

SIX GREEK TRAGEDIES

AESCHYLUS

Persians

Prometheus Bound

SOPHOCLES

Women of Trachis

Philoctetes

EURIPIDES

Trojan Women

Bacchae



Introduced by
Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton

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translated by Frederic Raphael and Kenneth McLeish

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INTRODUCTION

Tragedy in Athens

In a period which lasted no more than sixty-six years, between the first surviving Greek tragedy and the deaths of Sophocles and Euripides, three Athenian playwrights produced a series of tragedies which lasted on page and stage for the next two thousand four hundred years. To be accurate that sixty-six years was both more and less than that. Aeschylus' *Persians*, the first play in the present collection, was produced in 472 BC. Aeschylus had been writing, directing, choreographing and acting in his plays for nearly thirty years already but none of his early output has survived. Euripides' *Bacchae*, the last play in this volume, was first performed posthumously in 405, the year after Euripides' death; and Sophocles' final play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, was not played until 401 when the playwright had been dead for over five years. By a nice, if contrived, coincidence it was sixty-six years between the opening of the first purpose-built playhouse in London by James Burbage, The Theatre, in April 1576, and the closing of all the London theatres by Parliament in 1642. There can be little arguing with this sixty-six years having been the most fertile and innovative in the history of the English-speaking theatre.

Just as what has come to be known as the Jacobethan drama covered a growing and developing range of types and formats, from Marlowe to Shakespeare to Jonson to the Court Masque to City Comedy, so the theatre of the Greeks was fluid and wide-ranging. The labels, Tragedy, Satyr play and Old Comedy covered all the plays that are known, from the first ever performed in the sixth century BC, before Aeschylus was born, through to the deaths within months of one another of Euripides and Sophocles. Aristophanes, the only writer of Old Comedy whose work has survived, was so affected by Euripides' death that he wrote a play called *Frogs* in which Dionysus, god of the theatre – indeed the same Dionysus who also features as a character in *Bacchae* – travels down to the underworld to bring back a playwright to help save the city of Athens.

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The writers of tragedy presented plays in groups of four. The first three were serious but the fourth was a comic coda called a satyr play. Featuring a chorus of satyrs, animalistic supporters of Dionysus with horses' tails and sporting a phallus, a satyr play dealt with a mythological story but in farcical terms, usually a kind of 'send-up' of some theme or situation handled seriously in the first three pieces. The need to conclude a group of tragic plays with a comic afterpiece is an important indication of what the scope and purpose of Greek theatre really was. Most Greek tragedy was on mythological themes. The exception is *Persians* (see below). In part this is the result of Greek tragedy developing as a performing art from the oral tradition of story-telling. The epic poems of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, do not provide the immediate subject-matter of any surviving Greek tragedy except Euripides' *Rhesus*. The action of *Trojan Women* occurs between the two. These epics do provide a mythic framework in which the Trojan War and its aftermath are part of the background. Aeschylus is recorded in a later writer, Athenaeus, as claiming that all he wrote was 'slices from Homer's banquet'. Add to these surviving poems a number of lost sagas, which included the stories of such as Prometheus, Heracles, Philoctetes and Pentheus, and you have the world of myth, much of it handed down by word of mouth. Myth was malleable. There were no authorised versions, only outlines of character and situation whose details and variations formed the base material of drama.

So all of the surviving tragedies – *Persians* excepted – and a few others on historical themes known only by title, were from a past that had no historical authority to back it. Drama was invented before history. The Greeks had little sense of a fixed past. What they did have was a strong sense of stories from the past serving as parables for what could and should happen in the present. The theatre rapidly became a place for informed debate on issues of the present through the medium of the past. These issues might be moral, political, social or philosophical. They could be broad-based or direct. But they involved the spectators in a serious – Aristotle's later word was *spoudaios* – consideration of issues that were

immediate. It is this that links not only the six plays here but all Greek tragedy.

Generalisations about Greek drama are frequently misleading. Most pervasive are that going to the theatre for the Athenians was like going to church; that the audience knew exactly what was going to happen; and that Greek tragedy was created out of some kind of formula invented by Aristotle (who was not born until twenty years after Sophocles and Euripides died). It is risky to make any sort of pronouncement about the frame of mind of any audience in any period but Athens was a *polis*, a city-state. Affairs of state were, by definition, 'political'. Theatre in Athens developed at the same time as a new democratic system of government that in itself was the cause of the Persian invasions of 490 and 480. That was when the Persians set up expeditions to try and restore the last king of Athens, who had been expelled in 510 BC. *Persians* includes an eyewitness account of the battle of Salamis of 480 where the Greek fleet won a decisive victory. Clearly that is a play of immediate political impact.

But so is *Prometheus Bound*, a story set in the deepest past, about a Titan who gave fire to mortals and defied Zeus. For this he was pinned to a rock in the Caucasus by Hephaestus, Might and Force, visited by a chorus of winged women, and by Io, transformed into a bull and tormented by a gadfly. How political was that in Athens? How political was it in Ireland when Tom Paulin used the same myth in his *Seize the Fire: A Version of Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound* (1989) as a story about power and about victims? 'Prometheus,' wrote Karl Marx, 'is the foremost saint and martyr in the philosopher's calendar.' An Athenian audience may not have known much about saints but they knew their martyrs well enough.

Seamus Heaney chose Sophocles as his starting point in his examination of the Irish question, *The Cure at Troy: after Philoctetes by Sophocles* (1990). Sophocles' original play deals with questions of honour and deceit, patriotism and expedience, selfishness and selflessness. Political issues? Certainly. Such issues affected the *polis* every day in its dealings with its own citizens, its allies and its enemies. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides all wrote a *Philoctetes*. Only the Sophocles

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survives but what we still do have is an intriguing essay from 400 years later by a rhetorician, Dio Chrysostom, comparing the three versions. For the Greeks there were major issues embodied here.

Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* is a play about love and about power. Deianira, in an attempt to rekindle her husband's love for her, succeeds only in destroying him. Her love for him destroys him but his love for Iole was the initial cause. 'Your husband may be the best man-at-arms in the world,' says Lichas, 'but he met his match when he fell for this girl' (ll. 488-9). The Heracles of this play is not the strongest man in the world. He *was* the strongest man in the world but, thanks to his wife's love, is dying slowly and painfully by the time he makes his belated entrance. Sophocles is still the primary playwright of heroism, but he tackles heroism in all its phases and inevitably at points of crisis, the hero trying to endure the unendurable.

The Euripides plays included here, *Trojan Women* and *Bacchae*, are two of his finest, but in markedly contrasting styles. *Trojan Women*, produced in 415, was inspired by an actual atrocity committed against the island of Melos by the Athenians the previous year. The Peloponnesian War against Sparta lasted from 431 BC until 404 and was the background to the majority of surviving tragedies and comedies. *Trojan Women* has something in common with *Persians* in that it chooses to concentrate not on the winners in war, but on the losers. Whereas Aeschylus, who probably fought at the battle of Salamis which the Persian messenger so graphically describes, demonstrates the scope of the Athenian triumph through the degradation of the losers, Euripides offers as scathing a denunciation of war and, by implication, of his fellow countrymen as in any play written since. No member of that first audience could have been in any doubt about why the play was written when it was: or where the playwright's political sympathies lay.

Many people find *Bacchae* the most perplexing of all Greek tragedies. Dionysus, god of the theatre, is one of its leading characters but the other is his cousin, Pentheus, King of Thebes. The play deals in an almost Pirandellian way with the balance between real and unreal, between truth and

illusion. And yet, ultimately, it is a play about a family destroyed by one of its members who feels excluded. Domestic politics mingle with questions of the exercise of authority but, as in most Greek tragedies – and here is a generalisation that has some truth to it – there are few winners.

Politics in Athens encompassed everything that it took to be a citizen. All these plays, and the others too, tragedies and comedies, looked at the vicissitudes of life, and subjected them to rigorous and often uneasy scrutiny. The theatre in Athens was exciting, entertaining, emotional and dangerous. Comfortable it was not.

Play and festival

There were local festivals in Athens at which plays were performed, known as Rural Dionysia, but the two civic occasions were the Lenaea in mid-winter, and the Great Dionysia in the spring. Only Athenians and resident aliens could attend the Lenaea at which parochial comedy dominated the occasion. The Great Dionysia was held at the beginning of the sailing season and was open to foreign guests. Other events, processions, award ceremonies, sacrifices, occupied the early part of the proceedings, to be followed by a number of days devoted to the presentation of three sets of tragedies (including their satyr play) and old comedies of the sort that Aristophanes wrote. Groups of tragedies were offered to a state official by the playwrights the previous autumn and were selected on a competitive basis. Three sets were 'granted a chorus' which meant that the state would pay for three actors, a musician and some of the general costs, including the leasing arrangements for an *architekton* to manage the theatre space and its surrounds. They would appoint a *choregos* to cover the rest, including the training and maintenance of the chorus, costume and the provision of masks. The *choregos* was a wealthy private citizen who had been identified as someone to finance one of a number of civic duties in any year.

Aeschylus originally acted and chose his fellow actors but, as the fifth century progressed, acting became professional.

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In the fourth and third centuries BC, a guild system was to develop, each guild acting as a go-between for professional troupes who would tour throughout the Greek-speaking world with a repertoire of revivals of the classics and some new work. In the fifth century prizes were eventually awarded for writers and actors in tragedy and in comedy. A ten-man jury was appointed, one selected by lot from each of the ten Attic tribes. All the jury cast their votes but only a random five were selected so that no one could be held responsible and, to some extent, decisions were left with the gods. Already, then, in the ancient world we have theatre managers, angels, casting directors and agents. There must have been a stage manager and dressers too. A front-of-house manager probably saw to it that important people, including the priests of Dionysus, sat in the best seats. Tickets were sold at a cost of two obols (a day's wage for a juryman and subsidised for those on low incomes), so somebody must have checked them. And somebody probably controlled the lucrative refreshment franchise too.

Performance

The place of performance was not always the theatre in the precinct of Dionysus that was used in the latter part of the fifth century. There is a story that Aeschylus first put on his plays in a makeshift theatre in the agora, the commercial and political heart of the old city. A collapse of seating with loss of life resulted in a move to the south-eastern slope of the Acropolis. When the victorious Athenians returned to their sacked city after Salamis, a restoration programme began. Soon after the death of Aeschylus in Sicily in 456 BC, Pericles, the leader of the democratic party, inaugurated a building programme which included major modifications to the Precinct of Dionysus as well as the building of a number of temples above it, including the Parthenon. It was this theatre space for which the surviving plays of Sophocles and Euripides were all written, and where revivals of Aeschylus' plays – permitted by special decree – were performed after his death.

The theatre consisted of three linked parts, all, of course, in the open air. The *theatron* was for the spectators, cut into the hillside and arranged around two thirds of the *orchestra*, or 'dancing-place'; the third side was confined by the stage-building or *skene*. There are several different ideas current about the shape of the performance space; who used which bits and when; and the extent to which there might have been scenery and scenic effects. The problems are difficult to solve because this was basically a temporary stage. It was made of wood and wood does not survive, particularly when later stone theatres are built over the top of it. References within the surviving texts and later vase-paintings seem to create more difficulties than they solve but some things are reasonably sure.

The audience was large, not, perhaps, the thirty thousand that Plato talks of, but possibly as many as seventeen thousand. That takes up a significant proportion of the three hundred thousand who lived in and around Attica, but the real potential audience was probably nearer fifty thousand, allowing for the slave population and those for whom the trek in to the city was impractical. This is still significantly higher than the thirteen per cent of London's population that attended the theatre in 1605.

The *skene* needed to have at least one main entrance, possibly two or three, with two additional entrances available up the side passages (*parodoi*) which divided the ends of the *theatron* from the playing space. The chorus would usually have entered by these *parodoi* and remained in the *orchestra*. In front of the *skene* was a wide but shallow 'stage' area, perhaps raised, if only by a few feet, with steps up from the floor. Actors could play wherever the action could be most effectively presented which would have included the *orchestra* on occasions. If the plays and vases prove anything, it is that there was a sense of physical relationships and stage action which was promoted and fortified by furnishings, properties, an awareness of stage space and a sense of stage picture. There is evidence in the plays of Aristophanes of a wheeled truck (*ekklema*), and a stage crane (*mechane*) which could be used, for instance, for the arrival of gods. There may have been means of indicating location, at least

emblematically, by painted panel and even *periaktoi*, used in later times to swivel different settings on a prism-shaped device. Almost none of this is any help in deciding the original staging of *Prometheus Bound* which would probably have benefited from elaborate choreography and a lot of imagination. The six plays in this volume seem to ask for two earthquakes, a cave on a desert island, a tent, and a flying entrance, amongst other things.

Actors were male and masked. This is much less of a hindrance to subtle performance than is usually assumed as long as the actors were properly trained and working within a masked tradition. Greek actors were, and to think of the mask simply as a disguise is to misunderstand the whole nature of physical performance. There was clearly some doubling but the 'rule' of three actors may well have been breached on occasion. The word *choros* means dance, the *orchestra* was a dancing-place, but the chorus also punctuated passages of dialogue and interspersed choral odes in lyric metres between scenes. In some plays they could be closely involved with the action, as in *Persians* and *Bacchae*. In other plays they seem more remote. The performance overall made considerable use of musical accompaniment from a player of the *aulos*, a kind of oboe, but close detail of these vital performance elements is sadly lost.

Persians

The first performance of *Persians* took place at the Great Dionysia in 472 BC, only eight years after the second Persian expedition trying to reinstate Hippias, the former king of Athens. The first expedition, under King Darius, had been driven off after the celebrated Athenian victory at Marathon. This time Darius' son, Xerxes, had chosen to come overland through northern Greece. Greek resistance at Thermopylae was overcome by treachery and the Persians overran Athens. The whole population had to decamp to the island of Salamis. Threatened with extinction, the Athenians gambled everything on one last stratagem. The Persians were tricked into fighting in the narrow channel between the island and

the mainland. Their larger ships proved less manoeuvrable than the Athenians' and the result was the disaster for the Persians related in graphic detail by the Messenger (ll. 249–514). Disaster for the Persians, maybe, but for the Athenians Salamis was a triumph. Aeschylus fought in the battle which was, in later times, such an important point in Athenian history that it was used as a date to link the three tragedians. Sophocles, it was said, sang in the victory ode, while Euripides – somewhat fortuitously if it is true – was born on Salamis on the very day that the two fleets met.

As the only surviving 'history' play, and the earliest surviving tragedy at that, *Persians* might seem to point to the earliest tragedy as having much more to do with historical events. There certainly were precedents in the work of Phrynichus, for example, but *Persians* was part of a group of four plays, the other three of which were all on mythological themes, *Phineus*, *Persians* (second), *Glaucus of Potniae* and a satyr play *Prometheus the Fire-Maker*. Frustrating as it may be, virtually nothing is known about the other three, so not even a conjecture can be made as to how this contemporary story fitted with the mythic others in the group.

Standing alone, *Persians* is still an intriguing and dramatic piece. It is set back in the Persian capital, Susa, close to the tomb of former King Darius, as news begins to filter through of the defeat of the expeditionary force. The chorus of Persian elders who open the play are initially full of patriotic rhetoric though they do utter a note of warning. They remain throughout the play, witnesses to and commentators on the destruction of a nation. Darius had died between the first and second invasions of Greece and the first leading character to enter is Atossa, the late king's wife, mother of Xerxes, the commander at Salamis. She has had a worrying dream, an omen and one of the ways in Homer by which the gods could make contact with human beings. The arrival of a messenger confirms her worst fears as, in a remarkable speech, he offers an eyewitness account of the naval battle which saved Athens. The only consolation is that Xerxes still lives. The dramatic effect is created from the context, the first confirmation of disaster for the play's characters, a rehearsal of a glorious moment in history for the entire audience. The

Athenian audience basked in their democracy, contrasted with tyranny: Atossa asks the Chorus, 'Who shepherds them? Their warlord – who?' and the Chorus Leader replies, 'Call them no mortal's slaves. They bow to none' (ll. 241–2).

The Queen, the text implies, is finely dressed and attended on her first entrance. She leaves, to return alone and in mourning and requesting that the Chorus conjure up the ghost of her dead husband. He duly arrives as the play becomes a series of complex images contrasting success and failure, grandeur and degradation, life and death. Darius' urgent questioning reveals a Xerxes who has brought the catastrophe upon himself by his arrogant and insane behaviour. 'God stole his mind,' says the Ghost before advising the Chorus to ensure that Persia never again tries to attack Greece. He instructs the Chorus to fetch clothes for Xerxes' return: 'Defeat has tattered him,/ Beggared him, ripped finery to rags' (ll. 836–7).

One last choral ode recalling the triumphs of the past gives way to the bedraggled figure of the defeated king, who ends the play with a litany of grief shared by the Chorus. Though there might seem to be little action here, the graphic illustration of the disaster has real power. The most striking effect that Aeschylus contrives, though, is in the likely reaction of the spectators. The Athenians did not initiate or provoke either Persian expedition. They had to watch their city set on fire. Marathon and Salamis were military triumphs but there will have been people sitting in that first audience who had lost brothers, sons, fathers – as had Aeschylus, whose brother was mortally wounded at Marathon. There must have been many more who fought in that battle and in the earlier engagement.

The Persian reaction to the loss of an empire will have aroused more relief than grief in an Athenian audience. So what lies beyond it? Perhaps there is a warning here, a warning about the arrogance of power, that key word *hubris*, the state of mind whereby the gods contrive the downfall of those who acquire too great a sense of their own importance. Xerxes is clearly held responsible for the downfall of the state. That the Persians should have behaved like this was no novelty to an Athenian audience. That they, the Athenians,

should learn about their own future conduct from the situation of their defeated enemies is a far more sophisticated message which Aeschylus seems to advocate and which, as Sophocles and Euripides were to bear witness, over the course of the rest of the century, their fellow countrymen consistently failed to heed.

Prometheus Bound

Of all the tragedies included here, perhaps of all tragedies, *Prometheus Bound* most has the aura of deepest myth. The other plays of Aeschylus are set in or around cities and deal with recognisable human beings, albeit in some strange guises. So unlike the rest of Aeschylus, both linguistically and thematically, is *Prometheus Bound* that a number of scholars believe it not to be by Aeschylus at all but by some other unknown playwright. Strongly as such revisionists argue their case, the arguments for Aeschylean authorship are cogent too. We know he wrote a tetralogy of plays about Prometheus; the ancient world believed that this was part of it; whoever did write this *Prometheus Bound* was a master dramatist; and there is no reason why, with such a small sample of Aeschylus for comparison, he should not have produced a play such as this which is quite unlike any of the six others which have survived. Nevertheless the metrics, vocabulary and other evidence suggest to some critics a later writer, possibly Aeschylus' son Euphorion.

Set high in the Caucasus, the play opens on a bare mountainside. Four characters enter, an Olympian god, Hephaestus, two personifications, Might and Force (*Kratos* and *Bia*), and Prometheus, a Titan, himself a god, perhaps the nephew of Zeus but implacably opposed to that god's harsh rule. The stubborn Prometheus is chained to a rock and left there to suffer, an immortal but part of some almost primeval struggle for supremacy in a world that is still striving to escape from chaos. Deserted though this mountain-top may be, the immobilised Prometheus receives a series of visitors, beginning with a chorus of the daughters of Ocean who will himself later arrive in person. If their lines are to be taken at

face value, they fly in on a winged chariot. Perhaps, were we able today to conjure up that original production, a whole series of issues would be resolved about how early drama was staged. In *Prometheus Bound* we may have one of the earliest of all surviving plays. The fact that it appears to demand the staging resources needed for Wagnerian opera may well be an indication that what it actually received was not realistic production but the imaginative staging of an Adolphe Appia, the revolutionary Swiss designer who believed that Wagner should be presented in settings that hinted at the majestic and the primitive without trying to imitate them.

To a Greek audience, what could be presented through the medium of dance might have been quite sufficient to conjure up flight and it is probably most convenient to treat the whole play at its figurative and imagistic level. Prometheus is bound tight, his visitors are free, yet each faces restrictions of one kind or another. What Prometheus did, as an immortal, was to offer mortals knowledge: 'I planted seeds of thought/Intelligence' (ll. 442-3). Prometheus gave mankind fire but fire as husbandry, writing, numeracy, skills and crafts, medicine, prophecy, metallurgy. Nor has he any reservations over what he has done, whatever the ultimate result. The Chorus are terrified that the opposition of Zeus and Prometheus is a threat to all stability. Their father, Ocean, arrives riding a winged horse, and advises Prometheus to compromise. Prometheus refuses and warns of the dangers of becoming associated with his notoriety. When Ocean has left Prometheus reveals his bargaining power, knowledge which he refuses to divulge but which could topple Zeus.

His next visitor is another victim of Zeus, or rather, of Zeus and his wife Hera. Io was seduced by Zeus and turned into a cow by Hera. She now roams the earth, pursued by a tormenting gadfly. He is fettered to his rock, she unable to stay in one place for more than a moment. She looks to Prometheus for relief but he can only forecast further pain. She threatens suicide: the immortal Prometheus seems to envy her for having such a choice. But he does reveal some of his secret. Zeus is destined to have 'a son mightier than his father' but only he knows who the mother might be. For Io he can offer no consolation but he does forecast the tale of

Danaus and his fifty daughters, forty-nine of whom murdered the husbands of their forced marriage, and whose story is told in one of Aeschylus' other surviving plays, *Suppliants*.

Io is replaced by the god Hermes but he is no more able to break Prometheus' resolve than had any of the others been. He warns the Chorus that they should leave, as an earthquake seems to consume Prometheus.

This may be a rare world of gods and primeval passions but for the discerning spectator there are messages too, messages about the dangers of offering democratic power to all and sundry; messages about individuality and individual action; messages about the nature of freedom itself. 'All tyrants are galled by the same disease:/ They dare not trust their friends' (ll. 222-3) has lost none of its validity over the centuries. Prometheus is a recognisable fanatic, stubborn and determined, glorying almost in the extremes of his deprivation as a means to exact the greatest recompense in due course. But it is he who has given mankind fire. In doing that he opts for progress but is a living demonstration of the price that progress may exact. Aeschylus, if Aeschylus was the author, was to move on to write the *Oresteia*, the only complete and connected trilogy to have been preserved. That views the progress of democracy in Athens at its most crucial turning-point, all in the story of the return home of the commander of the Greek army at Troy. The *Prometheia* in its entirety, which included the release of Prometheus, may well have held as compelling messages. Unearthly as the whole setting may be, there are ways in which Prometheus as archetype presents the human condition more closely and more uncomfortably than does many a more realistic play, even in the Greek canon.

Women of Trachis

Sophocles is often seen as a sort of stylistic halfway-house between the monumental world of Aeschylus and the new realism of Euripides. In fact his playwriting career covered such a length of time that he probably influenced both of

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them as well as being influenced by them. He competed with Aeschylus in 468 at the Great Dionysia, and beat him, though the plays have not come down to us. He and Aeschylus could have been competitors for the next ten years. The seven plays of Sophocles we have were all written during Euripides' working life even though *Oedipus at Colonus* was not performed until after the death of both dramatists. Were there any decent way of dating the work of each with any certainty, it would be fascinating to try and trace the cross-influences and, perhaps, the cross-references. The fact is, however, that each of Sophocles' plays has a wonderful singularity which removes it almost entirely from any temporal boundaries.

Women of Trachis is the least known and least often performed of all of Sophocles. No one knows when it was first produced but it makes no difference to our appreciation. It is a Heracles play, dealing not with any of his famous and infamous exploits, but with his death, brought about unwittingly by his wife Deianira. It is she who opens the play and who will, before Heracles even appears, have killed herself on discovering what she has done. When he does enter, in great pain and already dying, the play is three-quarters over. It is almost as though he were a secondary character. The title, *Women of Trachis*, referring to a Chorus who have fewer than 250 lines and do not directly affect the action, seems to be a kind of statement of neutrality.

It is, for all this, an extraordinarily poignant piece with several powerful scenes and an advanced sense of dramatic structure, more like that of Euripides than any other Sophocles play. It opens with a prologue, as do many of Euripides' plays including *Medea*, *Electra*, *Bacchae* and *Helen*. The prologue is quite like that in *Helen*, with Deianira lamenting her beauty and the trouble it has caused her. She married Heracles only after he had won her in a battle with a river god: but now she never knows where he is from one year's end to the next. Though the tone is less comic than in Euripides' *Helen* there is something very domestic lurking in the midst of all the savage surroundings. The juxtaposition is maintained in the central part of the plot. Many years ago a centaur, half-man, half-horse, had molested Deianira while