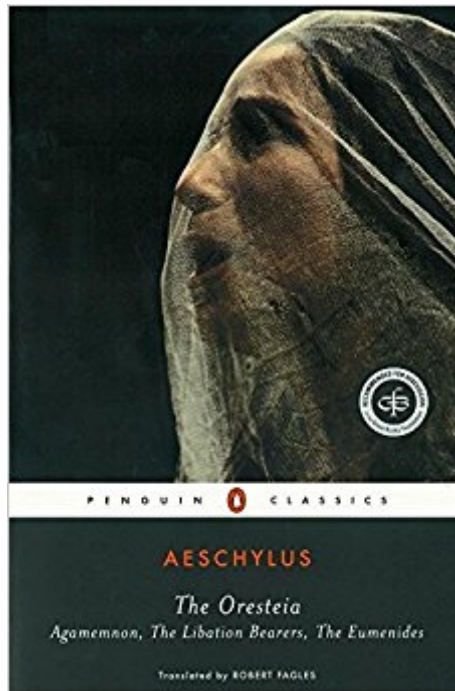




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The Oresteia: Agamemnon; The Libation Bearers; The Eumenides



Synopsis

In the *Oresteia* Aeschylus addressed the bloody chain of murder and revenge within the royal family of Argos. As they move from darkness to light, from rage to self-governance, from primitive ritual to civilized institution, their spirit of struggle and regeneration becomes an everlasting song of celebration. In *Agamemnon*, a king's decision to sacrifice his daughter and turn the tide of war inflicts lasting damage on his family, culminating in a terrible act of retribution; *The Libation Bearers* deals with the aftermath of Clytemnestra's regicide, as her son Orestes sets out to avenge his father's death; and in *The Eumenides*, Orestes is tormented by supernatural powers that can never be appeased. Forming an elegant and subtle discourse on the emergence of Athenian democracy out of a period of chaos and destruction, *The Oresteia* is a compelling tragedy of the tensions between our obligations to our families and the laws that bind us together as a society. The only trilogy in Greek drama that survives from antiquity, Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* is translated by Robert Fagles with an introduction, notes and glossary written in collaboration with W.B. Stanford in Penguin Classics. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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"Conveys more vividly and powerfully than any of the ten competitors I have consulted the eternal power of this masterpiece ... a triumph." —•Bernard Levin— "How satisfying to read at last a modern translation which is rooted in Greek feeling and Greek thought ... both the stature and the profound instinctive genius of Aeschylus are recognised." —•Mary Renault, author of *The King Must Die*

Text: English, Greek (translation)

Just as promised

All drama exists in the shadow of the three great tragedians of Ancient Greece; Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. They wrote scores of plays apiece, but only scattered works of those survive. Of Aeschylus' body of work survives the least: plays numbering a mere seven. However, Aeschylus was cut a bit of a break, because three of those surviving seven form the only complete trilogy of plays from Ancient Greek theatre: the *Oresteia* (Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex", "Oedipus at Colonus", and "Antigone" are often grouped together as the "Theban Plays", but they are not a proper trilogy, which, in Greek theatre, was three interlinked plays performed together in one festival, alongside a fourth satyr play; the satyr play that accompanied the *Oresteia* has been lost. The scene is the aftermath of the Trojan War, where at least 50% of all Greek mythology seems to have its roots; the victorious Agamemnon returns home, taking with him the despoiled Trojan Princess Cassandra, cursed by Apollo to forever speak truth and never be believed. The war is over, but the echoes persist; indeed, the tragedy has its beginnings in the war's beginning, when Agamemnon, in order to facilitate the armada's crossing of the Aegean, sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia. His wife Clytemnestra, understandably, resents this; perhaps less understandably, she has been unfaithful to her husband in his long absence, and, together with her new lover Aegisthus, plots to kill her husband, as well as poor Cassandra. The repercussions of this redound through the next two plays, "The Libation Bearers" and "The Eumenides", as Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's son Orestes, together with his sister Electra, must decide how to avenge their father's murder. Orestes is in a Catch-22, having to reconcile contradictory demands of divine justice: avenging his father means murdering his mother, a crime to the Eumenides, while not avenging his father will

offend Apollo. When looking at Greek drama from a modern perspective, the aspect that many people find the most challenging is the use of Chorus. The first play, "Agamemnon", makes the heaviest use of the Chorus, and I consider it the weakest of the three (by virtue of being the first, it also has a lot of setup). The following "The Libation Bearers" and "The Eumenides" are stronger, with more limited Chorus, and, since the crux of the latter, especially, are debates with dialogue, there is no sense that important actions are occurring offscreen (which was a major trope in Greek drama). These types of stories remain an acquired taste, but they are very enjoyable to those who get used to them. Aeschylus here uses the whole trilogy, and particularly the final play, to dramatize the development of current ideas concerning justice; explanations are given here for the existence of the twelve-man jury, for example. While I consider Sophocles to be the greatest of the three tragedians, Aeschylus' magnum opus is well worth the time of fans of classical drama and mythology.

If you are college student and your professor has asked you to get a different translation, please ignore him or her politely and purchase this one. In the classroom this translation has proven to be invaluable to both me and my peers. Mr. Fagles gives us a very powerful translation of this text. This edition, unlike other's I've read, comes with some very useful material including a thorough introduction by Mr. Fagles, a genealogy tree of the house of Atreus, notes from the author that give a certain insight into certain aspects of the trilogy that I would've otherwise missed, and a glossary of terms and characters within Ancient Greek culture. If you're looking for a more lyrical, more elegant translation of The Oresteia, I recommend R. Lattimore. Consistently throughout all of his translations Mr. Fagles delivers a certain immediacy and harrowing depth in his renderings. The Three Theban Plays, no less profound than The Oresteia, represent another exemplary application of his abilities. Disparate of the notes on this translation, this trilogy and Ancient Greek plays in general, never fail to deliver to you a glimpse at the ontological status of Truth itself. These are some of the most important texts ever written; not due to plot, but due to their aims and their subtextual elements and how they arrive at them. Ancient Greek tragedy helps develop an understanding of topics such as Justice and Truth so expertly and so painfully that I feel no other texts (or very, very few others) can rightly be considered equal.

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