GREEK DRAMA

Edited 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, Athen'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 ORESTIA.

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.

THE LEGACY OF GREECE

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

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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 requires 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 skepticism 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 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 ef-

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

fort 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's *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.

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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

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