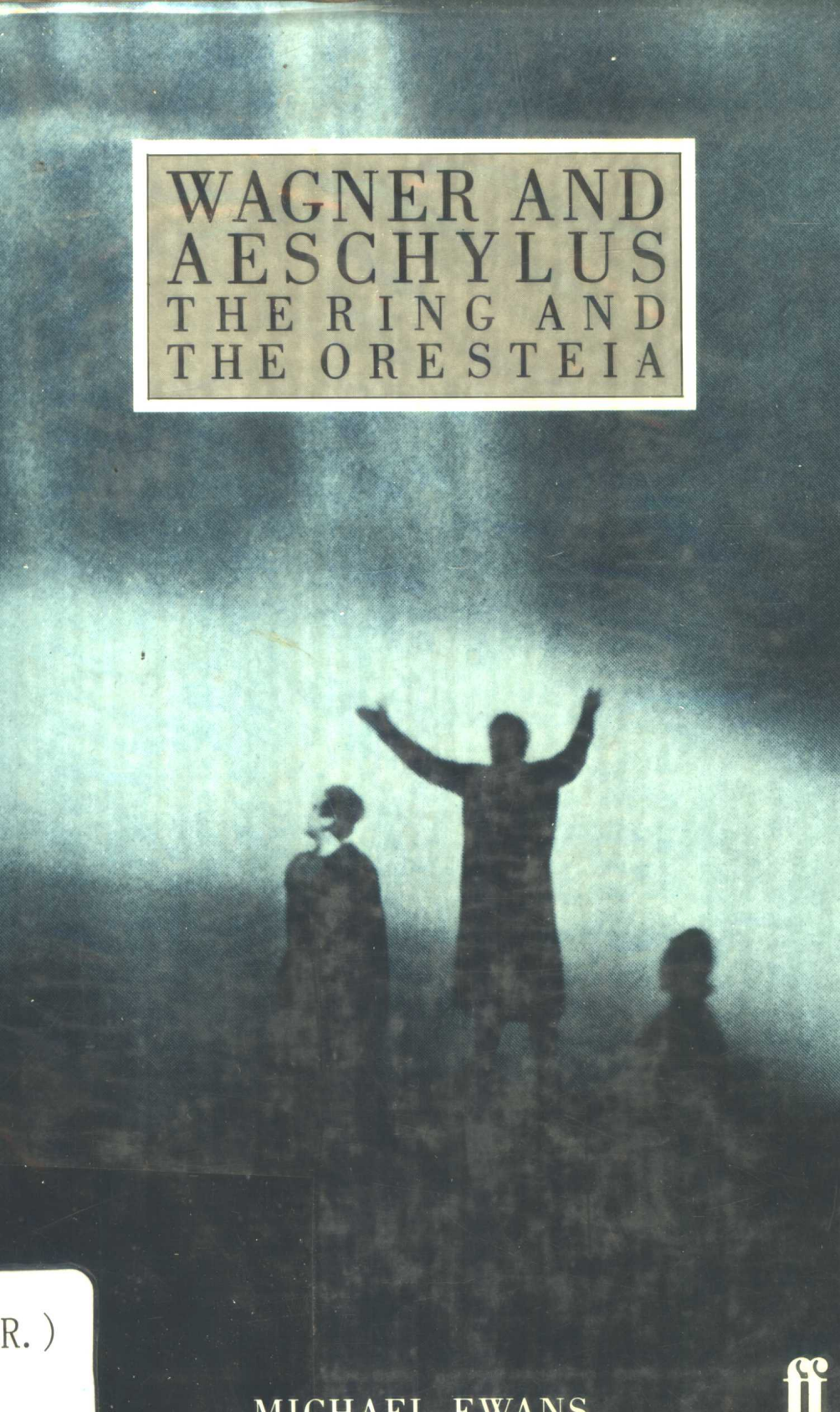
# WAGNER AND AESCHYLUS
## THE RING AND THE ORESTEIA





MICHAEL EWANS

# WAGNER AND AESCHYLUS

Michael Ewans

In 1847, the year in which he was finishing *Lohengrin* and when he began to consider basing his next opera upon the early Norse versions of the story of Siegfried, Wagner read the Oresteian trilogy, the finest surviving work by Aeschylus. The impact on him of Aeschylus' work, at this crucial time in his development, changed Wagner's entire vision of his own role as an artist. As he wrote in his autobiography: 'I could actually see the *Oresteia* with my mind's eye, as though it were actually being performed; and its effect on me was indescribable . . . My ideas about the significance of the drama and of the theatre were, without a doubt, moulded by these impressions . . . .'

*Wagner and Aeschylus* examines the role which the *Oresteia* played in the shaping of the *Ring*, showing how Aeschylus' masterpiece influenced Wagner's at many levels, from the basic idea of using mythical material for a cycle of 'stage festival dramas' right through to profound aspects of subject-matter and form, and Wagner's conception of the role of music in opera. Two introductory chapters look at the overall relationship between Wagner and Aeschylus; there follows an analysis of the four dramas of the *Ring*: the points of affinity, and the differences, between Wagner's cycle and Aeschylus' are discussed in detail, an approach which throws fresh light on the form and meaning of the *Ring*.

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**Michael Ewans** is the author of *Janáček's Tragic Operas* which won the *Yorkshire Post* Music Book Award in 1977. He is head of the Department of Drama at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales.

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# WAGNER AND AESCHYLUS



## The *Ring* and the *Oresteia*

MICHAEL EWANS

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# Contents

# Preface

Nietzsche once declared that 'no ancient work ever had as powerful an influence, as that of the *Oresteia* on Richard Wagner'. Wagner expressed his deep love of Greek tragedy in general, and the dramas of Aeschylus in particular, on many occasions. But Nietzsche later came to recant the enthusiastic admiration which had led him to portray Wagner, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, as the true heir of the Greek tragedians. And for most subsequent classical scholars Wagner's name is almost synonymous with Romantic extravagance. Few have felt that there is any real affinity between Wagner's stage works and those of the earliest and most ascetic of the surviving Greek tragic poets. (The exceptions, however, are distinguished: Wolfgang Schadewaldt and Hugh Lloyd-Jones.) Nor has the subject been adequately explored by Wagner's admirers, despite the enormous quantity of comment which his life and work have evoked.

It has, of course, long been accepted that Wagner's ideal of a festal community theatre for the enactment of dramas based on myth was formed under the example of classical Greek tragedy. Furthermore, Wagner instructed Gottfried Semper to design the auditorium of the projected Wagner theatre for Munich (the plans for which were later used in the construction of the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth) after the pattern of the amphitheatres in ancient Greek and Roman theatres. Greek influence on Wagner is also clearly visible in his major theoretical writings, especially in *Art and Revolution* (1849) and *Opera and Drama* (1850–1). But it can be traced, far more importantly, in his subsequent

stage works. In this book, I shall argue that the example of Aeschylus' great trilogy is present in the procedures of the *Ring* at several major levels, from the overall concept of a cycle of three closely interrelated dramas—designed for consecutive performance and solely for festival occasions—right through to profound aspects of subject-matter and form.

To interpret the *Ring* in relation to the *Oresteia* is not merely to shed fresh light on Wagner's dramaturgy. Wagner's cycle is itself a special 'reading' of Aeschylus. His areas of qualified assent and overt or tacit dissent from Aeschylus suggest a reappraisal not only of Wagner's own artistic aims, dramatic strategy, and vision of life, but of Aeschylus' as well. Indeed, the relationship between Wagner and Aeschylus raises such a wide range of issues that any treatment must inevitably be selective. I am very conscious that my own viewpoint is a subjective one, and that I have been able to discuss only those aspects which I myself feel to be the most important.

I have not hesitated to dwell at times on fairly basic details of the plot and the patterns of action of the two trilogies. Drama is a direct medium, and careful attention to what actually happens in the theatre, as each work unfolds, seems to me to be very important. And so, after the two introductory chapters, this book treats the issues raised by the *Ring* and the *Oresteia* in the order in which they are brought before us in performance.

Aeschylus like Wagner directed the production of his work himself, and he composed the music for the lyric sections of his dramas as well as supervising the design of the costumes and acting the leading parts. From what little we know about the music of the early fifth century, the lyrics of Aeschylean tragedy would seem to have been written in a clear and straightforward style, to be sung in unison to a plain accompaniment from one single woodwind player. There is therefore an immense difference between the *Oresteia* and the *Ring* whose entire action is surrounded by one of the most sumptuous orchestral scores ever to have been written for the theatre. But Wagner insisted in all his theoretical writings (from *Opera and Drama* to his 1878 essay 'On the Application of Music to Drama') that in his theatre works, by contrast with traditional operatic practice, the music

would be devoted exclusively to illuminating the action; and in order to proclaim this ideal clearly he even described the *Ring* in its subtitle as a 'stage festival play', and termed *Tristan und Isolde* a '*Handlung*', literally translating the Greek word *drāma* (action). Although his musical techniques for realizing it developed considerably as the *Ring* scores were composed, Wagner never deviated from this fundamental aim. I have, therefore, felt it proper, given that my subject is the influence on Wagner of a playwright, to confine my commentary on the music of the *Ring* to the manner in which the composer's musical inventions shed light upon the situations enacted on his stage. I have paid particular attention to the development and transformation of certain recurrent themes and motifs, since this is one of the principal musical means which Wagner uses to articulate the dramatic structure of the cycle.

I have tried to write in such a way that any intelligent reader can follow my argument. Specialists will, therefore, encounter explanations of some matters with which they are already familiar. I have also been obliged on occasion to be dogmatic about important details which are still hotly debated in academic circles. I trust that musicologists, classical scholars, and Germanists will tolerate both these features of the book. No other approach would have allowed me to treat adequately, and intelligibly, the issues which are central to this study.

This book could not have been finished without the study leave which was granted to me in 1979 by the Council of the University of Newcastle; my first thanks must go to them for this period of sustained work, during which I was able to complete the research and analysis for the book and write much of the first draft. I also owe thanks to the Department of Drama at the University of Bristol, both for the grant of a Visiting Lectureship and for their congenial hospitality. But I am of course most indebted of all to those who have read and criticized the drafts, and who gave me encouragement and expert advice: in particular to Dr Richard Buxton, to my wife, Dr Jenifer Ewans, and to my editor at Faber and Faber, Patrick Carnegy.

*Newcastle, N.S.W.*
*August 1981*

# Note on References

I have used Denys Page's Oxford Classical Text of Aeschylus (1972). All references to Aeschylus are given by the standard line-numbering, which is used by Page and by most translators. The translations in this book, both from the *Oresteia* and from the *Ring*, are my own.

The best complete translation of the *Oresteia* is that by Richmond Lattimore (*Aeschylus I*, Chicago U.P. 1953), which conveys the feel of the Greek better than any other modern version, and is also remarkably accurate. Its only drawback is that at several points it translates a text which is no longer tenable. Another good version is Robert Fagles's (Penguin, 1977), which is often more imaginative, but also unnecessarily free. Unhelpfully, it does not employ the standard line-numbering. Hugh Lloyd-Jones's annotated translations, with the three plays in separate volumes (Duckworth, 1979), are more prosaic but also far more accurate.

The musical text of Wagner is that of the study scores published by Edition Eulenberg. Since most vocal scores of the *Ring* lack rehearsal figures, and my argument frequently refers to the texture of the orchestration, I have made reference to Wagner's dramas either by act and scene number or, where a more precise indication is necessary, by the page numbering of the Eulenberg study scores.

There are two good modern English versions of the *Ring*: William Mann's translation, published by the Friends of Covent Garden (in the 1973 reprint), and Andrew Porter's singing version (Faber and Faber, 1977).

References to Wagner's prose writings are cited for convenience by the volume and page number of the standard English translation by W. Ashton Ellis (abbreviated as AE). I have, however, provided new English translations for this book, as Ellis's English style is now considerably dated. Wagner's letters are cited by the date of writing, preceded by the initial of the addressee's surname: R (Röckel), L (Liszt), U (Uhlig) and N (Nietzsche). Cosima Wagner's *Diaries* are cited by the letter D followed by the date of the entry. References to all other books are made by the page numbers of the edition or translation which is cited in the bibliography.

# 1
# Wagner and Aeschylus

Wagner never mastered classical Greek. He tells us in his autobiography that his love for Greek culture began at the age of six, when newspaper accounts of the Greek war of independence were read aloud to him; and he began to study ancient Greek at the Dresden Kreuzschule, which he attended from nine to fourteen. In his open letter to Nietzsche (N 12/6/72) Wagner claimed that at that time: 'no boy could have had greater enthusiasm for classical antiquity than myself; although it was Greek mythology and history which interested me deeply, I also felt strongly drawn to the study of the Greek language, to such an extent, in fact, that I was almost rebellious in my efforts to shirk my Latin tasks'. In *Mein Leben*, however, he more candidly admits that Greek mythology was the real attraction: 'in the matter of the classics, I paid only just as much attention as was absolutely necessary to enable me to get a grasp of them: for I was stimulated by the desire to reproduce them to myself dramatically . . . In these circumstances it will be readily understood that the grammar of these languages seemed to me merely a tiresome obstacle . . .' (p. 15). In spite of this, by 1826 Wagner had advanced sufficiently far in his study of Greek to make a German translation of the first three books of the *Odyssey*; and his master Julius Sillig had sufficient regard for Wagner's aptitude to urge him towards adopting philology as his profession.

The family, however, moved back to Leipzig in 1827, and Wagner fell behind in his classical studies. He claimed on several occasions in later life that this was due to the pedantic approach

of the masters at the Leipzig schools; yet it is plain that Wagner's passionate interest in Romantic drama, and his increasing devotion to music, overcame his interest in the Greek world. When he was seventeen, Wagner attempted to resume his classical studies, and to gain a firm grasp of the Greek language, by engaging a private tutor; but this came to nothing. Later—in Paris, between 1839 and 1842—he met the classical scholar Samuel Lehrs and attempted to renew his studies; but he was wisely advised to proceed no further. Lehrs told him that he would need so much time to gain a thorough grounding in the Greek language that it would stand in the way of his work as a composer. Wagner acted on this advice: the classical reading of his later years was done almost entirely in translation, though on one occasion Cosima's diary records that he read Sophocles in Greek with the German version open beside it, comparing the translation with the original (D 18/11/74).

Wagner thrived on his lack of formal knowledge. His mind was not a scholar's, and he drew so much creative gain from his own personal vision of the Greek world precisely because he never submitted to the extremes of formal discipline which were demanded in the higher stages of a classical education in nineteenth-century Germany.

Greek literature first became important to Wagner during the years when he was *Hofkapellmeister* in Dresden (1843–9). He purchased translations of almost all the major authors: Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Euripides, Herodotus, Homer, Pindar, Plato, Plutarch, Sophocles, Thucydides and Xenophon. He lost all these books to a creditor when he fled from Dresden to avoid arrest for his part in the insurrection of 1849; but he built up an even larger collection in later life.

After 1845, the example of Greek culture was almost constantly before Wagner's eyes. It forms the point of departure for his own aesthetic ideals from the opening pages of *Art and Revolution* (1849) to his last major essay, *Religion and Art* (1880). Cosima's diaries record many occasions on which Wagner read or discussed Greek literature, both during the Tribschen years (when Nietzsche, who had not yet given up his chair of classical philology, was a frequent guest) and at Wahnfried.

Wagner did not exaggerate when he claimed in the open letter to Nietzsche that: 'Again and again, amid the most absorbing tasks of a life entirely removed from these [classical] studies, the only way by which I seemed to be able to gain a breath of freedom was by plunging into this ancient world, however much I was now handicapped by having well-nigh forgotten the language.'

He 'plunged' in particular into the dramas of Aeschylus, returning to them many times. In 1880 Wagner read the three plays of the *Oresteia* aloud, and Cosima wrote: 'I feel as if I have never before seen him like this, transfigured, inspired, completely at one with what he is reading.' (D 23/6/80) And Wagner said of Aeschylus on the last day of his life that: 'my admiration for him never ceases to grow'.

That admiration had begun over thirty years earlier, in 1847, at the time when Wagner was finishing the orchestration of *Lohengrin*. He records in *Mein Leben* that he then 'for the first time . . . mastered Aeschylus with real feeling and understanding', and goes on to say that the impact on him of the Orestes trilogy was so great that:

> I could see the *Oresteia* with my mind's eye, as though it were actually being performed; and its effect on me was indescribable. Nothing could equal the sublime emotion with which the *Agamemnon* inspired me, and to the last word of the *Eumenides* I remained in an atmosphere so far removed from the present day that I have never since been really able to reconcile myself with modern literature. My ideas about the whole significance of the drama and of the theatre were, without a doubt, moulded by these impressions . . . (p. 415)

The *Oresteia* released Wagner from the artistic impasse which he had reached with the completion of *Lohengrin*; and, as he implies in this passage, Aeschylus' trilogy decisively influenced the form and content of all Wagner's subsequent dramas—and in particular those of the *Ring*.

Aeschylus was born into a noble Athenian family between 525 and 510 BC. He grew up during the last years of Athens' rule by tyrants, came to maturity during the first years of democracy,