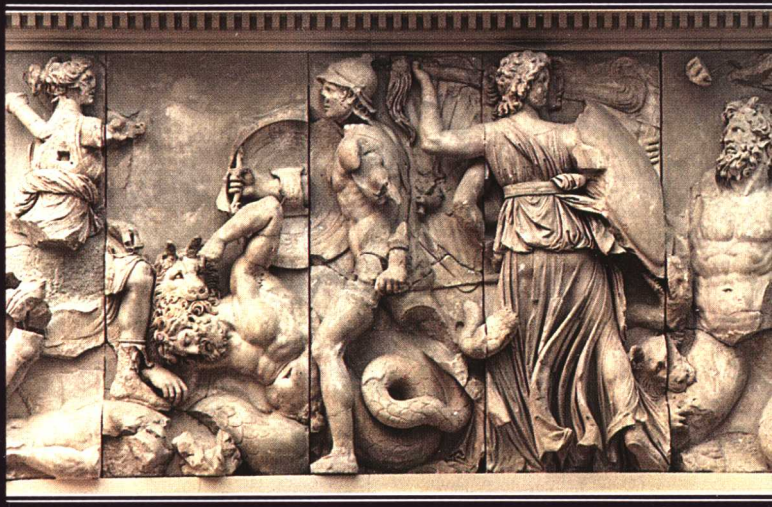
Greek Drama

Aeschylus • Sophocles • Euripides • Aristophanes



Edited and with an Introduction
by Moses Hadas

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AESCHYLUS

A complete fifth-century Athenian, he was an aristocrat by birth, a democrat by commitment. He fought at Marathon, Athens's proudest victory. And he was the creator of her proudest artistic achievement, tragedy. By using more than one actor he changed the form of plays from recited poetry to true dramatic dialogue, thereby making possible the sweeping grandeur of his great trilogy, THE ORESTEIA.

SOPHOCLES

The most popular tragedian of the Golden Age, he expanded the scope of classic drama by his technical innovations and lyric intensity, leaving the world such masterpieces as ANTIGONE and OEDIPUS THE KING, the play Aristotle called the perfect model of Greek tragedy.

EURIPIDES

A prolific author, Euripides wrote some one hundred plays. In contrast to his contemporaries, he brought an exciting—and, to the Greeks, a stunning—realism to the "pure and noble" form of tragedy. Although he was greatly criticized for failing to idealize his heroes and heroines, his influence altered drama forever, and he is regarded today as the originator of modern dramatic sensibility.

ARISTOPHANES

The most famous comic playwright of ancient Greece, he wrote what are now the only extant representatives of Greek Old Comedy. His three outstanding characteristics—gross obscenity, exquisite lyricism, and a serious concern for decency and morality—may seem a strange combination to the modern reader, but they accurately reflect the mood of the Dionysiac festivals at which comedy was performed. Aristophanes is still regarded by modern audiences as a master of risqué wit and brilliant comic invention.

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CANDIDE, Voltaire

THE LEGACY OF GREECE

by John Gassner

PROFESSOR HADAS' useful summary of essential facts in the Introduction that follows obviates the necessity of encumbering this preface with information on the plays in the present collection. But since it was originally conceived as an addition to the Bantam Library of World Drama (now part of the Bantam Classics), it is appropriate to advert here to the place of the classic drama in the world's theater. The subject, moreover, is by no means of purely antiquarian interest; it has engaged us for many years as a distinctly modern, if not indeed avant-garde, topic.

It is true enough that the Roman world revered Greek drama to the point of both direct imitation and adaptation. But in the case of tragedy, the imitations seem to have been early academic exercises which failed to survive. If plays by the Stoic philosopher Seneca exerted a literary influence in the sixteenth century, they reflected classic Greek tragedy only remotely in structure, style, and theatrical viability. And if Greek comedy had a more direct continuity and more salutary influence through the Romans Plautus and Terence (their influence has been considerable ever since the Renaissance), a substantial qualification must be made; we know too little about their immediate Greek models written by the famous Menander and other fourth-century B.C. playwrights. Roman comedy, like the so-called New Comedy of fourth-century Athens, is primarily domestic and romantic, comedy of "manners," whereas the Old, or Aristophanic, Comedy is, on the one hand, critical and satirical, and, on the other hand, lyrical and fantastic. With a few distinguished exceptions (one may cite Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid* and John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*), it commands attention again only as a modern phenomenon. We can identify and appreciate it best in such guises as Shavian and Brechtian comedy, topical

revues, and musical comedies like *Of Thee I Sing!, Finian's Rainbow,* and *Oh, What a Lovely War!*

In the case of Greek tragedy, too, we are most apt to be concerned in the theater with the modern possibilities. The purely historical interest has greatly receded. Today there can be but little concern with virtually forgotten Renaissance imitations and with misleading commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics* that foisted the cult of the unities of time, place and action on playwrights for approximately three centuries. (Aristotle himself had actually insisted on only *one* unity—that of dramatic action.)

Theater historians may take note of Milton's great dramatic poem *Samson Agonistes* (1673), composed like a Greek tragedy with alternating dramatic scenes and choral recitations, but only to observe that the author's interest was literary rather than theatrical since he did not intend this work to be performed. The historian can come to more than a brief pause only in arriving at the neo-classic period in France climaxed by the tragedies of Racine (1639-1699) in which the emphasis on inner cohesion, consistent with the author's focus on character, accounted for essential classicality of form, whether or not he employed the formal Greek structure of alternate scenes and choral passages. But Racine's achievement is but an interlude in a long and dreary chronicle of neo-classical sterility in a dozen languages which even the literary genius of Voltaire could not alleviate. And even the later classical German drama, exemplified by Schiller's *Wallenstein's Death* and *The Bride of Messina* and Goethe's *Iphigenia in Tauris,* was only another brief interval.

It is, of course, a high compliment to Greek drama to be able to cite as examples of its influence such altitudes of European tragedy as the dramatic writings of Racine, Goethe, and Schiller. But for our own time it is more useful to observe some of the direct and indirect affiliations and parallels, as well as contrasts, that have engaged the modern theater.

We must certainly take note of the tendencies to translate the classic theme of guilt and retribution into strikingly modern terms. Thus in Ibsen's *Ghosts,* and in other modern plays, guilt often consists in conformity to, rather than defiance of, convention. (Ibsen's Mrs. Alving "sinned" in *returning* to her husband rather than in leaving him.) Punishment in *Ghosts* is not for *hubris* but for lack of that self-respect and self-regard. Ibsen calls for self-realization and re-

quires independence of judgment. Later, existentialist drama makes the same point imaginatively, in Sartre's *No Exit* and *The Flies,* and in Anouilh's *Antigone.* Euripidean scepticism has filled the modern theater with much questioning of accepted values and with many anti-heroic or deflationary treatments of once generally accepted values; with concepts of moral relativity (*The Wild Duck* is one example, and another is Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma*); and with more or less dialectical interpretations of history as exemplified by *The Cherry Orchard* and *Saint Joan.*

Today we can look upon the Greek classics from the vantage point of modern drama of "ideas." We can appreciate much of the extant work of Aeschylus and Euripides as distinguished, if not indeed the most memorable, examples of this genre, since they possess the imaginativeness and power of poetic drama in addition to developing an argument or demonstrating a problem. Neither social criticism nor philosophical and religious inquiry suffers from this sublimation and universalization of reality by means of myth, choral song, and ritualism. This is amply apparent in the social dramas of Euripides (the best known example is *The Trojan Women*) and the trilogies of Aeschylus. The religious background of the Greek tragedies and the ritualistic occasion of their production in Athens' Theatre of Dionysus only enhance the intensity and depth of the work. And if notions of Fate have been translated into concepts of determinism (heredity, instinct, and environment) in modern literature, it is still true that the tragic experience is suprarational; it belongs to poetry rather than to debate and to passion rather than to scientific or sociological argument.

William Arrowsmith defined the "Greek theater of ideas" instructively when, in differentiating it from "a theater of intellectual *sententiae,*" he described it as "a theater of dramatists whose medium of thought was the stage, who used the whole machinery of the theater as a way of thinking, critically and constructively, about their world." *

Another, and equally modern development—that of "psychological" or character drama—is no less prefigured in the work of Sophocles and Euripides. It is most plainly observable in the latter's plunge into anti-heroic realism with *Electra* and *Orestes* (the latter is largely an exercise in

* "A Greek Theater of Ideas," *Ideas in the Drama,* ed. by John Gassner. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964.

pathology) and in his symbolical use of myth in such masterpieces as his *Hippolytus* and *The Bacchae,* which O'Neill would probably have selected as prime early examples of the genre he called "super-realism." The proper study of man, begun by Sophocles, interests us especially wherever we find Euripides anticipating the naturalists and the Freudians who have flourished since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. When Ibsen and Strindberg focus attention on their divided, destructive and self-destructive characters (as in *Hedda Gabler* and *Miss Julie*) they establish a kinship with the Greek tragic poets despite differences of style and dramatic form. When these and other modernists (such as Hauptmann, Wedekind and Schnitzler) deal with the destructive compulsions of the sexual instinct, or with "the duel of the sexes," they are decisively closer to the Greek masters than to the writers of typical eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dramatic literature.

I believe we can understand Euripides' *Electra* and *Medea* better today than Euripides' audience could have done in fifth-century Athens. And Euripides would have had no difficulty in understanding what Strindberg was about when he translated the husband-and-wife conflict of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* into a modern war of the sexes in *The Father.* Euripides would have also understood and probably approved Eugene O'Neill's effort in *Mourning Becomes Electra* to translate the *Oresteia* into Freudian terms.

Moving, moreover, from subject matter to dramatic form and style, we can only conclude that our advanced playwrights, designers, and stage directors have felt closer to the Greek theater than to any other, with the possible exception of the Elizabethan. Their consuming desire has been to recover or, better still, to recreate the poetic theater with a presentational rather than representational type of drama. This effort has been successful in such radically different experiments as the plays of Eliot, Lorca, and Brecht. And, understandably, some of the most impressive endeavors have actually been modernistic versions of the Greek tragedies themselves, such as Giraudoux' *Electra,* Anouilh's *Antigone,* and Cocteau's Oedipus-drama, *The Infernal Machine.* In a number of modern experiments with or without a classic subject, playwrights have even adopted or adapted the formal features of the classic chorus, the Messenger, and the Narrator.

(O'Neill went further and adopted the formal feature of the mask in *The Great God Brown.*)

With the employment of classical strategies, we have recovered in our century the *theatrical* resources of the drama. Progress has consisted largely in a re-theatricalization of the theater that the advent of nineteenth-century realism had deprived of open and expressive theatricality. In this modernist effort no example has been more potent than that afforded by the art of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

THE INTELLECTUAL AND artistic achievements of the Greeks claim our attention not only for their own sake, as the art and literature of other advanced peoples do, but also because they have had a substantial role in shaping outlooks and taste for all Western civilization. Of all the various cultural productions of the Greeks their tragedy offers the most convenient approach to their spiritual contributions because tragedy combines high art with profound thought and because drama is a form generally familiar. Everyone has seen or read plays and knows their general techniques and aims, so that reading a Greek play is not exploring territory wholly uncharted. But to judge ancient tragedy by gauges appropriate to modern drama can be misleading, for the premises and objectives of the Greek plays are different from those of the modern.

The basic difference is that whereas our theater is secular, Greek drama grew out of religious ritual and was presented as part of a religious cult. The religious association is indicated by the place and occasion of presentation, and it controls the structure of the plays and the mode of their presentation, the choice of subjects and themes, the attitude of the playwright and of his audience. The theater of Dionysus at Athens, where the plays were presented, was part of the sacred precinct of that divinity. The theater itself was a large open-air structure consisting of three parts. Its original and central element was a level circle, some ninety feet in diameter, called the *orchestra* (which means "dancing place"), where the chorus performed. Outside one arc of the circle was a low rectangular building, with uncovered passages at either end. From and into this building, called *skene* or tent, the actors usually made their entrances and exits and in it they changed their costumes and masks; eventually its front was decorated with simple painting—whence our

word "scenery." Rising from the circle of the orchestra (except for the arc occupied by the skene) was an auditorium of many tiers of stone seats, in sections divided by transverse passages. The theater at Athens accommodated some 17,000 spectators; others held as many as 40,000. The audience was not, then, a privileged elite but comprised a good part of the total population. The fact that they saw the performance virtually in the round, not frontally as in a picture-frame stage, helped make them participants in what was enacted, rather than eavesdroppers as modern spectators tend to be. The Greek spectator was not expected to imagine that he was watching real people going through real crises in a real living room. He knew that what he saw was a stylized reenactment of an ancient story as distilled through the mind of the poet. The ritualistic character of the performance was underscored by the circumstance that plays were presented only during annual religious festivals. If a man were allowed to attend the theater whenever he was inclined to seek entertainment, the plays could not have effected the spiritual purgation Aristotle said they were meant to produce.

The plays were not only all in verse, which is not a natural medium of conversation, but the actors' conversations were periodically interrupted by a chorus which sang and danced to express their comments and reflections on the action. The structure of the plays, in its developed form, was as rigidly prescribed as the design of a Doric temple. The *prologue* contained a dialogue which informed the audience of the circumstances of the play. The chorus entered, with a chant in a marching rhythm, and then sang their first fixed choral ode, or *stasimon*. They performed other stasima between *episodes*, equivalent to acts, when the scene was bare of actors, and at the end of the play marched out in an *exodus*. The choral lyrics are built in elaborate triads of *strophe*, *antistrophe*, and *epode*, and in early tragedy must have taken as long in performance as the "spoken" parts of the play. Tragedy started with choral lyric, to which actors' dialogue was added; and even after the role of the chorus was diminished it retained certain archaic wordforms. Tragedy was more conservative in form than in content.

The actors, three in number and all men, could play several roles by changing masks; there are never more than three speaking roles in a single episode. In their costume as in their speech the actors were removed from ordinary hu-

manity. Their masks had a swelling at the top (*onkos*) to enhance their dignity; the tragic buskin (*cothurnus*) raised their stature; and their robes, unlike any that could be seen in ordinary life, were like priestly vestments. Actors were incapable of violent movements or gesticulation; their only instrument of expression was the voice. Scenes of violence, and especially of bloodshed, were not enacted on the stage but reported by a messenger. The motive for this restraint may have been religious, but it may also have been a matter of taste. Turmoil like that in the closing scene of *Hamlet* would seem to the Greeks childish and not as convincing as a dramatic oral description. Similarly, there was no attempt at realism in representing scenery; such indication of locality as there was amounted to little more than asking the audience, "Please imagine that this is Argos"—or Athens, or Delphi.

The plots of the tragedies were almost all drawn from the great body of traditional myth, which was esteemed almost as a species of scripture. In the source only the bare bones of a story might be given, with no how or why or therefore—for example a Clytemnestra murders an Agamemnon, who is then avenged by an Orestes. The poet proceeds to show the character and motivation of personages who could so behave, and what their behavior can mean to the rest of us. Because the personages were familiar to the audience from childhood, the poet did not need to build them up by explaining that Agamemnon was the commander of the Greek expedition in the Trojan War or that Clytemnestra was born of a goddess. All the principal personages must be of heroic stature; the fate of little men may be very sad, but it cannot be tragic. And because the bare story was capable of more than one interpretation, it could be used repeatedly by different poets. It was not the outcome of the story (which everyone knew) that the audience came to discover, but rather how the new poet would handle the plot. With the essentials of the story he could not tamper, but he could add intrigue and even minor personages, provided they were convincing and contributed to understanding. The themes, broadly speaking, had to do with the precarious situation of man vis-à-vis external forces, whether these derive from the society of which he is a part or, more usually, from the unintelligible supernatural powers which impinge upon his life. The poet was in fact a religious teacher as

well as artist, with a status somewhat analogous to that of a prophet in Israel.

But the religion which Greek tragic poets explored and which Greek tragedy served was not what we understand by religion; unless we realize that it was not, we miss the meaning of Greek tragedy. The Greeks did not have a single all-powerful and benevolent deity and a prescribed code of rights and wrongs, but many gods with specialized, sometimes conflicting, powers and demands. Except that they were immortal and ever-glorious, gods were like men in shape and emotions and lived their own lives. The world of gods and the world of men were quite apart; gods were not primarily concerned with regulating men, nor men with emulating gods. Each followed his own nature; for the gods two plus two might equal five, but men must continue making it four. If, making it four, he is tripped up by a system he cannot control or even understand which makes it five, the result is tragedy. So far from being a punishment for error tragedy may therefore be proof of the sufferer's merits and demonstration that he deserves the status of hero.

Hero in the technical Greek sense is not merely the principal figure in a work of literature but a man whose career has somehow enlarged the horizons of what is possible for humanity and who has therefore, after his death, been deemed worthy of religious commemoration. It is not expected that the hero should be without flaw; often, like Achilles or Ajax or Oedipus, he is a self-willed brute. But then a flawless man is not apt to possess the determined energy heroism requires. Men like coins must be taken as wholes; we cannot choose to accept the heads and reject the tails. An issue between an obvious white and an obvious black may be appropriate for melodrama; it is not a subject for tragedy.

The presentation of plays was a state function, in the form of a prize contest under the supervision of the chief magistrates of the state. The magistrate chose three among the playwrights who submitted their work, to whom he "gave a chorus." Each entry was a tetralogy, or group of four plays —a trilogy of tragedies, not necessarily related in subject, plus a ribald satyr play to serve as afterpiece. The duty and expense of mounting each poet's work was assigned to a rich citizen as a *liturgy,* or form of income tax; another liturgy (or *choregia*) was to fit out a battleship. Judges

were drawn by lot from a large panel previously selected. The names of the victorious choregus, poet, and actor were inscribed on tablets; our knowledge of the subject derives from abstracts or remains of these records.

In the fifth century B.C., apparently, only new plays were presented, but after the death of the Great Three it was enacted that a choregus who wished might revive one of their plays. Revivals tempt virtuoso actors to "fatten" their parts; to prevent corruption of the text, a magistrate with script in hand stood ready to stop the play if an actor deviated from the official text. In the third century B.C. King Ptolemy Philadelphus of Egypt is said to have borrowed the state texts against a huge deposit to make copies of them for the great Alexandrian Library and then to have sent the copies to Athens, forfeiting his deposit in order to keep the originals. The plays which have come down to us, only a small fraction of those that were written, have survived because they were included in anthologies for teaching. The titles and some portions of many plays that have not survived are known from lists and quotations and allusions in later books; in recent years bits of plays have turned up on scraps of Egyptian papyrus.

At the first official presentation of drama at Athens, in 534 B.C., the prize was won by Thespis, after whom actors are still sometimes called "thespians." Thespis is said to have "invented one actor." This means that instead of merely giving the chorus an opening by asking "What happened next?" Thespis *impersonated* a character in dialogue with the chorus, and so invented true drama. The revolutionary nature of this innovation, and incidentally the sobriety expected of Greek literature, is illustrated by a story told of Solon. After he witnessed his first play Solon reproached Thespis for telling the assembly lies, and when Thespis replied that deception was proper in a play, Solon argued that the habit of persuading people that imaginary things are true might be carried into politics. Of the several playwrights between Thespis and Aeschylus of whom we have some knowledge, the most important was Phrynichus. At the presentation of Phrynichus' *The Sack of Miletus* (an allied city in Asia Minor which the Athenians failed to save from the Persians), Herodotus tells us, "the whole theater burst into tears and the people sentenced him to pay a fine of a thousand drachmas for recalling to them their own misfortunes. They

likewise made a law that no one should ever again exhibit that piece."

The few other playwrights of whom we know little and the many of whom we know nothing at all were eclipsed in popular vogue and critical esteem by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and there can be little doubt that these three were in fact the best in their kind. Whether the plays chosen by schoolmasters in later antiquity to represent each of the poets are those we should choose today if we had the complete works before us is another matter; the seven plays each of Aeschylus and Sophocles which have survived are less than a tenth of those they wrote, and the nineteen of Euripides little more than a fifth of his total.

The two significant facts in the life of Aeschylus (ca. 525–456 B.C.) are that he was born in Eleusis, the suburb where Athenians went for the solemn rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries, and that he fought for the Athenian democracy in the Persian War. The first may have influenced his profound religious speculations, the second his attachment to democratic values. His great technical innovation was the introduction of the second actor, which made true drama, in the sense of conflict of wills, possible. Later in his career, when Sophocles had introduced a third actor, Aeschylus employed three actors also. The plays in a trilogy of Aeschylus were interrelated, so that while each play was complete in itself, it was at the same time one act in a larger composition. This scale made it possible to carry the story, and the examination of problems which it involved, over several generations of the same family. It was the problem, more than the personalities of the figures who illustrate it, that was Aeschylus' chief concern. The characters are indeed so far individualized as to make their conduct intelligible and plausible, but their ultimate function is as a kind of mathematical symbol to make the argument meaningful. Usually the argument involves moral choices, between courses each of which has its own sanctions. The highest sanction is Zeus'; Aeschylus has a loftier conception of Zeus' power and justice than any other classical poet. His language, elaborately wrought in vocabulary and syntax and imagery, matches the grandeur of his conceptions. His plays are not versified prose; the mode of his thought as of his expression is the subtle mode of lyric, not only in the stately choral odes but also in the "spoken" parts.