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**Aeschylus**  
**The Oresteia**  
Translated By Robert Fagles





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# Aeschylus THE ORESTEIA

Translated by  
Robert Fagles

Introductory Essay,  
Notes and Glossary  
with W. B. Stanford



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## FOREWORD

My thanks to Aeschylus for his companionship, his rigors and his kindness. I found him a burly, eloquent ghost, with more human decency and strength than I could hope to equal. As I tried to approach him, I remembered what they said of the ghost of Hamlet's father: "We do it wrong, being so majestic, To offer it the show of violence." Translation has its violent moments, and I suppose it must. It begins with attraction, then a kind of attack, and it ends, if you are lucky, with a strong impersonation of your author. Whatever the end, at any rate, it is meant to be a thing of love and homage. So in thanking that proud old spirit, I would also ask for his forbearance, if he should ever hear what I have written in his name.

Now it is time to let this version of the *Oresteia* speak for itself, without apologies or statements of principle (petards that will probably hoist the writing later). A translator's best hope, I think, and still the hardest to achieve, is Dryden's hope that his author will speak the living language of the day. And not in a way that caters to its limits, one might add, but that gives its life and fibre something of a stretching in the process. In translating Aeschylus I have also tried to suggest the responsion of his choral poetry—the paired, isometric stanzas that form the dialectic dance and singing of his plays in Greek—but I have done so flexibly, and using English rhythms. The translation has its leanings too, yet they are loyal to Aeschylus, at least as I perceive him, and loyal to the modern grain as well. There is a kinship between the *Oresteia* and ourselves; a mutual need to recognize the fragility of our culture, to restore some

reverence for the Great Mother and her works, and especially to embrace the Furies within ourselves, persuading them to invigorate our lives. I hope this kinship can be felt in the English text and supported by the introductory essay.

The essay begins and ends with broader, general sections; in between come more detailed descriptions of each play. The final version of the introduction is my own, particularly the freer conjectures about images and symbols, the moral power of the Furies, and the psychological and religious dimensions of the *Oresteia*. My collaborator, W. B. Stanford, has supplied accounts of the dramatic action and a good deal of historical and linguistic material—the discussion of the watchman, Clytaemnestra's third speech, and her crucial exchanges with Agamemnon and the elders. The passages on technique owe much to him, to what he has written for the purpose, and his books on Greek metaphor, ambiguity, and *Aeschylus in His Style*. As we will indicate later, we have shared the writing of the notes. We have relied on Fraenkel's edition of *Agamemnon* with few exceptions, on Murray's of *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides* with help from other scholars. (Unfortunately Denys Page's new edition of Aeschylus arrived too late for us to use.) Our line numbers refer to the English text throughout and not the Greek; and we have kept the English or Latin forms of the most familiar proper names, but have transliterated the rest.

I could not have done my part without the help of many people. Bedell Stanford first, of course. He offered me what I have needed most, Ionic tolerance and Doric discipline. So much patience with my questions, so many cautions to revise—he has been the brake to my locomotive, in his phrase, and the conscience of Aeschylus in mine. Before they met their deaths in June, 1971, my friends Anne and Adam Parry often came to my rescue with their knowledge, comradeship and warmth. Robert Fitzgerald helped me on many points, even as late as the galleys of the first edition, with his Homeric magnanimity and tact. Kenneth Burke taught me that *The*

*Eumenides* is less tragic than I had thought, and less transcendental than he would like. And the one who led me to translate the *Oresteia* gave me his painstaking, strenuous criticism of the opening play, its notes and introduction. He would rather not be named; I owe him more than I can say.

Others have helped as well, with advice or encouragement or both. The list is long because the work was long, and they were very generous. Some are gone now—Alan Downer, Dudley Fitts, Erich Kahler, Robert Murray, Jr., and Fred Wieck. But many more remain: Donald Carne-Ross and the staff of *Arion*, where parts of the translation first appeared; Patricia Purcell Chappell, Julius Cohen, Robert Connor, Mark Davies, Francis Fergusson, Joseph Frank, Georgine and Ralph Freedman, Caroline Gordon, Edmund Keeley, Bernard Knox, Hanna Loewy, Maynard Mack, Mary Renault, Erich Segal, George Steiner, Dorothy Thompson, Kathryn Walker, Rex Warner, Theodore Weiss, and Theodore Ziolkowski.

My students ought to know how much I have learned about tragedy from them. I think of William Abernathy, Louis Bell, Kathleen Costello, James Donlan, Ruth Gais, Katherine Callen King, Kathleen Komar, David Lenson, James McGregor, Robert Scanlan, Celeste Schenck, Janet Levarie Smarr, and Macklin Smith. And I remember the brave actors who performed an early version of *Agamemnon* at McCarter Theatre in 1966, Angela Wood, and George and Susan Hearn. Princeton University granted me leaves of absence to work on Aeschylus, and the Research Committee freely saw to my expenses.

This is a new edition of the book, and I want to thank the ones who made it possible. Especially my editor, Toni Burbank, for her precision, her care in preserving the original design, and her sheer affection for the writing; and the good people at Bantam Books for their belief that Aeschylus should have a broad appeal. Once again Georges Borchardt poured the wine and sped the work, and Alan Williams cared for this *Oresteia* as if it were

his own; without their kindness it might never have seen the light.

Thanks above all to Lynne, abiding thanks and more—

... ἔστι γὰρ ἡμῶν  
σημαθ', ἃ δὲ καὶ νῦν κεκρυμμένα ἴδμεν ἀπ' ἄλλων.

R. F.  
*Princeton, New Jersey*  
September 1976



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A READING OF THE Oresteia

**THE SERPENT  
AND THE EAGLE**

*Now is the strong prayer folded in thine arms,  
The serpent with the eagle in the boughs.*

—HART CRANE, "*The Dance*"

---

**A**eschylus was forty-five in 480 B.C. when the Persians sacked Athens and destroyed the shrines of the gods on the Acropolis. Soon afterward he fought in the forces which defeated the Persians at Salamis and Plataea, as he had fought in the Greek victory at Marathon ten years before. The Greeks in general, and the Athenians in particular, because they had played the major part in the triumph of Hellas, saw these victories as a triumph of right over might, courage over fear, freedom over servitude, moderation over arrogance. After their struggle the people of Athens entered upon a spectacular era of energy and prosperity, one of the great flowering periods of Western civilization. Physically the two noblest monuments of that age were the Parthenon of Ictinos and Pheidias, and the *Oresteian* trilogy of Aeschylus. Paradoxically, when one considers the contrast between the durability of marble and the fragility of papyrus, the *Oresteia* is better preserved by far. But both were expressions of optimism as well as of artistic genius. Out of the savagery of past wars and feuds a new harmony—religious, political, and personal—might be created. Perhaps Athens would achieve what public-spirited men and women have always longed for, a peaceful, lawful community, a city of benevolent gods and beneficent men. Within fifty years of the Persian defeat the dream had faded, and before the end of the century Athens, overextended abroad and overconfident at home, lay defeated at the mercy of her enemies, a Spartan garrison posted on the Acropolis and democracy in ruins. Much in the intervening years had been magnificent, it

is true, but so it might have remained if the Athenians had heeded Aeschylus. As early as *The Persians* he had portrayed the Greek victory as a triumph over the barbarian latent in themselves, the *hubris* that united the invader and the native tyrant as targets of the gods. Their downfall, like the downfall of Agamemnon, called not only for exultation but for compassion and lasting self-control.

The *Oresteia* perfects this vision of warning and reward. Athenian exhilaration still ran strong in 458 when Aeschylus, at the age of sixty-seven, produced his trilogy. It breathes the buoyant spirit of his city. Its dominant symbolism is that of light after darkness. Beginning in the darkness-before-dawn of a Mycenaean citadel benighted by curses and crimes, it ends with a triumphant torchlit procession in an Athens radiant with civic faith and justice. The entire drama is one long procession, and each step brings us closer to the light. Originally the *Oresteia* consisted of four plays—*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, *The Eumenides*, and *Proteus*. The last was a satyr-play, completing the full "tetralogy" dramatists composed. It would have presented gods and heroes in a comic situation that relieved the tensions of the tragedies while illuminating them with fresh perspectives. The *Proteus* has not survived, but the three tragedies form a unity in themselves, the only complete Greek trilogy we have, and its scope is as expansive as an epic. Aeschylus referred to his work as "slices from the banquet of Homer," but his powers of assimilation were impressive. His trilogy sweeps from the *Iliad* to the *Odyssey*, from war to peace. Yet it was the darker events of the *Odyssey*—the murder of Agamemnon by his wife and the vengeance of his son, Orestes—that inspired Aeschylus to produce a great tale of the tribe. He deepened Homer with even older, darker legends and lifted him to a later, more enlightened stage of culture.

Let us recall the outlines of the tale. The house of Atreus is the embodiment of savagery. No other Greek family can rival it for accumulated atrocities. The founder of the line was Tantalus of Lydia, a barbarian

whose spirit haunts the *Oresteia*. He offended the gods by feasting them on his son's flesh, and they condemned him to starve in Hades, "tantalized" by the drink and luscious fruits they dangled out of reach. But they restored his victim, Pelops, to a new, resplendent life. Later he went to western Greece, where he won the hand of Hippodameia by a ruse which killed her father—a murderous chariot race which may have been the origin of the Olympic games. Pelops had two sons, Atreus and Thyestes. When Thyestes seduced his brother's wife and contested his right to the throne, Atreus banished him and then, luring him back for a reconciliation, feasted him on his children's flesh. Horrified, Thyestes cursed Atreus and his descendants and fled into exile once again, accompanied by his one remaining son, Aegisthus. Atreus had two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus, who jointly inherited the realm of Argos and married two daughters of Tyndareos, Clytaemnestra and Helen. Agamemnon became the commander-in-chief of the Greek forces that attacked Troy to avenge the seduction of Helen by Paris, son of Priam. At the outset of the expedition, however, Agamemnon had to sacrifice his and Clytaemnestra's daughter Iphigeneia—a fact that Homer had omitted, perhaps to exonerate the king for an aristocratic audience—and so he becomes an agent of the curse upon his house.

The action of the *Oresteia* begins more than nine years later, just after the fall of Troy and Agamemnon's seizure of Cassandra, the daughter of Priam and priestess of Apollo, whom he abducts to Argos as his mistress. The *Agamemnon* describes how Clytaemnestra kills her husband for the death of their daughter and the insult of Cassandra, and establishes herself and Aegisthus, her paramour and also the avenger of his father, as rulers over Argos. It is not a case of right against wrong as it is in Homer; it demonstrates Nietzsche's motto for Aeschylean tragedy: "All that exists is just and unjust and equally justified in both" (in Walter Kaufmann's translation). And its sequel erupts into a moral struggle never told by Homer. In *The Libation Bearers* the only son

of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, Orestes, obeys the command of Apollo and kills the murderers in revenge; but his mother's Furies drive him mad and in the final play, *The Eumenides*, pursue him to Apollo's shrine at Delphi. The god can purify Orestes of bloodguilt but cannot release him from the Furies and refers him to Athens and Athena for their judgment. There the goddess appoints a group of men to conduct a trial for manslaughter and so establishes the Areopagus, her famous court of law. Orestes is acquitted and restored to his fathers' lands in Argos, while Athena persuades the Furies, the demons of the primitive vendetta-law, to become benevolent patrons, changing their names to "Eumenides," the Kindly Ones of Athens. The final choruses are in the mood of Beethoven's Hymn to Joy: let us rejoice, the spirit of man has triumphed over the harsher elements of life—a new order has been born.

What Aeschylus builds upon the house of Atreus is "a grand parable of progress," as Richmond Lattimore has described it, that celebrates our emergence from the darkness to the light, from the tribe to the aristocracy to the democratic state. At the same time Aeschylus celebrates man's capacity for suffering, his courage to endure hereditary guilt and ethical conflicts, his battle for freedom in the teeth of fate, and his strenuous collaboration with his gods to create a better world. The tragic burden of the *Iliad* is magnified, then channeled into the battle of the *Odyssey*, the battle to win home. Aeschylus is optimistic, but he would agree with Hardy: "if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst." How had we come so far? he asks. Through struggle, and through struggle we will advance. Zeus, as the old men of Argos tell us, "lays it down as law/that we must suffer, suffer into truth." Perhaps no paradox inspired Aeschylus more than the bond that might exist between *pathos* and *mathos*, suffering and its significance. That bond is life itself. Reflect on the house of Atreus, what's more, on Pelops' regeneration from the caldron, on the rise of the Olympic games from an act of murder, on the establishment of the Areopagus in response to Orestes' matri-

cide, and that bond produces our achievements—pain becomes a stimulus and a gift. This commitment to suffering not only as the hallmark of the human condition but as the very stuff of human victory lends the *Oresteia* its perennial appeal. But it does not speak to certain later, more spiritual ages which sublimate our anguish into "the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love." Aeschylus speaks to a world more secular, to some more dangerous, more exhilarating, more real. He would say with Keats, "Do you not see how necessary a World of Pain and troubles is . . . ? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! . . . thus does God make individual beings, Souls, Identical Souls of the sparks of his own essence—This appears to me a faint sketch of a system of Salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity."

The suffering of Atreus and his sons is a very old and yet a very modern matter. They are less removed from us than we might like to think. They are cursed, their lives are an inherited disease, a miasma that threatens the health of their community and forces them, relentlessly, to commit their fathers' crimes. It is as if crime were contagious—and perhaps it is—the dead pursued the living for revenge, and revenge could only breed more guilt. For such guilt is more than criminal; it is a psychological guilt that modern men have felt and tried to probe. Every crime in the house of Atreus, whether children kill their parents or parents kill their children and feed upon their flesh, is a crime against the filial bond itself. So dominant is the pattern, in fact, that E. R. Dodds and others say that such mythology reflects the pathology of a culture ridden by its guilt. This is a subject that psychohistorians may explain; we can only allude to its vaguest generalities here. What the members of that culture may have fantasized and repressed, creating a pressure of recrimination in themselves, the sons of Atreus, their surrogates, have acted out with relish and abandon. They have heard Blake's Proverb of Hell: "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires." Those desires rose to a fever pitch, some



surmise, between Homer and the age of tragedy. Whatever conflicts caused them—the miseries of existence that might seem to set the dead against the living; or historical upheavals, the economic crisis of the seventh century that unleashed the class warfare of the sixth; or emotional tensions bred by the breaking-up of family solidarity—a people felt themselves in the grip of an angry father-god. His injustice was their fate; his judgment was the measure of their guilt.

They sought escape in the purges of Apollo, a god of self-restraint. They appealed to his opposite, Dionysos, a god of ecstasy who may have promised more. We will never be certain of his nature—what follows is sheer conjecture—but our intimations point to a god of paradox. Dionysos, son of Zeus and a mortal woman, Semele, was born of the earth and yet is always striving for the sky. Originally he was a god of fertility, even of life in all its contradictions, blasting us and blessing us at once. He was the menace of existence turning fruitful and, as the god of wine, leading us to joy. His spirit well might rule the house of Atreus, its atrocities and its achievements. For the rites of Dionysos could include the rending of living creatures and feeding on their flesh; yet his rites were horrible and holy too, as Dodds suggests, and through them his communicants could absorb his vital gifts. He is the god who dies, the hunter who is hunted, the render who is rent—but all to be reborn. According to one legend Hera was enraged that Semele had borne the child-god by Zeus; she commanded the Titans to tear him limb from limb and eat him raw. So they did, and Zeus consumed them with lightning and Dionysos with them. But he was restored, and from the Titans' ashes with their residue of his blood the race of man sprang forth, part Titan and part god, rage and immortal aspiration fused.

Through Dionysos, in other words, men might be restored, not by escaping their nature but by embracing it, not by expiating their guilt but by exercising it constructively. Here was a father, an authority who challenged us to challenge him. Only by acting out