODUCTION

**R**ecognized by his contemporaries as the leading figure in Greek drama, Aeschylus is regarded today as the father of tragedy because he influenced the entire history of Western drama, providing a technical and literary frame of reference for generations of playwrights. His tragedies, particularly his treatment of human destiny and myth in *Prometheus Bound* and the *Oresteia* trilogy, are counted among the greatest dramas ever written. Indeed, Aeschylus's plays are widely respected as thoughtful, profoundly moving dramatizations of moral and ethical questions performed in the sublime language of poetry.

### Biographical Information

Little is known about Aeschylus's life, but ancient biographies indicate that he was born at Eleusis, near Athens, in 525 B.C. into an aristocratic family. A participant in the Persian Wars, Aeschylus fought at Marathon in 490 B.C. and probably at Salamis a decade later. Although his youth was marked by military heroics, his maturity coincided with Athens's Golden Age, the period when Greek democracy prevailed and the arts flourished. Aeschylus possibly produced his first tragedy, *The Persians*, as early as 499 B.C., but more likely in 472 B.C. He entered the annual Athenian drama contest, the Dionysia, twenty times and emerged the victor on thirteen occasions; he also made several visits to Sicily to stage his plays at the bequest of its ruler, Hieron I. Aeschylus died at Gela in Sicily in 456 B.C. According to legend, he was killed by an eagle that dropped a tortoise's shell on the dramatist's bald head.

### Major Works

Aeschylus wrote more than eighty tragedies and sa-



tiric plays, but only seven survive in their entirety: *The Persians*; *Seven against Thebes*, performed in 467 B.C.; *The Suppliant Women*, dated c. 463 B.C.; the *Oresteia* trilogy (comprising *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and the *Emends*), staged in 458 B.C.; and the undated *Prometheus Bound*. *The Persians* vividly describes the battle of Salamis and centers on Persian *hubris*, which refers to the peculiar type of human arrogance that offends the gods and, according to the dramatist, inevitably leads to disaster. *Seven against Thebes* and *The Suppliant Women* concerns human freedom and divine compulsion. Aeschylus shaped the *Oresteia* trilogy as a chronicle of death perpetuated by a cycle of *hubris*, divine animosity, and human revenge. In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra murders her husband, King Agamemnon, upon his triumphant return from the Trojan War in order to avenge the death of her daughter Iphigenia, whom Agamemnon had sacrificed to ensure a favorable wind when he set sail for Troy. Revenge is the motivation in *The Libation Bearers*, in which Clytemnestra is murdered by Agamemnon's children Electra and Orestes, who consequently evoke the wrath of the Furies, demons who traditionally punish offenses against blood relatives. The *Eumenides* opens at Apollo's shrine at Delphi, where Orestes had come to seek protection from the Furies. Eventually he is ordered to stand trial in Athens before the temple of Athena. When the court is unable to reach a verdict, Athena casts the crucial vote in favor of Orestes and even persuades the Furies to change their nature and serve her as Eumenides, or Kindly Spirits. *Prometheus Bound*, the first work of a trilogy, recounts the heroic efforts of Prometheus, Zeus's cousin, to save humanity from the god's decision to punish human disrespect by total annihilation. As punishment for his opposition, Prometheus is chained to a rock on Mount Caucasus. The trilogy, parts two and three (*Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bearer*) of which survive only

in fragments, concludes with Prometheus's liberation and reconciliation with Zeus.

### Critical Reception

Although his contemporaries respected Aeschylus as a successful dramatist, some later Greek dramatists, notably Sophocles and Aristophanes, decried what they called his archaic and pompous style. Following the classical period, Aeschylus's dramas disappeared into relative obscurity. Scholarly interest in his works was reawakened in the early nineteenth century by August Wilhelm Schlegel, who first acknowledged him as the originator of tragedy. As late nineteenth century critics continued to focus on Aeschylus's simple but grand style, they also began to scrutinize the dramatist in a cultural context, a trend that has continued into the twentieth century. Admiring the clarity of Aeschylus's style, critics have found his simple, linear narratives the ideal vehicle for the dramatic depiction of unavoidable human catastrophes. Commentators have extolled the lyrical elegance of his verse, praising his dramas as masterpieces of detailed imagery, intense emotion, and intellectual exploration. Scholars have also credited Aeschylus with introducing many new technical features into Greek theater, including the addition of a second, and later a third, actor, which fostered dialogue; and the incorporation of dance, costumes, and scenic effects. Critics and dramatists agree that Aeschylus's oeuvre endures because it constitutes a singularly powerful and universal view of the most profound human concerns.

(For further information, see *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, Vol. 11; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 176; *DISCovering Authors*; *DISCovering Authors: British*; *DISCovering Authors: Canadian*; *DISCovering Authors Modules: Dramatists Module*, *Most-studied Authors Module*.)

---

## CRITICAL COMMENTARY

### HERBERT WEIR SMYTH

SOURCE: Herbert Weir Smyth, in his *Aeschylean Tragedy*, 1924. Reprint by AMS Press, 1972, 234 p.

[Smyth was an American classicist and educator. In the following excerpt, he discusses the unique features of Aeschylus's dramatic genius, paying particular attention to the mythological, religious, and intellectual context of the tragedian's art.]

[Of] the immediate spiritual kindred of the poet who

gave direction to the later history of tragedy, nothing remains whereby his genius may be measured with theirs. Eclipsed by his greater radiance, and by the injuries of time, their works have perished in oblivion. From the bare titles of Thespis' plays, if genuine, and from those of his pre-Aeschylean successors, it may be inferred that other choruses than those attendant on the god of wine might sing the lyric odes, the essential portion of the play; and that heroes were impersonated who had no concern with the life of the son of hapless Semele blasted by the lightning splendor of her omnipotent lover, the high god Zeus. Yet

## Principal English Translations

*Prometheus Bound* (translated by Elizabeth Barrett Browning) 1833  
*Agamemnon* (translated by Robert Browning) 1877  
*The Tragedies of Aeschylus* (edited by F. A. Paley) 1879  
*Seven against Thebes* (translated and edited by A. W. Verrall) 1887  
*The Choephoroi* (translated and edited by T. G. Tucker) 1901  
*Aeschylus: The Seven Plays in English Verse* (translated by Lewis Campbell) 1906  
*Prometheus Bound* (edited and revised by A. O. Prikard) 1931  
*\*Greek Tragedies* (edited by David Grene and Richard Lattimore; various translations) 3 vols. 1941-60  
*Agamemnon* (translated and edited by E. Fraenkel) 3 vols. 1950  
*The Complete Plays* (translated by Gilbert Murray) 1952

*The Oresteian Trilogy* (translated by Philip Vellacott) 1956  
*The Persae of Aeschylus* (translated by H. D. Broadhead) 1960  
*Prometheus Bound, The Suppliants, Seven against Thebes, The Persians* (translated by Philip Vellacott) 1961  
*Aeschylus* (translated by H. W. Smyth) 2 vols. 1971  
*The Suppliant Women* (translated by J. Lembke) 1975  
*The Oresteia by Aeschylus: A New Translation for the Theater* (translated by David Grene and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty) 1989

\*This collection includes the following dramas: *Agamemnon* and *Prometheus Bound* (vol. 1), *The Libation Bearers* (vol. 2), and *Eumenides* (vol. 3).

for Aeschylus, as for his successors, the theater in which the legends of the heroic past were envisaged, remained the sanctuary of the god, compacted of divinity and humanity; whose mortal part entailed on him suffering and struggle with a rejecting world, and whose immortal part so triumphed that, latest of the gods, he was received into the celestial society of Olympus. . . .

From his very primacy in time, Aeschylus has long been a magnet that has attracted philosophic aesthetics to the determination of the essence of the tragic — to the veritable *Ding an sich* [thing in itself]. In the *Agamemnon*, which he revered as if divine, Goethe found the keystone of all aesthetic inquiry; and lesser critics than Goethe, though of the same race (for which the problem of the relation of moral to tragic guilt has a particular fascination), hold that Aeschylus discovered the absolute conception of tragic art and that he fixed that conception for all time. . . .

The purely aesthetic, as distinguished from the intellectual, effect of the tragic drama of the Greeks was attained by elevated action and melodious verse, by satisfaction of the just demands of emotion in its deeper forms, and, as regards sensible embodiment, only herein differing from the loftiest modern tragedies, by harmonious musical and orchestric accompaniment. What we call "the tragedies of life" are our defeats, due for the most part to lapses of reason, to inability to scan the horizon of our acts, to flaws of character, which hurt most ourselves and others less or even not at all. Tragedy, as art, is the mirror of these defeats. Greek tragedy, as tragedy, because it is "heroic," deals

with the sufferings of immortal beings or of mortal men and women normally of loftier station than ourselves, or, if of like common clay with ourselves, who appear to enjoy a loftier estate through the ennobling dignity of time. Greek tragedy does not inevitably end with death or a similar catastrophe. Its theme, however, is generally, in the last issue, such defects of character as occasion exceptional calamities, calamities that bring ruin to men set between a cruel choice, and not only to themselves but to the lives of others. In Aeschylean tragedy, in particular, that ruin involves not only the individual but also his descendants, whole families, and even entire nations. In *Agamemnon* ambition overmastered his nobler self: he sacrificed his daughter to retain his authority as commander of the expedition against Troy. That crime destroyed himself, his wife's honor, and her life at the hands of her own son. Eteocles lacked self-restraint: of his own headstrong will he slew his brother. Xerxes' desire to take vengeance on a land beyond the sea brought defeat to himself and disaster to his people.

In the last analysis, Aeschylean tragic drama presents the features common to the tragic drama of later times. As drama, it is the spectacle of a conflict of will, human or divine, or of man's will encountering obstacles internal or external, such as the sense of moral rectitude, the reasonable or unreasonable judgments of others, the sheer force of circumstance, the very contradictions of life itself. It sets forth, in condensed form, a story normally of antique times, acted by people who impersonate the characters of the story. It presents a series of crises culminating in a supreme crisis. It depicts action or the growth of action (all in

fact that Aristotle's [*praxis*] connotes) as determined by character and circumstance; and conversely, the influence of action on character and circumstance. Aeschylean tragedy seeks to find peace for the soul troubled by the spectacle of limitless capacity for good involved in limitless ruin; peace for the soul, because it discerns that human life is somehow correlated to the demands of a moral world by the mystical union of Fate with the will of God. . . .

My [concern here] is not with the question of tragic guilt and the relation of punishment to the offense, nor indeed with any part of the terminology of aesthetics. I am dealing with the everliving drama, the drama of a great artistic craftsman. As drama, his plays must be visualized by the imagination. No grace of style, no cunning art of description, can in the faintest degree supply the place of that contribution which we must bring to the understanding of a play twenty-five centuries old: the spoken word, the choral song alternating with the dialogue, the statuesque grouping of the main actors, the freer movements of the secondary personages, and the nature of the chorus on whom the words and deeds of the actors react as they react on ourselves—all must be reborn by the cooperation of our individual creative faculty.

Aeschylean tragedy is full of startling and thrilling scenes, scenes that at times outdo the sensationalism of Euripides; yet they were not designed to produce a mere emotional effect. Aeschylus would not let emotion be secured at the sacrifice of tragic pity and tragic fear: pity for undeserved misfortune, fear lest a like misfortune befall ourselves. By the intensified life of his characters he raises us to a heightened consciousness of living. The legends which form the substratum of his plays, legends that are more often a national possession than severely local, he has so shaped that at the outset we discover ourselves confronted by moral and religious problems of profound significance. Io, wandering transformed through the world, arrives at the rocky height in uttermost Scythia where Prometheus is riveted by command of Zeus: is the supreme god a just god? The daughters of Danaus, fleeing from the persecution of their detested suitors, seek the protection of the land of their primal ancestress: is mercy due the suppliant when hospitality spells peril? Is neutrality possible when the choice lies between war and the recognition of the rights of the oppressed? A free people is justly triumphant at its victory that rendered a barbarous enemy impotent for the conquest of the world: is the thrill of triumph to be tempered by no warning to the victor to beware the divine justice that brings low all arrogance? The mysterious beckonings of Fate, the awfulness of the battle waged by ambition against duty to man and God, the ways of God to man—these are the conceptions that inter-

penetrate the tragic dramas of the soldier-poet Aeschylus. Not the exquisite refinement of the art of Sophocles, not Euripides' varied portrayal of man as he is, can vie with the massive imagination linked with moral grandeur that distinguishes their predecessor.

Thus it is, in the presence of such an art, ancient no less than modern, by grace of the contributive sympathy of reason and emotion, we make a startling discovery. We had thought to have been merely witnesses of the actions or feelings of others in the mimic world of art. We have, however, for the moment, been actual participants in the shock of will against will at its utmost tension, have been participants in the struggle of passion with duty as it has been visualized on the stage. From the representation of that shock of conflict, condensed into the crisis of a lifetime, we depart tranquilized, rejoiced to realize that it is not ourselves who have suffered, but constrained to pity by the sufferings of others. The burden of our mistakes and misdoings has been lightened by the high consolation of art. In such moments, when we are transported above the level of our petty selves, whether by a Greek or a modern dramatist (for it is equally possible with both), we are tempted to the belief that art, the symbol of beauty, wedded to reason, is, save for the Divine, the true, the permanent reality, the rest but shadow; tempted to accept in full the equation of that Hellene cast upon the shores of a northern world, surrendered in his youth to death because he was loved of the gods, the poet who discerned the equivalence of beauty and truth, now in a Grecian urn, now in the splendor of nature shaped by no mortal hand.

Genius is wont to display its most authentic quality when it works in a restricted field or with a stubborn material. The Greek choral ode is obligated to preserve all but mathematical balance of rigid quantitative response. Greek tragedy marks the supremacy of the artist working in a field and with a material imposed on him from without and therefore an invigorating challenge to his imagination and his fancy. Aeschylus might not survey at will the varied incidents of life showing forth a spectacle charged with tragic value. He rested under the compulsion to use an ancient story as the medium for his picture of mankind, the drama of human personality and its environment, and the crisis of a human life. To this rule there are only three certain exceptions in the period of the bloom of classical tragedy: the *Capture of Miletus* and the *Women of Phoenicia* by Aeschylus' contemporary Phrynichus, and the *Persians* by Aeschylus himself. All three were *pieces d'occasion*, their themes actual events of recent date. Only the magnitude of the struggle between Orient and Occident could cause tragedy to desert its proper domain, the heroic past. With themes derived from the ancient myths Greek tragedy could make a more uni-



versal appeal because it was not under the compulsion of the realities of present circumstance. . . .

The legends of early Greece formed an inexhaustible repository of tales of revolting crime and its retribution. Remote in time, their very antiquity cast a glamor over the annals of bloodshed, adultery, revenge, the ingratitude of sons, a father's curse, and every defiance of the laws of God and man.

Roman history under the earlier Caesars, the chronicles of the Sforzas, the Borgias, and the Romanoffs, alone can rival the far-off tales of crime which tradition reported of the famous and infamous personages who figured as heroes on the Athenian stage. The house of Atreus has here preeminence. From Pelops to Orestes were accumulated horrors from which our poet might draw the material for his fables. The earliest atrocities he omits as impertinent to the ancestral guilt of Agamemnon. The wife of Atreus, Agamemnon's father, was corrupted by his brother Thyestes; Atreus' revenge was the banquet, served to Thyestes, of his own sons' flesh; Agamemnon slaughtered his daughter for ambition's sake; his wife was unfaithful to her absent husband with Thyestes' son; she slew her husband on his return home and, together with her par amour, was killed by her own son. . . .

The perpetrators of such revolting deeds won for themselves "heroic" proportions because they were seen through the magnifying mist of antiquity. Even the dastard Aegisthus is thus installed under the heroic canopy. It was not the subject matter but the manner of their artistic adaptation that charged the sanguinary myths of Ancient Greece with a spirit suitable for the tragic stage. And it is precisely so with the Elizabethan drama filled with horrors by Seneca from abroad and by native taste. One difference should, however, not be left unnoticed. Blood, which flows in plenteous streams in Shakespeare, was never spilled before the audience in any play of Aeschylus. The Greek dramatist utilized the physical limitations of his art to the end that the moral significance of a sanguinary deed should not be endangered by the actual sight of blood.

The lyric predecessors of Aeschylus no doubt had already begun to discern a spiritual content in the ancient stories of brutal crime. It is, however, in the dramatist that we discover the process in full play. The sinister myths of far-off times were to be enlightened by emotion and thought. Abhorring her deed, the sympathy of the spectator for the doer was to be won by understanding all the multiple motives that drove Clytaemestra to the accomplishment of her dreadful purpose. The appalling end of Eteocles and his brother was to be sought in the character they had inherited from Oedipus. The myth, reflecting the passions of a

barbarous age, was thus made the medium to convey in beautiful form the significance of life that transcends alike the boundaries of the original tale and of the poet's own sphere of time. Epic, nay even lyric, pathos was thus intensified. The inner forces that dominate man's spiritual life took visible and concrete shape. Though no preacher, Aeschylus appealed to the undertone of religious consciousness of an audience assembled in the sanctuary of a god. He moralized, he idealized. With a few actors at his disposition he created a microcosm of life. He related the significant action to the moral order of the world.

In his all too rapid summary of the history of tragedy, Aristotle says this of Aeschylus: "he first introduced a second actor, diminished the importance of the chorus, and assigned the leading part to the dialogue." Now I am not unmindful of that fine epigram in the [Greek] *Anthology* which puts into the mouth of Thespis the words "A younger race shall reshape all this, and infinite time will make more inventions yet; but mine are mine." I would not diminish the true fame of Thespis by an undue appreciation of his greater successor. Yet it might fairly be argued that Aeschylus is a claimant for the title of 'founder' of the tragic drama. Thespis' single actor served only to create an intermezzo between choral chants. But only with the second actor did there become possible that conflict of will, which to us, if not consciously to Aristotle, is the very essence of the drama. Only with the second actor, can plot, character-drawing, the reaction of an event upon the soul, the reaction of man on man, be knit into the very fabric of dramatic art. All the rest of Aeschylus' significant innovations are as nothing in comparison, though they never lost their authority — the regulation of the forms of the dance, the fashioning of costume, the installation of the iambic trimeter as the appropriate verse of dialogue. As two Homeric champions contend in arms in the presence of a nameless crowd, so now, with the second actor, two forces, incorporated in living though mimic personages, are arrayed in antagonism in the presence of the choral mass. The enrichment of plot and the delineation of character through the addition of a third actor, adopted by Aeschylus in his old age from his youthful rival Sophocles, made possible the *Oresteia*; yet that addition was not needed to produce the majesty of the *Prometheus Bound*.

Aeschylean art ranges over the whole Greek world, though he favored Argos of all the cities of the motherland. Like Marlowe and Milton he knows the art to poetize geography. The adventurous Ionian wanderers on the sea, the explorers of the regions beyond the farthest Greek settlements, gave wing to his imagination and transported him to the uttermost parts of the earth, to the trackless wastes of Scythia, to Colchis, to