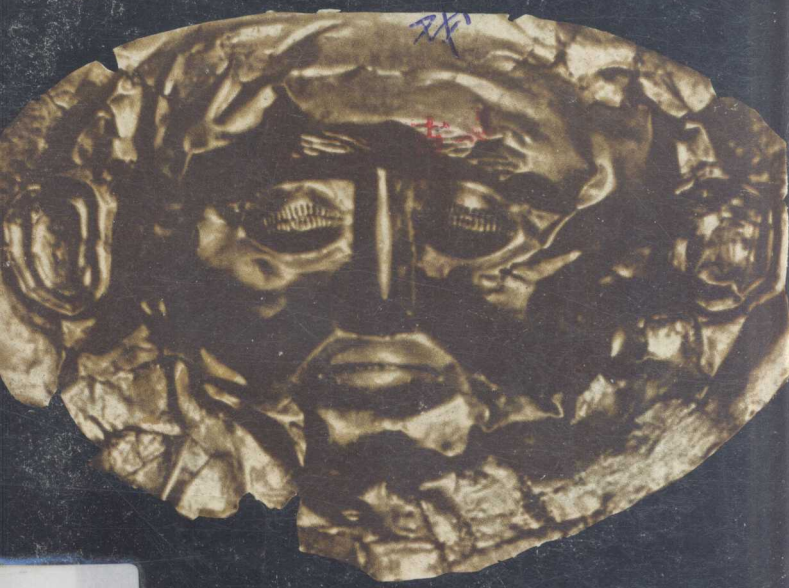
Penguin Classics

AESCHYLUS

THE ORESTEIAN TRILOGY



THE PENGUIN CLASSICS
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AESCHYLUS was born of a noble family at Eleusis near Athens in 525 B.C. He took part in the Persian Wars and his epitaph, said to have been written by himself, represents him as fighting at Marathon. At some time in his life he appears to have been prosecuted for divulging the Eleusinian mysteries, but he apparently proved himself innocent. Aeschylus wrote more than seventy plays, of which seven have survived: *The Suppliants*, *The Persians*, *Seven Against Thebes*, *Prometheus Bound*, *Agamemnon*, *The Choephori* and *The Eumenides*. (All translated by Philip Vellacott for the Penguin Classics.) He visited Syracuse more than once at the invitation of Hieron I and he died at Gela in Sicily in 456 B.C. Aeschylus was recognized as a classic writer soon after his death, and special privileges were decreed for his plays.

PHILIP VELLACOTT is the translator of seven volumes for the Penguin Classics; these are the complete plays of Aeschylus, the complete plays of Euripides, and a volume of Menander and Theophrastus. He was educated at St Paul's School and Magdalene College, Cambridge, and for twenty-four years he taught classics (and drama for twelve years) at Dulwich College. He has lectured on Greek drama on four tours in the U.S.A., and has spent four terms as Visiting Lecturer in the University of California at Santa Cruz. He is also the author of *Sophocles and Oedipus* (1971) and of *Ironic Drama*: *A Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning* (1975).

AESCHYLUS

THE ORESTEIAN TRILOGY

AGAMEMNON · THE CHOEPHORI
THE EUMENIDES

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TRANSLATED BY
PHILIP VELLACOTT

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TO
RAYMOND RAIKES

This translation of the *Oresteia* was commissioned by the British Broadcasting Corporation, and was first broadcast in the Third Programme on Sunday, 27 May 1956, with the following cast:

Clytemnestra	Margaret Rawlings
Orestes	Peter Wyngarde
Agamemnon	Howard Marion-Crawford
Cassandra	Beth Boyd
Aegisthus	Malcolm Hayes
A Watchman	Cyril Shaps
A Herald	Denis McCarthy
Electra	Nicolette Bernard
A Servant	Cecil Bellamy
A Nurse	Nan Marriott-Watson
The Pythian Priestess	Gladys Young
Apollo	Deryck Guyler
Athene	Joan Hart

The Choruses were spoken by

Leon Quartermaine
with

Agamemnon
- Carleton Hobbs
- Francis de Wolff
- Godfrey Kenton

Choephori
- Dorothy Holmes-Gore
- Mary Law
- Susan Richards

Eumenides
- Denys Blakelock
- Denis Goacher
- John Gabriel
- Howieson Culff
- Kelty MacLeod
- Molly Lumley

The Choruses were sung by

Stephen Manton
Mary Rowland
and
The Ambrosian Singers

The Music was composed by Antony Hopkins. The Boyd Neel Orchestra (led by Joshua Glazier) was conducted by the composer

The plays were produced for radio by Raymond Raikes

INTRODUCTION

A PROPER introduction to these plays, even for the reader who knows no Greek, would occupy a whole volume much larger than this little book. Their subject-matter is so near to the core of human feeling, to the central experiences of life from which all human studies take their origin, that the careful reader of them finds himself turning aside, now to history and pre-history, now to philosophy, theology, and ethics, now to the development of drama as an art; and all the time held by the intensity of the author's poetic conception which springs to life in line after line like an inexhaustible fountain. In the following pages I shall not attempt even to summarize the wealth of learned, imaginative, and critical writing which is available in libraries for the enrichment of our understanding of this work; but merely to give the minimum of information necessary for a first reading. Those who already have some knowledge, even if slight, of the world in which Aeschylus lived will find their desire for further reading best satisfied by selecting from the short list of books given on page 197.

In modern times the Oresteian trilogy has rightly been accorded a place among the greatest achievements of the human mind. Much of the dramatic excitement, much of the philosophic intensity, of this work, perhaps also some hint of its poetic splendour, may reach the modern reader through a translation. But the basis of it all is a story which, like many great stories, grew gradually into shape through several centuries; a story compounded of fact and imagination, reflecting the experience, belief, and aspiration of a vital society, and blending within itself the poetry of common life and the vision of the prophet. It is a long story, and has been told very often. In telling it once more, for the interest of those who read the plays for the first time, I must begin with the remotest myth, and end with documented history.

In the beginning of the world, Ouranos was king of the gods. He was the sky, and Gaia, the earth, was his wife. Of the age during which he reigned very little is known. Certain other deities were already

established in power, notably Fate, or Moira. In time Ouranos and his age declined and disappeared, and Cronos his son reigned in his stead.

During the reign of Cronos the human race was created. The number of deities increased, and their functions became more distinct. Man was kept in a state of wretched weakness and subservience; but our race from its first appearance proved a source of irresistible fascination to the immortals. They tried to impose on man certain principles of behaviour; and man in turn tried various ingenious ways of influencing gods and the powers of nature to favour his enterprises. The age of Cronos was in general characterized as the age of anarchy, the time before the institution of property, the establishment of cities, or the framing of laws. We may fairly infer that it was not gods, but humans, who first began to be dissatisfied with the blessings of anarchy; and one god was on their side, Prometheus, a son of the earth, himself the germ of intelligence in a brute universe, the germ of moral order in the midst of blank confusion. Nature itself was similarly dissatisfied, and stirring towards the principle of order. The time ripened for a new dynasty.

So, some time in the third millennium B.C. (a date may establish some relation between myth and history), there occurred that strange and unquestionable event which was the vision Keats realized in 'Hyperion'. From the sea and the mountains, from forest and stream, young gods and goddesses were born, whose eyes expressed knowledge and imagination, laughter and feeling, order and control. Their chief was Zeus, whose name, which means the sky, claimed direct descent from Ouranos. The old order rallied its forces against the new; but Prometheus belonged by nature to the age of reason and law, and by his help the cosmic battle was won, the age of anarchy defeated, and the Olympian dynasty established.

Prometheus was rewarded for his services with an invitation to dine at the table of the Olympian gods. There, in pity for the sad plight of mankind, he stole a spark of divine fire and conveyed it to the earth. He taught men all the uses of fire, and in particular how to melt metal and shape it into weapons and tools. Zeus, seeing what increase of strength and confidence men would gain from fire, was angry that divine supremacy should be so imperilled, and demanded repentance

and complete submission from Prometheus. When the champion of mankind proved defiant, Zeus sent Hephaestus, the Olympian fire-god, to chain him to a rocky peak in the Caucasus mountains. This event forms the opening scene of Aeschylus' play, *Prometheus Bound*.

Prometheus continued his defiance of tyranny, and reinforced it by declaring that he knew an ancient prophecy, revealed to him by his mother, the earth (the original holder of all foreknowledge), which threatened the ultimate downfall of Zeus unless he should be warned in time. For a thousand years Prometheus endured the successive torments which Zeus inflicted to make him reveal the prophecy; until at last Zeus turned from violence to reason and offered Prometheus release and pardon in return for his secret. This stage in the story brings us to about the middle of the second millennium B.C.

Prometheus then revealed the prophecy. It concerned one of the sea-nymphs named Thetis, whose destiny was 'to bear a son greater than his father'. Zeus had relented only just in time; he was already enamoured of this nymph and contemplating a union. Prometheus was released, and Zeus immediately chose a mortal husband for Thetis, a young man named Peleus who had sailed with Jason in the ship *Argo*. Such delighted interest had been aroused among the Olympian deities by this dénouement, that they consented to attend the wedding-feast in a body.

All the gods were invited, except (naturally) a minor power called Eris, the goddess of strife. Eris, however, came uninvited, and threw on to the table a golden apple inscribed 'For the fairest'. Hera, the wife of Zeus, Athene, the maiden goddess of wisdom and valour, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love, quarrelled for possession of the apple. To settle the matter, Zeus sent them to the most beautiful of mortal youths, Paris, the son of Priam king of Troy. Each goddess offered Paris a bribe: Hera offered supremacy in government, Athene supremacy in war; Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful of women for his wife. Paris gave the apple to Aphrodite.

Troy was a rich and powerful fortified city on the eastern side of the Dardanelles. (This modern name is derived from Dardanus, the founder of the Trojan race, who in Homer are called Dardanidae. The name 'Greeks', like the name 'Trojans', is a Latin word; Greece

was 'Hellas', and its people 'Hellenes'.) The Trojan way of life had many features in common with that of the Greeks. Behaviour on the battlefield observed (or failed to observe) roughly the same conventions. Both nations were highly skilled in the training and use of horses. Both recognized as the unit of government a city in which an absolute and hereditary monarch ruled over citizens and the country people of the surrounding district. Both accepted slavery as an institution. But Greeks affected to regard Trojans as typical Orientals, as effeminate and irrational, as slavish subjects of despotic kings, as cruel, primitive, and unreliable. Greek tragedy, which was all written within a few generations of the final overthrow of monarchy in Athens, naturally expresses this contempt for despotism more strongly than Homer, who wrote when Greek cities were always ruled by kings; though it is probable that Greek kings took more notice of advice from their nobles than was customary further east.

One of the most powerful Greek cities in the second millennium B.C. was Argos, in the Peloponnese. Two brothers, Atreus and Thyestes, descended through Pelops from Tantalus (who, like Prometheus, feasted with gods and was punished for betraying their secrets), had quarrelled about succession to the throne of Argos; moreover, Thyestes had seduced Atreus' wife. Atreus reckoned that the score would be settled once for all if he could trick Thyestes into committing some unclean or sacrilegious act which would render him permanently taboo in the eyes of the Argive citizens. He secretly murdered Thyestes' two young sons, and served their flesh to Thyestes at a banquet. Thyestes went into exile and died there; but he had a third son, an infant called Aegisthus, whom he took with him and brought up in exile.

Atreus himself got away with murder; but such debts are not forgotten. His eldest son, Agamemnon, inherited the throne of Argos, and with it the curse that had settled on the family. His brother Menelaus later became king of Sparta in succession to his father-in-law Tyndareos. In the plays of Euripides we find Menelaus generally presented as an unpleasant character; but in the Oresteia (though he does not appear) he seems to command the love and loyalty of Argive citizens almost equally with Agamemnon.

Menelaus as a young man had been one among a great number of

noble Greeks who had haunted the palace of Tyndareos king of Sparta. Tyndareos' wife Leda had been loved by Zeus, who visited her in the form of a swan. Leda bore Zeus twin daughters, Helen and Clytemnestra. (Both are often called 'daughter of Tyndareos'; but whereas Helen is as often called 'daughter of Zeus', Clytemnestra's divine parentage is seldom referred to.) Helen's extraordinary beauty attracted innumerable suitors and aroused such emotion that they all entered into a mutual pact: each man swore that he would accept Helen's choice as final, and offer his armed service to the husband, should his possession of her ever be threatened. By what principle, instinct or calculation Helen was led to choose Menelaus will remain one of the delightful puzzles of history. He was a good fighter; a man of few words and little wit. Almost the only other thing known about him is that he had auburn hair.

Agamemnon's character is clearer. He was 'every inch a king'; and he would have liked to be a thorough-going tyrant, but in general recognized the necessity for compromise with inferiors. His resentment at having to compromise was shown in a readiness to deceive on occasion; and itself arose from a deep-rooted weakness of will, and lack of confidence in his own authority. It was Agamemnon's inevitable fate to marry Helen's sister, Clytemnestra.

Clytemnestra is the most powerful figure in the *Oresteia*; one of the most powerful, indeed, in all dramatic literature; but this figure is very largely the imaginative creation of Aeschylus. Other writers of his period, whose works are lost to us, may have contributed something; but Homer gives only a meagre statement of the one act for which she was universally known, that she plotted with her lover to murder her husband. He neither examines her motives nor describes her character. When, however, we meet Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia*, we find her as vivid and fully developed a personality as the great heroes of the *Iliad*. She is the only character who appears in all three plays. Clearly Aeschylus intends her part in the drama to be significant. We must defer consideration of this until later, and meanwhile continue the story.

King Priam of Troy sent his youngest son, Paris, as ambassador to Sparta; there he was entertained by Clytemnestra's sister Helen. Menelaus, with what seems to have been his normal stupidity, found

it necessary to sail to Crete on State business and leave Helen and Paris alone. Aphrodite fulfilled her promise. When Menelaus returned, he called upon all those who had been his fellow-suitors to fulfil theirs, and aid him in pursuing Helen to Troy, and burning to the ground that stronghold of Oriental lust and treachery. There was an almost universal response to his appeal, and Agamemnon was made Commander-in-Chief of a vast army and fleet which assembled at Aulis, a bay sheltered by the island of Euboea on the east coast of Greece.

When everything was ready for the start, the wind changed to the north. The usual fair-wind sacrifices failed to have their effect. Days lengthened into months, and still northerly gales kept the fleet harbour-bound, till food-supplies became an acute problem. At length the prophet Calchas pronounced that the anger of the virgin goddess Artemis must be appeased by the sacrifice of Agamemnon's virgin daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon protested, and was taunted by his fellow-kings with faint-heartedness. In the end he wrote to Clytemnestra saying he had arranged for his daughter to be married to Achilles, and commanding her to be sent to Aulis. Iphigenia came, and was duly slaughtered. The wind veered, and the fleet set sail. In the ninth year of the siege Paris was killed in battle. In the tenth Troy was captured by the ruse of the wooden horse; all adult males were killed, the women and children enslaved, and the city reduced to ashes.

The play *Agamemnon* opens in Argos a few hours after the capture of Troy; and its climax is the murder of Agamemnon, on his return, by Clytemnestra. In *The Choephori* Agamemnon's son Orestes, who had grown up in exile, returns to Argos at Apollo's command to avenge his father; he kills both Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, and departs pursued by the Furies. Finally, in *The Eumenides*, Orestes stands his trial before Athene and the Athenian court of Areopagus. The Furies accuse him, Apollo defends him; the mortal votes are evenly divided; and Athene gives her casting vote for his acquittal. The Furies at first threaten Athens with plagues, but are at last persuaded by Athene to accept a home and a position of honour in her city. Such is the bare outline of the three plays, which will be discussed in more detail later; but first it is necessary to give some brief

account of the history and the ideas which form the background of the trilogy.*

In the 800 years between the fall of Troy and the rise of Athens, Greek social and political life underwent many changes. Each city and island for the most part maintained its independence; sometimes one city or group of cities was more powerful, sometimes another. Periods of prosperity and peace, by reducing the necessity for a unified command in the hands of a king, gradually transferred power from the kings to the nobles, then from the nobles to rich merchants who had risen by trade from the ranks of the peasants. By the seventh and sixth centuries merchants of outstanding ability or good luck established themselves in many cities as tyrants; and these tyrants tended to pay tribute to the powerful empire of Persia, which in return would guarantee their position. Finally, about the end of the sixth century a great movement for freedom resulted in the expulsion of most of the Greek tyrants and the establishment of democratic constitutions. The last tyrant of Athens was expelled in 510 B.C. He was with the Persian expedition which in 490 B.C. was utterly defeated by the Athenians at Marathon.

The plays of Aeschylus were all written within some thirty years after the battle of Marathon, while the new Athenian democracy was bursting into full life, and preparing with boundless confidence to take upon itself the leadership of the Greek world. Aeschylus and his contemporaries had spent their youth amidst tyrannies, revolutions, and wars. They were now called upon to govern, to judge, and to legislate. The new moral responsibility of the ordinary citizen was fully accepted and deeply felt. No important burden was delegated either to aristocrats or to officials: the citizens themselves decided in person, by a majority vote, all judicial and political questions. One problem, therefore, occupied their minds insistently: What is justice? What is the relation of justice to vengeance? Can justice be reconciled with the demands of religion, the force of human feeling, the intractability of Fate?

This problem was complicated for the contemporaries of Aeschylus

* For much of the material comprised in the following pages I am indebted to several valuable articles by Professor R. P. Winnington-Ingram, especially two contained in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, volumes LXVIII and LXXIV.

by the fact that religion spoke with a divided voice. There were indeed two religions inextricably mixed: the old religion and the new. The old religion, deriving from the period before the advent of Zeus and the Olympians, was in origin probably a worship of the dead, and therefore was concerned with placating the powers that live under the earth, the 'chthonian gods' (from *chthon*, the earth). The earth itself has, naturally, always been thought of as female, and other female deities were worshipped as well, such as the Fates and the Furies, and Themis, goddess of justice and order, the mother of Prometheus, whom Aeschylus identifies with Earth. The religious rites of the Eleusinian mysteries were also connected with this older religion, for they centred round the worship of Demeter, goddess of crops (the name means 'mother earth'), and her daughter Persephone, who was queen of the lower world. The Eleusinian rites, however, were mainly joyful in character, while the worship of chthonian powers was more generally associated with fear and mourning. The worship of the Olympians, on the other hand, was always an occasion of enjoyment; and dancing, athletic and dramatic performances, and feasting, were its natural modes of expression.

Legend described the rise of the new religion in terms of a 'theomachy', or battle of gods, in which Zeus and the Olympians overcame Cronos and the gods of the earth. History connects it with the invasion of Greece, some time in the fifteenth century B.C., by a warlike race from the north of Europe who called themselves Achaeans, and whose gods were closely related to the Nordic gods who figure in early English legend. These armed and organized invaders easily conquered the indigenous tribes, built themselves walled cities, and established dynasties, laws, and military traditions. The old order was not simply abolished; many of its cults and customs remained, and some of the older deities were still universally honoured. So by a whole series of expedient compromises the two religions flourished side by side, their opposite characters giving scope for a wide variety of personal preference in religious practice. It seems probable, however, that essential differences between the two religions from time to time made themselves strongly felt; and in the middle of the sixth century Pisistratus, 'tyrant' of Athens, did his best to strengthen the Olympian cults by the building of temples, by