2.4 AESCHYLUS

Aeschylus was born in 525, two years after the death of the dictator Pisistratus, nine years after the traditional date of the creation of tragedy by Thespis. About his father Euphorion we know little. He was of upper-class family and came from Eleusis, centre of the Mysteries of Demeter and the Maid. Aeschylus was probably not an initiate, although he was later charged with revealing the Mysteries; his defence was that he did not realize that what he revealed was secret, which an initiate would surely have known.

Figure 12 Aeschylus. (Museo Archeologico, Florence. Photo: Brogi-Alinari.)

He was still at an impressionable age when the dictators were ousted, eleven when Hipparchus was assassinated, fifteen when Hippias was exiled. He saw during his life the steady growth of democracy, to which he was broadly sympathetic.

He also saw the threat from Persia and shared in its repulse. He certainly fought at Marathon in 490, where his brother was killed, probably at Salamis in 480 (he gives a vivid account in *The Persians*), possibly at Artemisium in 480 and Plataea in 479. He was patently a patriot: his epitaph, probably composed by himself, speaks of his soldiering and does not mention his writing!

We do not know how or when Aeschylus began to write but possibly it was early in the fifth century. His first victory was in 484; the plays are lost, and we do not even know their titles. An ancient list of his works numbers seventy-two titles, or eighteen tetralogies, but we know of ten more titles from other sources. Only seven plays survive, a selection prescribed for use in Byzantine schools. These are *The Persians* (472), *Seven Against Thebes* (467), *The Suppliant Women* (463? archaic in style, perhaps written thirty years before and revived, perhaps deliberately reverting to a past mode), the three plays of *The Oresteia* (458: the only trilogy to survive from any dramatist), *Prometheus* (457 or 456).

Round about 470 Aeschylus paid a visit to the court of Hiero at Gela in Sicily, at that time a major cultural centre. He revisited Gela at the end of his life, and died there in 456; the story goes that an eagle with a tortoise in its talons mistook his bald head for a rock and dropped the tortoise on it. His epitaph ran:

> Aeschylus the Athenian, Eurphorion's son, is dead,
> his body lies beneath the grave in Gela's fields of corn.
> The holy ground of Marathon could tell his glorious bravery,
> and one long-haired Persian came to know it.

The people of Athens honoured his memory by permitting the performance of his works after his death in competition with those of living authors.

2.5 THE LEGEND BEHIND *THE ORESTEIA*

Tantalus was a son of Zeus who ruled in Lydia, was admitted to the company of the gods, abused their hospitality, and was punished everlastingly by having food and drink just out of his reach; hence our 'tantalize'. Pelops was his son. Pelops won a bride by bribery, subsequently killing the man he bribed, who cursed him with his dying breath. The curse passed on. Pelops's sons, Atreus and Thyestes, quarrelled over the power and Atreus murdered Thyestes's sons, and served them up to him in a cannibal or 'Thyestean' feast. Thyestes cursed his brother's line, which thus inherited a double curse (Seneca in a gory rhetorical drama on this theme has a scene in which Atreus produces the heads of the children and says 'Do you recognize your sons?' to which Thyestes replies 'I recognize my brother'). Atreus had two sons, Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, and Menelaus, king of Sparta, who thus divided between them the Peloponnese or Island of Pelops.

Zeus in the form of a swan seduced Leda, and from the resulting egg were hatched two girls, Helen and Clytemnestra, and two boys, Castor and Polydeuces (or Pollux). Helen grew to be the most beautiful woman in the world. (Homer, wisely, does not attempt to describe her but shows the old men watching her, and whispering that she was worth a war.) Helen married Menelaus, Clytemnestra Agamemnon. Throughout *The Oresteia* we must never forget that Clytemnestra is Helen's sister.

Across the Aegean, commanding the Dardanelles, was the powerful city of Troy, ruled by Priam. One of his sons, Alexander or Paris, was shepherding on Mount Ida, when he was called in to adjudicate in a divine beauty contest. All the candidates were goddesses. All offered bribes. Hera offered power, Athene wisdom, Aphrodite marriage to the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris chose the last (the romance of youth!).

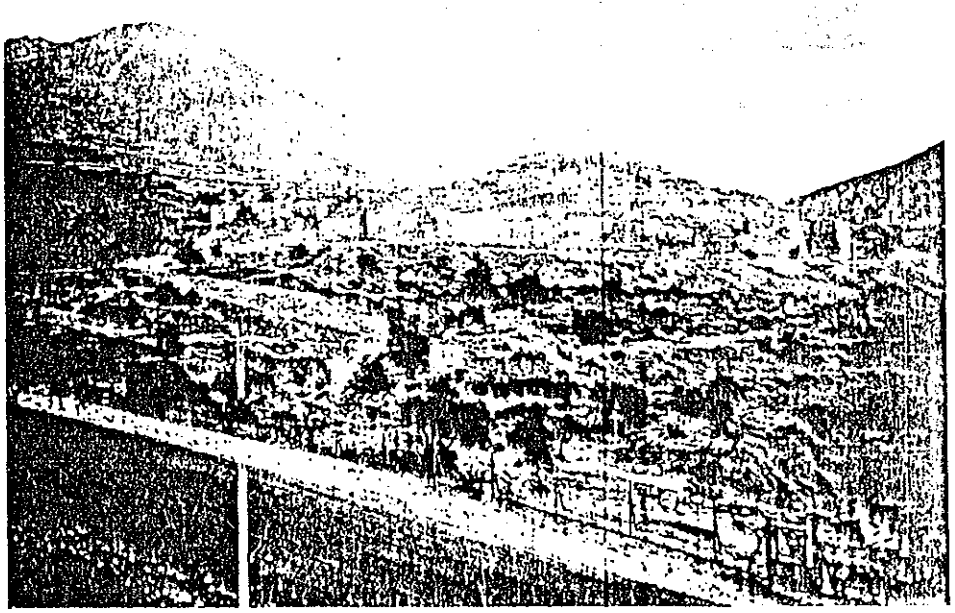


Figure 13 The palace at Mycenae. (Ronald Sheridan.)

The most beautiful woman in the world was married to Menelaus. Paris went to Sparta and eloped with Helen. We may now think that the Greeks saw a pretext for cutting the Trojan economic stranglehold on them, but ancient sources say nothing of this. At any rate, the Greeks were out for vengeance. Their forces mustered at Aulis, on the east coast, with Agamemnon in command. But, according to the usual myth, which Aeschylus does not follow, Agamemnon shot a deer sacred to Artemis. Adverse winds kept the fleet in port. The prophet Calchas declared that the goddess would be appeased only by the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigeneia. She was lured out under pretext of marriage to the heroic soldier Achilles, and killed. The fleet sailed.

The siege lasted ten years. Homer's *The Iliad* (properly *The Anger of Achilles*) records an episode in that decade. Clytemnestra felt no loyalty to Agamemnon after his murder of their daughter, and took Thyestes's surviving son Aegisthus as her lover, keeping the other daughter Electra at home, but sending their son Orestes away to Phocis in Central Greece.

Eventually Troy fell. The Greeks went too far and offended the gods by plundering temples. Their ships were scattered by a storm, so that Menelaus and Odysseus were years in their return. Agamemnon escaped and arrived with his prisoner-of-war and concubine, the Trojan princess Cassandra, who was dedicated to the god Apollo and hence sacrosanct. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus killed both Agamemnon and Cassandra.

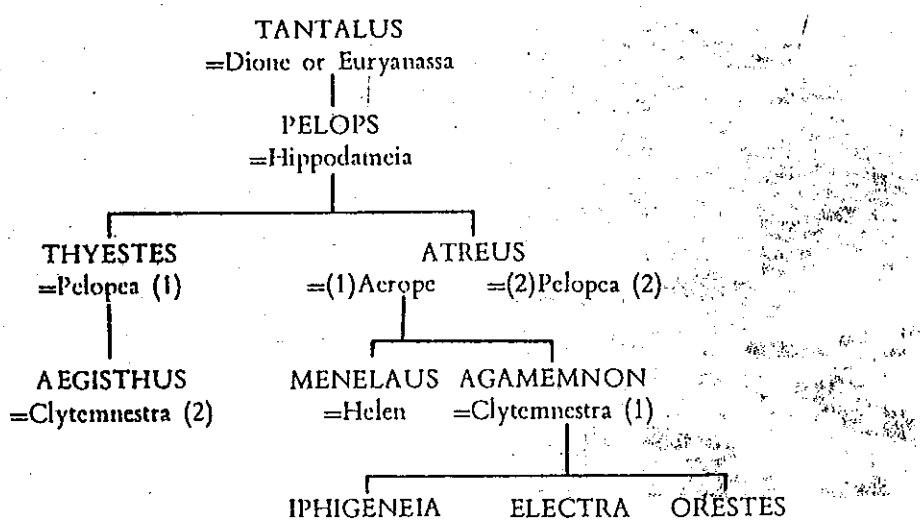
Figure 14 Troy. Eastern city walls. (Mansell Collection.)

As the years passed Orestes grew to manhood. Apollo through his oracle at Delphi told him to avenge his father. The killing of Aegisthus was just another episode in a feud. The killing of his mother raised acute problems of moral and ritual impurity but he did it. The earliest traditions concentrate on the killing of Aegisthus, which is treated as commendable. Later accounts tell how he was harried by the Furies or Avenging Spirits of his mother, until he eventually found purification in one way or another.

This, or something like this, would be the expectation of the Athenian audience once they knew the theme of the tragedy. But did it actually happen? Not all of it: we are not likely to believe in seduction by a swan, human birth of quadruplets from an egg, or a divine beauty contest. But Troy existed: so did Mycenae and Sparta. A war in the mid-thirteenth century is a historical possibility; the abduction of a queen would be a positive occasion for war. African studies have taught us to respect oral tradition. We need not doubt that the myth had a historical basis. But its historicity does not affect the drama.

Figure 15 Agamemnon and Clytemnestra; relief (Archaeological Museum, Sparta.)

Family Tree of Orestes



2.6 STRUCTURE OF A GREEK PLAY

Before you begin to read, it will be sensible to say briefly something about the structure of a Greek play and some of the things to look for. A Greek play is written in verse, and shaped in a succession of scenes interspersed with songs (and dances) from the chorus. Thus the pattern of *Agamemnon*, the first play of *The Oresteia* trilogy, is as follows:

1–39	Prologue. The Watchman sees news that Troy has fallen.
40–257	Parodos (entry of chorus) (40–103: entry, 104–257: choral song).
258–354	First episode. Clytemnestra tells the chorus that the news is true.
355–488	First stasimon (choral song).
488–680	Second episode. The herald brings news of Agamemnon's arrival.
681–781	Second stasimon followed by 782–809: ceremonial entry of Agamemnon.

810–974 Third episode. Agamemnon arrives and enters the palace on a purple or crimson carpet.

975–1034 Third stasimon.

1035–1330 Fourth episode (broken 1072–1177 by a duet between Cassandra and the chorus), Cassandra refuses to follow Clytemnestra into the house, tells her story, and prophesies the death that awaits them.

1331–42 Fourth stasimon.

1343–1576 Fifth episode. Agamemnon's death-cry is heard. Clytemnestra is revealed in triumph. The chorus burst into song, and she eventually also sings.

1577–1673 Exodos (final scene). Aegisthus boasts his triumph and quarrels with the chorus; Clytemnestra intervenes for peace.

You will be able to see similar structures in the other plays.

You have still to come to terms with lyric tragedy, poetical tragedy. First, understand what Aeschylus is doing: he is going to be concerned in a sequence of crimes. One of these is the destruction of Troy; this is kept constantly before us; it is the *type* of the other crimes. He uses *images* to point the sequence: watch out for the image of the net, for example. Look for animal images: what do they signify? He uses dramatic actions as *symbolic* or representative. Agamemnon's treading on the carpet is one such. Look out for the house both as visible backcloth and symbol. Indeed the whole trilogy has a certain symbolic quality; for it assuredly has something to do with cor temporary politics and the myth thus becomes symbolic. In addition to this, poetry gives Aeschylus a dramatic *form* both broadly and narrowly. Remember for example in the chc ruses verse balances verse, and the same dance movement was carried out in the reverse direction. You will sometimes find an obscure thought illuminated when you see that it is part of a balancing pattern.

I don't think you'll have much difficulty in coming to terms with the scenes or episodes. They are powerfully handled, and provide obvious strong drama. I think you may find the choruses more difficult, particularly the first chorus of *Agamemnon*, which is generally reckoned one of Aeschylus's most magnificent productions, but which is certainly obscure. You are plunged in head first! Treat it as poetry. Do not forget the *symbolic* and *typical* value of myths, which somehow seem to set a particular incident as expressing a timeless truth. So there are many incidental allusions to myths in the choruses. And look how the first song of the chorus sets in context the events that follow. Remember again that the plays were presented at a religious festival.

Do not look for realism in Greek plays. There is some, but it is startling because it is not the norm. Look for originality but within the context of the handling of the given material. Look above all for a poetic (that is a creative) representation of life. It is imagination above all that you must bring to the study of a Greek tragedy.