

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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AESCHYLUS

(525 B.C.E.-456 B.C.E.)

Works

Persians 472 B.C.E.

The Seven Against Thebes 467 B.C.E.

The Suppliant Maidens. 467 B.C.E.

(*The Oresteia*; 458 B.C.E.)

The Agamemnon

The Libation Bearers

The Eumenides

Prometheus Bound (480's-410's B.C.E.) (*Disputed dates of creation*)

Biography

The lives of the three great Greek tragedians (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides) are interwoven with myth; tradition is mixed with fact, and the facts themselves are often so uncertain, that it is hard to tell where fact ends and fiction begins. One tradition attributes the greatest contribution of Aeschylus to the revelations of a dream. One night when he was guarding his father's flocks, a vision from the gods commanded Aeschylus to glorify the divine through writing tragedy drama for the religious festivals. This is the kind of injunction with which we are familiar, both from ancient Greek and ancient Hebrew cultures, as it indicates the high calling expected of the great writer.

Whatever the truth in the story, Aeschylus must have begun writing plays at an early age. By the age of twenty-five years he was competing in the dramatic contests held yearly in honor of the god Dionysus. It was to be fifteen years, however, before he carried off first prize in these hard fought drama contests. Meanwhile, he had learned his craft so well, and was such a natural genius at it, that from his first success, in 484 B.C.E., he continued to win almost continuously until his death. It is estimated that more than half of his plays were first prize winners.

Aeschylus spent much of his writing life at the court of Hieron, tyrant of Syracuse, though he regularly returned to Athens to supervise the production of his dramas, in which he apparently competed in alternate years. He continued to write till the day of his death which, according to the story told, was caused by an eagle's mistaking his bald head for a stone and dropping a tortoise on it to break the shell.

Achievements

Technical innovation In seven extant dramas, produced in the first half of the fifth century B.C. E., the playwright Aeschylus takes us from the mythical imagination of the epic tradition into mimetic action aimed to engage the newly self-directing democracy of Athenian citizens. We move squarely into the world of the *dramatic imagination*. Aeschylus is the first classical dramatist we know, a writer of great vision and depth of human understanding, who took the choral-actor ingredients of the sixth century drama, and powerfully raised the expressive power of drama, as well as enriching the on-stage relationship between the chorus and the main, and eventually the second, actor. Though we have only seven remaining plays, out of some ninety Aeschylus wrote, those works span a twenty-five year period during which Greek drama was evolving at a meteoric rate, and give us a perspective onto the whole genre.

The Institution of Justice In his trilogy *The Oresteia*, a group of three dramas, Aeschylus takes several different snapshots of the development of justice in the human community—community projected onto the mythological level—which community is Athens. In the first play of his trilogy we see the doom of murdered Agamemnon; in the second play, the return of Agamemnon's son and daughter to avenge him;

in the third play the creation of a Supreme Law Court—its members gods—who decree the replacement of revenge killing by legal judgment, and who at the same time exonerate Agamemnon's son, Orestes, for his act of murder/vengeance. The trilogy as a whole is a brilliant examination, from within Athenian culture, of the origins of a legal system which is the supremely civilizing institution of Athenian society. Aeschylus's grasp of the nature of justice is his greatest achievement.