

AGAMEMNON



By Aeschylus
translated by Ted Hughes
A Playgoer's Guide

Aeschylus

The first great tragic dramatist of Greece was Aeschylus (525-456 BC). His plays focused on the conflicting concerns of political leaders for their people and for themselves. Little is known of Aeschylus' youth. He was probably born and grew up in Eleusis, northwest of Athens. He was recorded as having entered the Dionysia, Athens' major dramatic competition, shortly after its reorganization in 501 or 500 BC. He won his first success in the theatre in 484 BC at the age of 41.

Aeschylus is said to have introduced into Greek drama the second actor. This not only was an exciting break from the traditional single performer and chorus but also allowed for a variety of plots and dialogue. Aeschylus reduced the size and the role of the chorus. He used some unusual scenic effects as well as exotic and often terrifying masks and costumes.

Aeschylus died at the age of 69 in Gela, Sicily. After his death the Athenians took the unprecedented step of decreeing that his plays could be revived for festival competitions. He was awarded the title "Father of Tragedy."

The House of Atreus

The story of the House of Atreus, and particularly Orestes' and Electra's revenge for their father's murder, is one of the most popular and enduring of all Greek legends, a favourite among the classical tragedians and still very popular with modern playwrights (e.g., T. S. Eliot, Eugene O'Neill, Jean Paul Sartre). However, different writers tell the story in very different ways. The outline is as follows.

Pelops had, among other children, two sons, the brothers Atreus and Thyestes. Atreus married Aerope, and they had two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus. And Thyestes had two sons and a daughter Pelopia.

Atreus and Thyestes quarrelled; Thyestes had an affair with Atreus' wife, Aerope, and was banished from Argos by Atreus. However, Thyestes petitioned to be allowed to return, and Atreus, apparently wishing a reconciliation, agreed to allow Thyestes to come back and prepared a huge banquet to celebrate the end of their differences.

At the banquet, however, Atreus served Thyestes the cooked flesh of Thyestes' two slaughtered sons. Thyestes ate the food, and then was informed of what he had done. Overcome with horror, Thyestes cursed the family of Atreus and left Argos with his one remaining child, his daughter Pelopia.

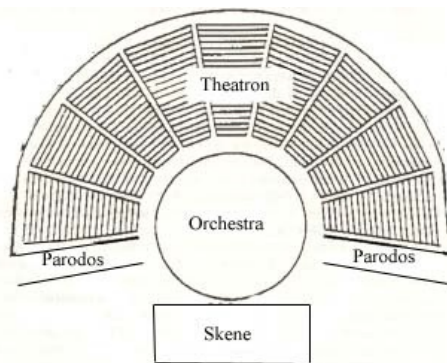
Agamemnon and Menelaus, the two sons of Atreus, married Clytemnestra and Helen respectively, two twin sisters, but not identical twins (Clytemnestra had a human father; whereas, Helen was a daughter of Zeus). Helen was so famous for her beauty that a number of men wished to marry her. The suitors all agreed that they would act to support the man she eventually married in the event of any need for mutual assistance. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra had three children, Iphigeneia, Orestes, and Electra.

When Helen (Menelaus' wife) ran off to Troy with Paris, Agamemnon and Menelaus organized and led the Greek forces against the Trojans. The army assembled at Aulis, but the fleet could not sail because of contrary winds sent by Artemis. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia in order to placate Artemis.

With Agamemnon and Menelaus off in Troy, Aegisthus (son of Thyestes) returned to Argos, where he became the lover of Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife. They sent Orestes into exile, humiliated Electra, Agamemnon's surviving daughter (either treating her as a servant or marrying her off to a common farmer). When Agamemnon returned, the two conspirators successfully killed him and assumed royal control of Argos.

(Adapted from the Aeschylus Web site of Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College:
<<http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/HouseofAtreus.htm>>

The Greek Theatre



Parts of a Greek Theater

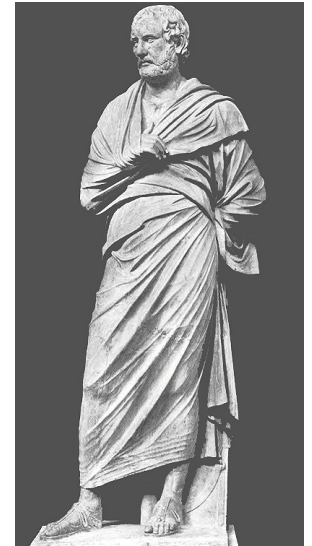
Greek plays were originally performed in an outdoor theatre. Earlier Greek theatres were described as “open areas in city centers or next to hillsides.” The audience could sit or stand and view the play. There was a later gradual evolution towards more elaborate theatre structures, but the basic layout stayed the same.

The actors used masks to show what character they were, and the stage could only have a chorus and three actors at one time. The actors had to go back stage after playing one character, switch masks and costumes, and then come back as a different character. There were certain limits to the way an actor could present on the Greek stage. The Chorus, which was a group of 12-15 people, were not allowed to go backstage, and had to remain in full view of the audience for the whole show.

Greek plays were performed as part of religious events or festivals, and

unless later revived, were performed only once. The plays were always shown in competition with others and the audience voted either first, second, or third place. Tragedies usually dealt with stories from the mythic past, and comedies dealt with contemporary figures and problems.

(Drawn from the Reed College Humanities 110 Web site
<<http://academic.reed.edu/humanities/110/Tech/Theater.html#staging>>



Aeschylus

Out of more than 80 known titles, 52 of Aeschylus' plays won first prizes. Only seven of the tragedies survive: the trilogy *Oresteia*, which includes *Agamemnon*, *Choephoroi*, and *Eumenides*; *The Suppliants*; *The Persians*; *Seven Against Thebes*; and *Prometheus*.

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From the Page to the Stage

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