

DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

V O L U M E

8



DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied
Dramatic Works from All the World's Literatures

VOLUME 8

Lawrence J. Trudeau, Editor

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Preface

D*rama Criticism (DC)* is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring interest. Furthermore, *DC* seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse body of commentary, the essays in *DC* offer insights into the authors and their works but do not require that the reader possess a wide background in literary studies. Where appropriate, reviews of important productions of the plays discussed are also included to give students a heightened awareness of drama as a dynamic art form, one that many claim is fully realized only in performance.

DC was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Gale's *Short Story Criticism (SSC)* and *Poetry Criticism (PC)*, which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *Drama Criticism* directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Gale series. Commentary on the works of William Shakespeare may be found in *Shakespearean Criticism (SC)*.

Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, *DC* assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Each volume of *DC* presents:

- 8-10 entries
- authors and works representing a wide range of nationalities and time periods
- a diversity of viewpoints and critical opinions.

Organization of an Author Entry

Each author entry consists of some or all of the following elements, depending on the scope and complexity of the criticism:

- The **author heading** consists of the playwright's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates. If an author consistently wrote under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction are any name variations under which the dramatist wrote, including transliterated forms of the names of authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.
- A **portrait** of the author is included when available. Most entries also feature illustrations of people, places, and events pertinent to a study of the playwright and his or her works. When appropriate, photographs of the plays in performance are also presented.

- The **biographical and critical introduction** contains background information that familiarizes the reader with the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her works.
- The list of **principal works** is divided into two sections, each of which is organized chronologically by date of first performance. If this has not been conclusively determined, the composition or publication date is used. The first section of the principal works list contains the author's dramatic pieces. The second section provides information on the author's major works in other genres.
- Whenever available, **author commentary** is provided. This section consists of essays or interviews in which the dramatist discusses his or her own work or the art of playwriting in general.
- Essays offering **overviews and general studies of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.
- **Criticism of individual plays** offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. In some cases, the criticism is divided into two sections, each arranged chronologically. When a significant performance of a play can be identified (typically, the premier of a twentieth-century work), the first section of criticism will feature **production reviews** of this staging. Most entries include sections devoted to **critical commentary** that assesses the literary merit of the selected plays. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety.
- As an additional aid to students, the critical essays and excerpts are often prefaced by **explanatory annotations**. These notes provide several types of useful information, including the critic's reputation and approach to literary studies as well as the scope and significance of the criticism that follows.
- A complete **bibliographic citation**, designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, precedes each piece of criticism.
- The **further reading list** at the end of each entry comprises additional studies of the dramatist. It is divided into sections that help students quickly locate the specific information they need.

Other Features

- A **cumulative author index** lists all the authors who have appeared in *DC* and Gale's other Literature Criticism Series, as well as cross-references to related titles published by Gale, including *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. A complete listing of the series included appears at the beginning of the index.
- A **cumulative nationality index** lists each author featured in *DC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *DC* volume in which the author appears.
- A **cumulative title index** lists in alphabetical order the individual plays discussed in the criticism contained in *DC*. Each title is followed by the author's name and the corresponding volume and page number(s) where commentary on the work may be located. Translations and variant titles are cross-referenced to the title of the play in its original language so that all references to the work are combined in one listing.

A Note to the Reader

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in *Drama Criticism* may use the following general formats to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to materials reprinted from books.

¹Susan Sontag, "Going to the Theater, Etc.," *Partisan Review* XXXI, No. 3 (Summer 1964), 389-94; excerpted and reprinted in *Drama Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), pp. 17-20.

²Eugene M. Waith, *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden* (Chatto & Windus, 1962); excerpted and reprinted in *Drama Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), pp. 237-47.

Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest authors to appear in future volumes of *DC*, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor.

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Christopher Marlowe
Arthur Miller
Yukio Mishima
Richard Brinsley Sheridan
Sophocles
Thornton Wilder

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John Millington Synge
John Webster
August Wilson

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Tom Stoppard

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Aeschylus

525 B.C.-456 B.C.

(Also transliterated as Aischylos)

INTRODUCTION

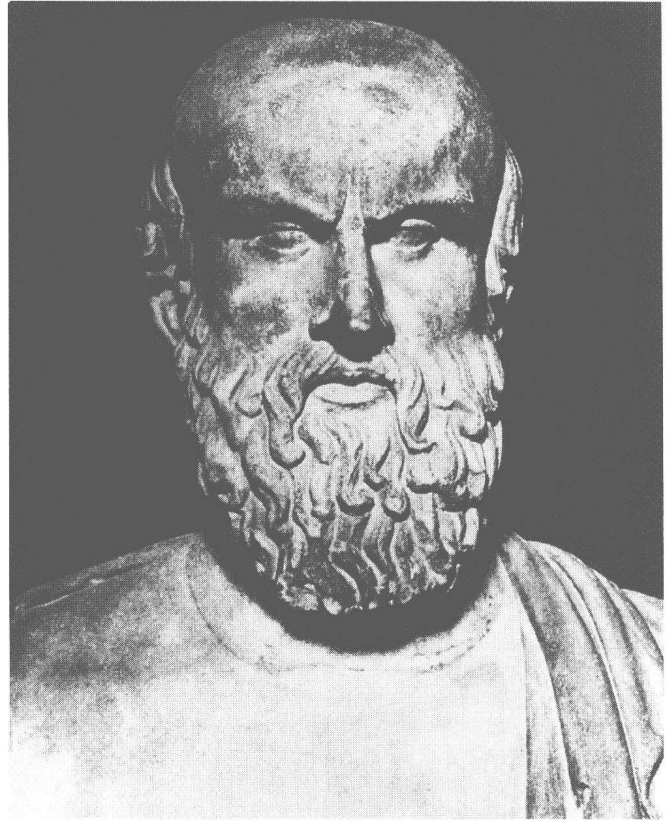
The earliest of the principal dramatists of the Golden Age of Athens, Aeschylus is widely regarded as the father of tragedy because he established the paradigm for that genre in Western literature. His tragedies, exemplified by such works as *Persians*, *Prometheus Bound*, and the *Oresteia* trilogy, have been universally respected as reflective, profoundly moving translations of religious and ethical concerns into the sublime language of poetry.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Little is known for certain about Aeschylus's life, but, according to ancient biographies, he was born at Eleusis, near Athens, in 525 B.C. and was descended from an aristocratic family. He took part in the Persian Wars, fighting in the battle of Marathon in 490 B.C., and probably at Salamis a decade later. While the young Aeschylus experienced the immediate Persian threat to Athens, his maturity coincided with the city's Golden Age, which witnessed the triumph of early Greek democracy and the consolidation of political and cultural power. Aeschylus probably began to write in his youth; some scholars date his first production, *Persians*, as early as the year 499 B.C. He entered the annual Athenian drama contest, the Dionysia, twenty times and was the victor on thirteen occasions. Legend has it that at some point in his career, he was prosecuted (but never convicted) for divulging the mysteries of the Eleusian religious cult during a theatrical performance. Aeschylus made several visits to Sicily at the invitation of its ruler, Hieron I, and it was at Gela in Sicily that he died in 456 B.C. According to a popular myth he was killed by an eagle who dropped a tortoise's shell on the dramatist's bald head, believing it to be a stone. The Athenian government honored Aeschylus posthumously by granting the use of a chorus to anyone who wished to produce his dramas, thereby bestowing special status on the playwright and his works.

MAJOR WORKS

Aeschylus composed more than eighty tragedies and satyr plays, seven of which survive in their entirety, while references to others are found in papyrus fragments and other ancient writings. Aeschylus's earliest play, *Persians*, is



unusual in that it is the first account by a great poet of a significant historical event in which he himself had participated. It recounts in extraordinarily vivid detail, the defeat of Persian King Xerxes' forces at Salamis. Aeschylus attributes the overthrow to Persian hubris, a type of human arrogance that offends the gods and, according to the dramatist, inevitably leads to disaster. The same theme serves as the basis for the *Oresteia*, which scholars regard as one of the greatest achievements of Greek drama. Derived from a variety of myths surrounding the house of Agamemnon, the trilogy chronicles a relentless cycle of divine animosity and human revenge. In *Agamemnon*, the first play of the trilogy, Clytemnestra murders her husband, Agamemnon, king of Argos, upon his triumphant return from the Trojan War. Since Agamemnon is a descendant of the divinely accursed houses of Tantalus and Atreus, he is automatically a target for the gods's wrath. Clytemnestra, however has her own reasons for the crime: she must avenge the death of her daughter Iphigenia, whom Agamemnon had sacrificed in order to enable the Greek fleet to sail to Troy. The chain of revenge continues in *Libation Bearers*, which relates the terrible dilemma of Agamemnon's children, Orestes and Electra, when they are commanded by Apollo to avenge their father's murder

by killing their mother. Their matricide, a violation of one of the most sacred Greek laws, evokes the wrath of the Furies, chthonic (earth-based) demons who traditionally punish offenses against blood relatives. The cycle of guilt and punishment concludes with the last play of the trilogy, *Eumenides*, which some commentators have regarded as a theological work exhibiting Aeschylus's representation of the shift in Greek religious inclination from earth-based to heavenly divinities. The play commences at Apollo's shrine at Delphi, where Orestes has fled to seek refuge from the Furies. Eventually he is ordered to stand trial in Athens before the temple of Athena. Since the court is unable to reach a verdict, Athena—like Apollo a divinity of light and virtue—must cast the deciding vote, and she adjudicates in Orestes' favor. Athena even persuades the Furies to change their nature and serve her as Eumenides, or Kindly Spirits.

Many Aeschylean dramas concern humanity's unwillingness to bend to divine authority. In the first play of his Prometheus trilogy, *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus recounts the heroic efforts of Prometheus, Zeus's cousin, to save humanity from the god's decision to punish human disrespect by total annihilation. Because of his opposition to Zeus's tyranny, Prometheus is chained to a rock on Mount Caucasus. The trilogy—parts two and three (*Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bearer*) of which survive only in fragments—ends with Prometheus's liberation and reconciliation with Zeus. The same theme pervades *Suppliants*. Here, the fifty daughters of Danaus defy Aphrodite by refusing to wed their Egyptian cousins. Although the other two plays that formed this trilogy have been lost, scholars surmise that the cycle most likely concluded with the daughters being reunited with Aphrodite by overcoming their aversion to marriage. Another drama concerned with human freedom and divine compulsion is *Seven against Thebes*, the last of a trilogy recounting the story of the royal house of Thebes. It concerns the siege of Thebes, in which the two sons of Oedipus, fighting on opposite sides, kill each other, thereby carrying out a divine curse and bringing to an end the horrors of the house of Laius which began when Laius defied the gods.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Scholars have lauded the clarity, grandeur, and surpassing beauty of Aeschylus's language and have found his spare, unencumbered linear narratives the ideal vehicle for the dramatic depiction of human catastrophe. Aeschylus consistently interwove the colloquial Greek of his time with the formal poetic diction of such earlier writers as Hesiod and Solon; he was especially indebted to the works of Homer, and, as Greek scholar Athanaeus recounted, Aeschylus "used to say that his tragedies were slices from Homer's great banquets." Fascinated by Aeschylus's extraordinary command of the resources of the Greek language, commentators have admired his inventive use of compound words, lavish epithets, and bold metaphors to fashion panoramic battle scenes and moments of excruciating human anguish. Strong images recur in his plays,

with symbols like the eagle, the net, and the snake growing in significance through repetition. Critics have observed that Aeschylean characters are drawn simply; usually they are not individually delineated but, rather, are universal archetypes serving as embodiments of ethical principles or ideals. The hero Prometheus, for instance, represents the phenomenon of an individual's self-sacrifice for a group's benefit. Aeschylus's choruses of eager elders, fiery virgins, and vengeful Furies likewise function to explain the importance of dramatic events at hand. One notable exception is the poet's last work, the *Oresteia*, where such characters as Clytemnestra and Cassandra are distinctive individuals depicted in all their frenzy and pathos. While many of Aeschylus's contemporaries decried his style as bombastic, pretentious, weighty, and dated, modern critics have extolled the lyrical elegance of his verse, praising his dramas as masterpieces of detailed imagery, intense emotion, and intellectual exploration.

Aeschylus's tragedies, particularly his treatments of human destiny and the myths of Prometheus and of Agamemnon's family, are counted among the greatest dramas ever written. He has influenced the entire history of Western drama, providing a technical and literary frame of reference for generations of playwrights. Aeschylean characters such as Prometheus, Clytemnestra, and Orestes have remained appealing and intriguing to the widest variety of readers throughout the history of Western civilization. As critics and dramatists agree, Aeschylus's oeuvre endures because it constitutes a singularly powerful view of the most profound universal human concerns.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

EXTANT PLAYS

Persae [*Persians*] 472 B.C.

Septem contra Thebas [*Seven against Thebes*] 467 B.C.
Supplices [*The Suppliants*; also translated as *Suppliant Women*] 463 B.C.

**Agamemnon* 458 B.C.

**Choephoroe* [*The Libation Bearers*] 458 B.C.

**Eumenides* 458 B.C.

†*Prometheus vincetus* [*Prometheus Bound*] (date unknown)

*These works comprise the *Oresteia* trilogy. The accompanying satyr play, *Proteus*, is lost.

†Aeschylus's authorship of this work is disputed by some scholars.

OVERVIEWS AND GENERAL STUDIES

Richard S. Caldwell (essay date 1970)

SOURCE: "The Pattern of Aeschylean Tragedy," in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 101, 1970, pp. 77-94.

[In the following essay, Caldwell discerns an "oedipal pattern" operating in all of Aeschylus' plays. The "effect of a father upon his children," he claims, is "the most important single element in the total work of Aeschylus."]

A major obstacle in the way of an inclusive, unified appreciation and criticism of the work of Aeschylus has been the tendency to study the plays (or trilogies) as discrete entities, related to the other plays only by distance and contrast. Thus the *Persae*, *Septem*, *Supplices*, *Oresteia*, and *Prometheus* have all been regarded, at different times and by different critics, as anomalies in the history of Greek tragedy, as virtually separate genres.

To be sure, wide-ranging diversity is exhibited in the Aeschylean corpus, one of several ways in which the work of Aeschylus has closer affinity to that of Euripides than to that of his younger contemporary Sophocles. This wide variety is not, as some suggest, merely the growing pains of a nascent art form. If we cannot find a hero in the *Persae* or in the *Agamemnon*, it is not because these concepts were yet to be formulated. There is no hero because Aeschylus was not writing a play about a hero; for precisely the same reason, there is no protagonist in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, a play about victims, not heroes.

A good example of the problems caused by basic discrepancies between the plays of Aeschylus is the debate which has centered on the nature and power of Zeus as he is portrayed in these works. Although Aeschylus' deep religious feeling seems practically the only characteristic of his work as a whole (other than linguistic complexity) upon which most critics have been able to agree, these same critics have been unable to reach anything close to agreement on the meaning of the chief object of his religious feeling.

The best attempt, to date, to establish some sort of unity in our over-all picture of Aeschylus is that of C. J. Herington, who [in his "Aeschylus: The Last Phase," *Arion* 4, 1965] has divided the plays into early (*Persae*, *Septem*) and late (Danaid-trilogy, *Oresteia*, *Prometheus*) on the basis of a change from a static and unified cosmic background (early) to a divided and chaotic cosmos which reflects the impact upon Aeschylus of political and philosophical innovation (late). While the work of Herington provides a valuable perspective, does it mean that there is no larger pattern, which might provide unified insights into plays as disparate as the *Persae* and the *Supplices*?

The objective of this essay is to suggest and describe such a pattern, the existence of which reflects an enduring concern on the part of Aeschylus and, probably, of the society for which he wrote. In the course of this description, I intend to touch also on the question of the nature of the Aeschylean Zeus.

Briefly, my suggestion is that all of the extant plays of Aeschylus may be fruitfully examined from the standpoint of the *influence of the father upon his children*. Psychologically, we might call this an oedipal pattern; as

we shall see, all the tragedies of Aeschylus are to a certain extent the tragedy of Oedipus. This is not to say that the effect of a father upon his children is the most important aspect of each play, or that it is of equal importance in each play. Nevertheless, it is, I would suggest, the most important single element in the total work of Aeschylus. As I will attempt to show, the basic meaning of some of the plays, as well as problems of interpretation in all the plays, can hardly be understood if this element is neglected.

Persae

The play which seems most separate from all other Greek tragedies is, of course, the *Persae*, the earliest extant tragedy and the only one whose subject matter is taken not from myth but from recent history. Accordingly, most criticism of the play has been historically oriented: Is the play historically accurate? Is it about the Greek victory or the Athenian victory? Does it praise the conquering Greeks or does it sympathize with the defeated Persians? While one must reject Golden's strange denial of the status of poetry to the *Persae* [L. Golden, *In Praise of Prometheus*, 1962], it still remains that his statement that "the characters in this play exist simply as vehicles" and Lesky's comment that "individuals are kept in the background" [A. Lesky, *Greek Tragedy*, 1965] betray a common belief that in this historical drama it is not human concerns, but questions of state, which matter. A salutary corrective is the view of Kitto, that "Aeschylus was not writing a play—epic, patriotic, or anything else—about the victory, but was constructing a religious drama . . . not the tragedy of Persia's downfall, but the tragedy of Xerxes' sin" [H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, 1961].

This is, I think, the key to the matter: what is the sin of Xerxes? To say simply that he is guilty of hubris is begging the question; there is no concept so badly in need of re-definition, for this play and for all of Greek tragedy, as that of hubris. The exact nature of Xerxes' sin, of his individual, and yet archetypal, act of hubris, is to be found in the relationship between Xerxes, Darius, and Atossa, in the familial tension and domestic tragedy for which international conflict is but the background setting.

Xerxes and his nation are destroyed as a direct result of his efforts to surpass his father Darius. Darius is presented not only as a king, but also as god and father in the eyes of his people and his wife (634, 643, 654, 663, 671, 711, 856). At the expense of historical accuracy, he is pictured as the ideal king, governing wisely in time of peace and always victorious in time of war (852-906). In contrast to the divine rule of the aged king (γηραιος βασιλεὺς 854-55), Xerxes is seen by his father himself as a mere child, in both age and intelligence. Xerxes is νεος (782), his thoughts are νεα (782), his fall is due to νεω θράσει (744).

Hubris is indeed a sin against the gods, but, as both Aeschylus and his contemporary Xenophanes perceived, and as Freud carefully analyzed, gods are made by men and of men. As Freud says [in *The Future of an Illusion*],

When the growing individual finds that he is destined to remain a child for ever, that he can never do without protection against strange superior powers, he lends these powers the features belonging to the figure of his father; he creates for himself the Gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate and whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection.

Darius exemplifies the equation of father, king, and god which lies at the heart of myth and fantasy; it is against this awesome figure that Xerxes commits the sin of hubris.

The yoking of the Hellespont and the invasion of Greece are indeed offenses to the traditional gods, but, as Aeschylus points out on many occasions, these actions and their causes and effects are due to the joint responsibility and causality of men and gods alike. In his official role as pretender to the divine throne of his father (80, 157-58), Xerxes sins against the official gods (e.g., Poseidon 750), but in his role as son, he sins against the god in his own family.

The motivation which lay behind Xerxes' folly is revealed in Atossa's conversation with Darius:

Fierce Xerxes learned these things by associating with evil men. They said that you acquired great wealth for your children by the spear, but that he, because of cowardice, acted the warrior at home and did not increase his father's fortune. Hearing often these reproaches from evil men, Xerxes planned the expedition and the invasion of Greece.

(753-58)

Xerxes' sin is here clearly stated: the desire and the attempt to surpass his father. However, equally as important as the content of Atossa's statement is the fact that it is she who makes it, for she had earlier expressed similar sentiments about the effect of cowardly possessions and the failure to use one's power to increase wealth (161-67). Faced with the fact of her son's defeat and confronted by the presence of her husband, Atossa imputes to "evil men" her own vicarious ambitions and involvement in the career of her son. Furthermore, the feelings of Atossa for her son vacillate between proud ambition—even if he is defeated, he will still rule and will not be held to account (213-14)—and the tendency to hold him to account herself (753-58, cf. 726, 846-48). While ambition predominates, Atossa is dependent upon Xerxes, whose presence is, in her opinion, the "eye of the palace" (169). When ambition has been dashed and her son is no longer a man, but is reduced to the role of a child, it is Xerxes who is dependent upon his mother for the needs of a child, clothing and comfort (529-31, 832-38, 849-51).

In this interpretation of the *Persae*, we have seen a son driven to failure by the need to be greater than his father, impelled by a mother who nevertheless is quick to blame him in the instance of failure. This picture accurately reproduces the family situation which, in the view of Slater, dominated the social structure of 5th century Greece and shaped the dramatists' interpretations of myth [P. Slater,

The Glory of Hera: Greek Mythology and the Greek Family, 1968]. The basic components of this domestic situation are the ambivalence of the mother toward her son and the son's inordinate anxiety about becoming greater than his absent father. The important factor in the constellation described by Slater is the mother-child relationship:

Since she alternately accepts him as an idealized hero and rejects his masculine pretensions, one would expect him to develop an abnormal concern about how others view him, and to have an extremely unstable self-concept. He will feel that if he is not a great hero he is nothing, and pride and prestige become more important than love.

The result of this situation is the production of "male children who are highly oedipal . . . a vicarious involvement of the mother in the life of her son . . . an emotional overload on the mother-son relationship . . . by forcing the mother to put the son in the father's place." At this point, we may ask what it means to be "highly oedipal." For Slater it means "to be oriented toward an unattainable goal . . . to be competitive, dissatisfied, grandiose." But these are secondary symptomatic formations, and we should expect to find in myth and in mythically-oriented art some indications of the basic meaning of "oedipal striving," which can only be the desire to supplant the father and win the mother. These indications are, I believe, to be found in the *Persae*, in the elaborate dream sequence of Atossa (176-200). She dreams of two magnificent sisters, one dressed in Persian robes and the other in Doric clothing. From their paternal inheritance the first sister receives Asia, the second Greece. When they begin to quarrel, Darius appears, attempts to soothe them, and then yokes them to a chariot. One of the sisters is proud of her new role, but the other destroys the yoke and causes Xerxes to fall. Darius then appears, pitying his son, but at the sight of his father Xerxes tears his clothes.

This dream is, on one level, a patent historical allegory of Xerxes' abortive expedition. On a deeper level, however, if we permit ourselves the privilege of regarding a dream as a psychological phenomenon as well as an artistic allegory, a privilege we must certainly extend to Aeschylus also, the dream of Atossa lends itself to interpretation in terms of the familial relationships we have postulated.

Intrapsychic conflict commonly causes a dreamer to dream of himself as two separate persons. In Atossa's dream the two quarreling women represent Atossa's internal conflict, her ambivalence toward her son. Allegorically, they are Asia and Greece; psychologically, they represent Atossa's conflicting desires that her son remain a child, less than his father, through failure to expand his father's possessions beyond Asia, and that her son succeed and surpass his father, who could not win Greece. Allegorically, the sister who does not resist the yoke represents Xerxes' rule over Asia, while the sister who rebels represents his defeat at the hands of the Greeks. Psychologically, they again symbolize maternal ambivalence between the need to please and flatter the son and the need to criticize and derogate him, reflecting "a mother-son relationship in which the