

FOUR,
FAMOUS GREEK
PLAYS

Edited, with an introduction by

Professor PAUL LANDIS

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FOUR FAMOUS GREEK
PLAYS

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INTRODUCTION

THE Greek drama is the most convincing testimony we have to the fact that great literature is timeless and therefore always modern. Homer carries a still greater burden of years, and Sappho's songs have come to us in scarred and jagged fragments, like the remains of buried statues; but one was a simple story, directly told, of war and the beauty of women and the love of friends and family, and the other a passionate cry from a woman's heart. These are permanently moving things, and in Homer and Sappho there is little of the débris of bygone literary conventions to hide the treasure. The drama is different. It, too, tells stories of elemental human passions, but it must speak to us across twenty-five hundred years, not only in a language that for half that time has been a stranger to the lips of man, it must speak also through an art form more foreign to us than even its names and stories.

The dramatic is peculiar among literary forms in the strength of the conventions which it develops, conventions upon which the author leans for support and by which he is limited in the exercise of his genius. The dramatist, instead of speaking directly to his reader, must depend upon a group of actors to present his story to the audience, also in the group. Unless, therefore, he is writing a "closet-drama"—and the Greeks never did—the author must govern himself always by the circumstances surrounding the performance of his piece. Chief among these are the occasion when the play is to be performed and the

architectural characteristics of the theatre. A proper appreciation of Shakespeare demands some knowledge of the Elizabethan theatre, and the French stage of the seventeenth century is part of the art of Corneille and Racine. We accept the conventions of our own time without thinking of them, but the influence of these circumstances is just as strong upon Eugene O'Neill as on all his predecessors.

The four great Attic dramatists whose works have come down to us, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, all flourished during the fifth century before Christ. Aeschylus at the age of forty-five fought in the battle of Salamis in 480; Sophocles, as a boy of fifteen, took part in the celebration of the victory; and tradition has it that Euripides was born on the very day of the battle. Aristophanes, the last of the writers of old comedy, was born about the middle of the century, and since the three tragic poets lived to a great old age, all four were practically contemporaries nearly twenty-five hundred years ago. Naturally the conditions under which they wrote at that far time require some explanation today.

We know relatively little about the theatre in the great age of Greek drama—all of the Greek theatres which remain were built long after the dramatists here represented had died. We do know, however, that it was an open-air theatre, its only roof the blue Aegean sky, its only "spot" the clear Aegean sunlight. Perhaps it was for this reason that the scene of all Greek plays was laid out of doors. Directly behind the stage—not a raised platform, probably, but simply levelled ground—stood a temple through which the actors went inside, but all the action which took place in the temple or palace was reported on the stage. Now and then the audience was made directly aware of what was happening within, as when in *Agamemnon* the death-

cry of the king is heard from behind closed doors, and a moment later Clytemnestra appears in the doorway, holding the dripping knife. But we are never shown an interior scene. This condition made it necessary for the authors to represent only such scenes as could plausibly take place out of doors. Certainly much more of Athenian life was carried on in the open than we should judge from our own, but even so this condition had a definite effect upon the choosing and handling of the story. Another effect of the outdoor theatre was that the audience was large—perhaps as much as ten or fifteen thousand—and widely diffused; consequently the action presented on the stage had to be simple and impressive, rather than swift and complicated. In the Athenian theatre the finesse of gesture to which we are accustomed would have been obscured by distance, and words spoken in rapid or violent action would never have reached their hearers. So used do we become to our own theatrical conventions that we are likely to overlook the fact that the Athenian stage had no curtain; yet without that simple appliance most of our plays could never be presented. Without curtain or wings or fly, scene shifting was a difficult if not impossible matter, and dramatists, therefore, developed the convention of representing all action as taking place in one spot—what we have come to call the unity of place. When we wish to indicate a lapse of time, we lower the curtain. The Greek dramatist faced the same problem in presenting his action, but he could not use the same solution. Without a curtain, his play had to go on, and he uses the chorus to cover the lapse of time with song and dance. In *Agamemnon*, for instance, between the announcement of the herald and the arrival of the king several days elapse while the chorus is singing its ode.

But this mechanical use of the chorus was only a developed function. Actually the chorus was the heart of the Greek play, and since it is the element strangest to our modern experience, something more must be said about it.

The great Greek religious festivals were those which were solemnized at seed-time and harvest in honor of Demeter and Dionysos, the one the goddess of grain and the other the god of wine. It was a pagan worship which sprang not from a sense of sin, but from a desire to propitiate and thank these two divinities who represented the chief forces of nature. There was about it, therefore, the seriousness which belongs to any honest religion, but there was also a gaiety in its celebration which we do not naturally associate with worship; and from these two spirits, as they were expressed in religious exercises, grew tragedy and comedy. The central element in these festivals was the choral song and dance, which might be either grave and impressive or riotously gay. From the gradual addition of first an interlocutor for the chorus, then a story to furnish the substance of the song, and finally of another actor so that the story might be brought out by dialogue, evolved the dramatic form. At first the play was built about the chorus, as in *The Suppliants* of Aeschylus, where the chorus of the fifty daughters of Danaüs is the protagonist of the drama. Later the chorus was fitted into the story. In *Agamemnon* it is made up of the old men who had been left at home when the Greeks set out for Troy. They have seen the changes wrought by the rule of Clytemnestra, and they feel the imminence of danger to the state, but in the impotence of their age and station they are helpless. The chorus of Oedipus is formed of the plague-stricken citizens of Thebes, whose troubles set Oedipus to inquire into his history, and in whose interest

he brings about his own ruin. Gradually the chorus declined in importance until in the last plays of Euripides and Aristophanes it is distinctly secondary, but the real Greek drama could not exist without it. These lyric passages express not only the spirit of the occasion, but the attitude towards life which the chief actors in the story illustrate dramatically.

This rapid summary of the circumstances surrounding the Greek drama of the fifth century B.C. may help to make the form more intelligible, but the strangeness remains. The Greek play was written in poetry, whereas the natural vehicle for ours is prose; its action was simple and impressive, whereas ours tends to be complicated and subtle; it was severely limited as to the number of actors and changes of scene, whereas we are very free in both respects; it was carried on by means of long speeches with little movement, we use shorter, more natural speeches and freer movement; and, finally, the Greek play was built about a chorus for which we have no counterpart whatever. With this knowledge the plays may be more effective as plays, but if the Attic drama could not speak to us without our reconstructing an entirely different civilization, it would be an interesting relic, but in no sense a living voice in modern life.

The permanent appeal of the Attic drama arises from the fact that it presents with the vividness of the greatest art an attitude towards life at once so honest and so intelligent that the minds of men, however far they may be deceived by fancy or philosophy, must always return to it at the end. By virtue of something that looks almost like racial genius the Athenians of the fifth century succeeded in looking upon life with a level gaze. They faced it neither with bravado and bluster, nor with fear and trembling; not

with an ignorant assumption of power over it, nor with an equally ignorant and cowardly feeling of inferiority. They found it not always pleasant; in fact more often it was a dark, uncertain battle with the odds against them. "Ah! What is mortal life?" sings the chorus in *Agamemnon*,

"When prosperous,
A shadow can o'turn it, and, when fallen,
A throw of the wet sponge blurs the picture out."

And again:

"Who but a god goes woundless all the way?"

But they do not seek to escape the danger, nor complain of the unequal struggle, nor delude themselves with dreams. They accepted life as they found it, not as good or evil, but as a fact and if they questioned, it was *How?* not *Why?* They took their plots from old-time legends of the lives of men, and in their dramas they presented life not as it should be, but as it was and is. Their heroes may be good or evil, but the poets are not deluded with a belief in poetic justice. There is no nobler character in literature than *Antigone*, but her very nobility drives her to destruction. Nor are men made good or evil by force of circumstance. Circumstance may force the tragedy, but the characters are good or evil in their reaction to the circumstances, and the circumstances themselves are not criticized, they are presented. It is a common belief that fate dominates the Greek drama, and that consequently it does not portray men and women as free moral agents. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The Greeks recognized, as we in our moments of wisdom also recognize, that the outcome

of man's life is determined by circumstances over which he has no control, but the virtue of his character is a matter quite apart from this and altogether his own affair. The murder of Agamemnon is part of the fulfillment of the curse on the house of Atreus, but Clytemnestra is evil of herself, not made so by fate. The fall of Oedipus is the fulfillment of a prophecy, but Oedipus in his reaction to the circumstances shows himself a good man.

In this courageous acceptance of life as it is, the Greeks succeeded in uniting the passion for truth and the sense of wonder with a completeness to which our only modern parallel is the truly great scientific mind, which will have nothing but truth, and knows that to find truth it must accept, not judge, the facts of nature. The natural result of this honest intellectualism was a serenity of spirit that brings to the end of the most terrible of Greek tragedies, not "consolation," indeed, but "calm of mind all passion spent." Honest intellectualism, and its attendant simplicity and serenity, these are the spiritual content of the four Athenian dramatists; but their manifestation is different with each poet.

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Aeschylus is the oldest and perhaps the noblest of the dramatists whose word has been preserved. Certainly he is the most severe, and in *Agamemnon* he has presented his story with a dramatic intensity that has never been surpassed in the history of literature. Nowhere, except in the boding beauty of the first scene of *Hamlet*, is there another such opening scene as that which discovers just before the dawn the watchman keeping his year-long vigil upon the Atridae's tower. In a few packed lines he runs the gamut of his emotions during the years of watching, and

at the end there flashes on his tired eyes the beacon which tells that Troy is taken at last. He summons the house, but his joy is dimmed by premonitions of disaster, and the chorus of old men, as it recalls the events of the years of waiting, finds it hard to "let the happier note prevail." Clytemnestra enters, queenly and ominous, and the passionate imagery with which she traces the flash of the beacon from headland to headland, even her honeyed words to the herald and the chorus, increases our sense of a tremendous power, not all for good. Even the triumphant Agamemnon scents disaster in the magnificence of his reception, and the wailing figure of the captive Cassandra has scarcely vanished down the crimson carpet when to the trembling chorus comes the death-cry of the king. Here is the climax of the action, but we have yet to see the consummation of evil as Clytemnestra, knife in hand, stands in the doorway, taunting the old men and boasting of her crime. A gorgeous setting, action swift and terrible, and tremendous poetry, all in the shadow of the great Aeschylean idea that:

"The issue of impious deeds is evil still,
With plenteous increase, like to like succeeding."

By the original crime of Atreus in feeding Thyestes a banquet of his own children "the race is wedded to calamity," but the judgment of the chorus is against Clytemnestra:

"The offence is thine,
Whatever spirit of hoarded recompense
From elder ages may have wrought with thee."

Evil breeds evil, is the eternal law, but under it the human character is morally responsible. Aeschylus presented men

and women acting under what to him was the fundamental law of life; there is criticism of the characters, but no attempt to explain or justify the law.

In the drama of Sophocles, Aeschylus' younger contemporary, is represented the highest degree of Greek detachment. He sat, says Tennyson, "like a god, holding no form of creed, yet contemplating all." He is not primarily concerned with the laws that govern life. With him the first interest is man—

"Many wonders there be, but naught more wondrous than man,"—

and man he represents not in vindication of any moral law, but as in his strength and weakness he steers his course through the dark waters of experience. It may or may not be his fault that he is caught in an eddy and sucked down—that is of little consequence—what matters is that he hold his helm steady. The end may be ruinous, but it is often glorious. Sophocles knew that life is as pitiless to ignorance as it is to wickedness, and, like a true Greek, he finds no fault with the fact. He may present man as the helpless victim of an unjust universe, but his purpose is to permit us to contemplate the eternal wonder of humanity, as Pope later described it,

"The glory, jest, and riddle of the world."

Oedipus, as has been said, is a good man; he has shown himself a wise king, and with the noblest intentions he pulls down the sky upon his own head. We, who know the whole story before he does, tremble with expectancy as step by step he gathers the forces for his own destruction, and when finally blind and mad, with blood streaming

from his sightless sockets, he rushes from the scene, we sit transfixed at the malevolent power of circumstance and the awful capacity of the human soul for suffering. Horror there is, and pity, but there is also admiration, and most of all there is wonder, staggering wonder at man and the ways of man in life. Ibsen in *Rosmersholm* used the same sort of plot, and there, too, the unravelling of the past drives the present action to disaster, but with what a difference. Always with Ibsen, society is the villain, there is something wrong with the universe. Sophocles has no complaint to make; there is nothing wrong, there is only what is, and that his play presents.

With Euripides, the last of the three, there comes another and greater change. Like Sophocles, he found no law, but he was worried about it, and his plays are a passionate vindication of man. Where Aeschylus presented the vindication of the moral law, and Sophocles the wonder and mystery of man, Euripides plead man's cause against the forces that destroy him. *Medea* is the story of a woman wronged. Her story is interesting because she is interesting, not as it is the story of mankind. It was the nature of Greek tragedy to present heroic but typical characters in extraordinary but typical crises. *Medea* is a strange, exotic woman in a trying situation, and her solution is entirely her own. Hers is perhaps the most terrible display of passion in literature, but it lacks the universality characteristic of Greek drama. The old Greek tragedy was clearly changing in the hands of Euripides, and that, no doubt, accounts for his contemporary failure—he won only five first prizes in a long life, notwithstanding that he was ranked as the first poet in Greece. His reward has been to become the most popular Greek dramatist to modern readers.

With Aristophanes we have another end, but for us he is also a beginning. He was the last of the writers of the old comedy, and he is the only one whose work has been preserved. The old comedy of Athens is tragedy with a grinning face; not that it is burlesque of the great themes, or even structurally resembles tragedy, but Greek comedy is simply that same honest intellectualism used in the interests of laughter.

Comedy, by its very nature, is intellectual. The comic muse had reason for her handmaid, as the tragic muse has passion. One can feel without thinking—in fact one usually does—but one cannot recognize an incongruity even of the most obvious sort without the exercise of reason. It is only natural, that when the comic spirit took hold of a people as intellectual as the Athenians of the fifth century it raised peals of laughter such as have rarely been heard since. It was another aspect of their passion for truth that the comic spirit should be free. Nothing and no one was safe from it; war and philosophy, poets, statesmen, tradesmen, slaves, and women of every variety were victims of the jibes of Aristophanes. He did not hesitate to smother with ridicule the greatest man in Athens or the last solemn undertaking of the state. He is the spirit of Dionysos, wine and spring and the riotous joy of the free creative impulse, and his only serious purpose is to raise a laugh. His comedy is intellectual, but it makes no snobbish pretense. He knew that slapstick is funny and that there can be a hearty laugh without viciousness in a lewd situation, and he used both with a verve and audacity that sweeps away all moral objections. With all his coarseness there is not a speck of moral pollution in Aristophanes. He is the great mind at play, turning the world upside down for the fun of it as Rabelais did, but all with a polished art.

to which Rabelais was a stranger. We cannot produce in English the lyric beauty of his verse, but he is the supreme example of the master poet turned clown. "Monkeys and nightingales in the tree-tops," has been given as the symbol of his spirit; for us the antics of the monkeys remain, but only the faintest echo of the song of the bird.

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This is the message of the Attic drama—this honest intellectualism, this passion for truth, this serene and level gaze on life—and this has always been the modern spirit. For seven hundred years, ever since the first glimmer of the Renaissance, great spirits here and there have been struggling to make it prevail. It is the struggle to free the intellect, to tear from it the veils of hope and fear, so that it may look clearly and unafraid upon the face of life and know it as it is, terrible and pitiful and glorious and utterly nonsensical. Once for a short time in Athens twenty-five hundred years ago this vision was achieved, and from that brilliant age rise the tragic figures of kings and queens to show what men saw in it: the stifled cry of Agamemnon from behind the palace doors; Cassandra praying for the fate of the ever-mournful nightingale; blind Oedipus, once more a king at heart, walking out alone from Colonus to vanish from the world; and lest the spirit of man grow too proud with the dignity of sorrow, from the reeds along the river Styx comes the mocking chorus of the Frogs.

PAUL LANDIS

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AGAMEMNON

BY

AESCHYLUS