THE

OF READING

A Passionate Guide to 189 of the World's Best Authors and Their Works

CHARLES VAN DOREN

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chapter one

The Golden Age

In the beginning … two thousand seven hundred years ago, more or less. That great beginning led people of later times to call it a Golden Age. It is almost incomprehensible that the first poet about whom we know anything in the history of the Western world is also, as Dante later called Homer, the greatest of all. The same is true of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; they are not only the first dramatists but also among the best. Herodotus and Thucydides are, if not the greatest historians, then the most inventive and memorable not only for their stories but also for the judgments they pronounced. And Aristophanes taught us how to laugh at the follies of even the most powerful tyrants.

Homer; Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes; and Herodotus and Thucydides were all Greeks; that is, they were inhabitants twenty-five hundred years ago of a small, disorderly country at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. Homer predated the others by two or three hundred years, but his presence continued to be felt by all classical Greeks for as long as people thought it meant something special to be Greek. He was not an Athenian, as most of the others were, but he might as well have been. Nor was the language he spoke and wrote exactly the same as theirs, although it was close enough to be understood by them when they read him. The entire population of what could have been called Greece, or Hellas, in the fifth century before the birth of Christ was probably not greater than the population of a medium sized city of today. The total

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number of persons calling themselves Greeks (or Hellenes) may have represented less than 1 percent of the population of the world. But they had an advantage not shared by any one else at the time. They were fighting for their lives, not just as individuals but as members of a civilization that treasured liberty. They were fighting to be free, and that is a powerful incentive.

HOMER

fl. 750-675 BCE ?
The Iliad
The Odyssey

Almost nothing is known about the author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. It is only a guess that he lived, probably somewhere on the Mediterranean's eastern littoral or perhaps on one of the Aegean islands, sometime in the eighth or seventh century before the Christian era. It is customary to say he flourished 750-675 BCE. It used to be thought that he, like most of his contemporaries, could neither read nor write, but the latest theories hold that he must have inscribed the two great epics, although no manuscripts dating from that period have ever been found. The language of the poems is a curious mixture of more or less ancient dialects and later versions of Greek, but this doesn't mean the works are merely collections of stories or songs. It now seems almost certain that a single man, whom we call Homer (as did the Greeks twenty-five hundred years ago), wrote the two poems that, for a hundred generations, have continued to move our hearts and souls because of their deep understanding of what it means to be human. It is not surprising, then, that they have also influenced almost every great literary work since.

The Iliad is surely the earlier of the two poems. Beginning with the immortal hexameter line: "Sing, Goddess, the wrath of Achilles, Pelias's son," it deals with events that are thought to have occurred three or four hundred years before it was composed, perhaps around 1200 BCE. According to Homer's version of the events, Paris, the

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second son of King Priam of Troy, eloped with Helen, the wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta. Helen was apparently willing to leave her husband and her daughter Hermione for this handsome stranger, and Paris took her back to Troy where, after a suitable period, they married. They lived there as man and wife for twenty years, Helen in particular enjoying the luxurious life her new husband provided for her in what was then perhaps the wealthiest city in the Mediterranean world. Troy was the capital of an empire that encompassed much of what we now call the Middle East, and Priam seems to have been a benevolent ruler who was loved and admired by his subjects. Mainland Greece at this time was probably primitive by comparison with the civilized world that Paris had described to Helen when he wooed her away from her old home and carried her off to a new one.

But Menelaus never forgot her, and after many lonely years he prevailed upon his brother, Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, to gather an army to retrieve her. This first expeditionary force was beset by bad luck; among other things, the Argives, or Achaeans, didn't know where Troy actually was located. Agamemnon returned with little to show for his efforts except some treasure stolen from small cities along the way, and slaves—males to row his ships, and females to perform their usual services.

Menelaus continued to urge his brother to "make things right," as Homer writes, and another, much larger army was raised about ten years after Helen's abduction. The siege of Troy began and continued for another ten weary years, with neither the Argives nor the Trojans able to claim victory. Victory for the Trojans would mean the destruction of the entire invading army, with perhaps only a handful of refugees able to return to their far-off homes. An Achaean victory would result in the destruction of the city of Troy and the devastation of its hinterland.

In the tenth year of the siege, the Trojan general, Prince Hector, was killed by Achilles, the chief Argive warrior, and shortly thereafter Troy fell, was burned to the ground, its male inhabitants put to the sword, and its women and children sold as slaves.

Things like that happened fairly frequently in the twelfth century BCE, and it is not entirely clear why the Greeks commemorated this

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tale with religious intensity, as they did no other expedition, successful or not. The Homeric poems were said to have been divinely inspired, and the story they told was interpreted as revealing the true story of the gods in their relation to men.

Later epics—for example, *The Song of Roland* or *The Saga of Burnt Njal*—are primitive, in the sense that they present scenes of heroic warfare unalloyed with profound or subtle emotions. They are about raw courage, raw revenge, and other strong feelings. Homer, in *The Iliad*, deals with these feelings, too, but the poem is not primitive. An astonishing thing about it is, although Homer obviously knew nothing about the amenities and comforts of our life today, he knew most of what we know about the human heart. Maybe even more.

Hector and Achilles are an extraordinary pair. There is a sense in which both are the hero of *The Iliad*, another sense in which neither is. Both Achilles and Hector have their moments of "stardom," as we might call it, in the poem. Achilles is far and away the best of the Greeks, but he is deeply insulted by Agamemnon, who humiliates him in front of the entire army. He retires from the fray to sulk in his tent, surrounded by his followers—his Myrmidons. In his absence, Hector tears through the Achaean army, killing many famous fighters, and finally reaches the Greek ships, which he tries to set afire. Without their ships, the Achaeans will never be able to return home. Win or lose, they will be stranded in Asia. The burning of the ships is therefore a major crisis. Hector is beaten back not by Achilles, who should have been there, but by the giant Ajax, whose slowness of wit then and thereafter deprives him of the honor that should have been his due.

But Hector has overreached himself. He is so certain of victory he ensures his own death and the destruction of his family and his city. In a mad rage he kills Patroclus, the best friend of Achilles, and Achilles, wracked by this unbearable loss, finally returns to the battle. His revenge is terrible. He is like a great scythe slicing through the Trojan ranks. Finally the field is left alone to the two antagonists, Hector and Achilles. The Achaeans fall back to the water's edge; the Trojans retreat within their walls. There is an awful silence on the plain, the only sound the crunch of Achilles' feet and the rasping gasp in Hector's throat as, in heavy armor, he runs for his life. He doesn't make it.

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Achilles, still enraged, insults the body, dragging it naked behind his chariot, round and round his Myrmidon encampment. Finally, old King Priam, who has lost both his general and his dearest son, determines that he must retrieve the body. Alone he goes, out into the silence, with a wagon drawn by mules, piled high with a ransom of gold, rich robes, jewels, and ornaments. It is night and Priam, aided by the gods, drives the wagon through the Greek encampment, seeking the tent where Achilles sits, still mourning the death of his friend. The old man enters, kneels down, and "kisses the hands that had slain so many of his sons." Achilles, shaken, moved beyond grief, accepts the gifts and returns the body. Priam, the old king, loads the corpse of his son on the wagon and drives the mules back to the city, where the funeral takes place.

On the twelfth day, when the funeral ends, the war will begin anew. The poem ends here. It does not tell what happens. Everyone knew, and still knows, that Troy will be taken, burned, destroyed, wiped from the face of the Earth, that Helen will run back to the arms of Menelaus and be forgiven, and that many Achaean leaders will be lost or killed on the way home. Agamemnon, the chief Argive general and the king of Lacedaemon, will reach home but be slain there by his wife, Clytemnestra, as he struggles to emerge from a richly embroidered shirt he discovers has no sleeves or neck hole. Before he dies she tells him she has made it as a homecoming gift.

The Greeks thought the siege and defeat of Troy was the most terrible thing to ever happen, and the most wonderful. The gods were involved in it as much as the men and women and children. It was a conflict on every level the Greeks could understand, and yet they also understood—or Homer did—that nobody won. They recognized that the deaths of the three great men—Achilles, Hector, and Patroclus—were all tragic and would define the meaning of tragedy for millennia. Perhaps most astounding of all about *The Iliad* is that its author, writing at the very beginning of recorded history, already knew everything there is to know about the deep folly of war.

People who have never read *The Iliad* but who know of it are often unwilling to open it in the belief that it is unrelievedly sad, a seemingly endless series of bloody battles. In a sense this is true, but in another sense it is not. Homer never fails to tell us what is going to

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happen, but even so, when it happens, it is a surprise. You hope against hope and are exhilarated by your love and admiration for the three main characters. The deaths leave your heart broken, but the epic is inspiring nevertheless.

And there are many wonderful interludes in the savage brutality of the fighting, moments during which the beauty of peace shines through even though it cannot be enjoyed. The scene where Hector unknowingly says goodbye for the last time to his beloved wife, Andromache, and his little boy, brings tears to the eyes of the hardiest reader. The response of Andromache to the return of her husband's body from the encampment of Achilles is wrenching: she understands perfectly what must happen to her and her child now that her husband can no longer protect them. And the last dirge for Hector, spoken by Helen herself, who remembers that he was always kind to her even though he knew, as did she, that her very presence in his city was a curse, is riveting. You realize you will never forget these remarkable men and women and that you are richer for having known them.

During the German occupation of Paris in World War II, Simone Weil, a French philosopher, published a small book (really only a pamphlet) titled *The Iliad; or, the Poem of Force*. She said that *The Iliad* was a poem without a hero; the dominant figure in the war was force itself, brutal force, the force of bronze cutting into flesh, the force of fate overtaking a human life, the hopelessness of all the characters, great and small, in the face of events they did not and could not comprehend.

The book was a veiled reference to the brutal German occupation of France, but it is as a commentary on *The Iliad* that it achieved permanence. Simone Weil was right about Homer's epic, which is completely without sentiment and is about force, another name for which is *anangke*, the "necessity" that stands between human beings and the realization of their dreams.

The world of *The Odyssey*, although superficially the same as that of *The Iliad*, is really utterly different. The entire action of *The Iliad* takes place in a period of forty-one days on a blood-soaked beach at the foot of the walls of Troy, and within the beleaguered city. The action of *The Odyssey* ranges over land and sea, extends all the way

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to Hell and back, and only at the end—ten years after it begins—focuses on the small island of Ithaca, in the Ionian Sea, where the crisis and denouement of the poem are played out. The sounds of *The Iliad* are those of clashing arms and the screams of wounded and dying men, and finally the hoarse gasp of a single man running from his foe. Those of *The Odyssey* are the cries of sea birds and the strumming of a lyre as a harpist sings of a world that is no more. And our memory of *The Iliad* suggests to us that much of its action occurs at night in flickering campfire light, whereas *The Odyssey* unfolds in daylight, high noon, with the sun shining and sea waves lapping against a white beach, while on the brow of a hill there shines a building, dazzling, white, a dwelling whether of gods or men we cannot tell.

For more than two thousand years readers have said of *The Iliad* that it is, or is like, a tragedy; and of *The Odyssey* that it is, or is like, a comedy. This judgment is, I think, most just.

Not that *The Odyssey* is funny. A man has gone off to war, and although his side has won he has not returned. For ten years, since word came of the fall of Troy, his faithful wife has waited for him, hoping and praying that he is still alive and will come home to her.

Now, a troop of greedy neighboring landowners is trying to force Penelope to choose among them, beautiful as she still is, her riches and the kingdom to be the reward of the man who wins her. Her son, Telemachus, who was a baby when Odysseus went off to war and is now almost twenty years old, sets out to seek news of his father, in the faint hope that he can be found and brought back to help them. Meanwhile Odysseus lies in the soft, illicit bed of the lovely nymph, Calypso, whose fame is immortal.

The gods are impatient with Odysseus, particularly the dread goddess Athene, the daughter of Zeus. Athene sends the messenger god, Hermes, to Calypso, warning her that she must release her lover, who has remained with her for seven years. Calypso finds Odysseus sitting by the edge of the sea, weeping, and she begs him to stay with her; she will make him immortal, and they will live together for always on her island, Ogygia, the island of the Dead, in the paradise she has made.

He refuses, declaring that he must go home if she will let him. Reluctantly, she helps him build a raft. But Poseidon, Lord of the Sea

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Waves, angry with him, causes a storm to rise. It destroys the raft, and Odysseus is washed up on the shores of a magic land, Phaeacia. There he meets the maiden Nausicäa, who takes him to her father the king. Odysseus is recognized and tells the story of his earlier voyages, beginning at Troy after the end of the war and concluding with his rescue by Calypso. It is probably the most famous voyage ever described—even though it never happened.

Odysseus leaves Troy intent on going home as quickly as possible, but is waylaid by adventures, mostly of his own making. They arise out of his great curiosity about lands he has never seen and the people who inhabit them. He leads a raid on the Ciconians, which offends the gods. He visits the land of the Lotus-eaters, where all is sweet and delightful and no one seems to be ambitious. Odysseus breaks away from that temptation only to fall into the clutches of the Cyclops, Polyphemus, a son of Poseidon. He nearly loses his life but in the end he blinds Polyphemus, thus incurring Poseidon's wrath.

Onward Odysseus wanders, to the land of the Lastrygonians, and then to Circe's island, Aeaea, where Circe transforms his men into grunting swine. Odysseus once again escapes and, at Circe's suggestion, travels to Hell in order to discover the best way home. There he meets the dead Heroes, including Achilles, who tells him how terrible death really is. Returning to the world of the living, Odysseus avoids the Sirens, manages to sneak through the strait between Scylla and Charybdis, loses all his companions, and finally is rescued from the sea by Calypso at the very moment he is expiring.

The telling of this tale within a tale occupies four whole books of *The Odyssey*. By the end of his story, Nausicäa is more than half in love with Odysseus, and the king of the Phaeacians would like to keep this famous, fascinating man in his kingdom, as his son-in-law. But that is impossible; Athene won't have it. And so the Phaeacians carry Odysseus home to Ithaca after bestowing on him princely gifts.

He has arrived home, but he is not yet safe. If the suitors who are harassing Penelope were to find him, alone and unarmed, they would slay him in an instant. How "wily Odysseus" makes contact with Telemachus, how father and son plan together their revenge on the suitors, and how Odysseus finally triumphs over his enemies, is the

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real story of *The Odyssey*, and a superb story it is. It is made even more astonishing as we realize, slowly but surely, that the plan is really Penelope's (although she refuses to accept credit for it). His lovely, faithful wife is therefore the equal of her husband, the famous "Man of Many Devices," and deserves as much fame as he does.

Odysseus, who has spent much of the past nine years in the arms of one goddess or another, still has to make his peace with his wife. Athene is fond of him, chastely of course; he is her favorite mortal. Fortunately, the love of this goddess is without jealousy, the proof of which is made clear by the gift Athene gives Odysseus after he has slain all the suitors and taken his wife into his arms.

What do you do when you have been away from home for twenty years (ten in the siege of Troy, ten in the subsequent wanderings)? Do you spend the first night making love? Or sharing the stories of your troubles? Odysseus of course wants both, as he always does. He asks Athene for help and she, smiling at him as *she* always does, extends the night so there is time for both. Such a night there never was before, and perhaps never after.

The Odyssey is an adventure story of almost unbearable excitement, but it is also—as countless other poets, as well as ordinary readers, recognize—a profoundly true portrayal of human beings and the relations among them. A mother and a son just growing into manhood, a father learning how much he needs the help of his son; that father and *his* old father, whom he also needs; a man and wife—these human ties are probed with an intensity seldom equaled in the two and a half millennia since the poem was composed. In the end, a wonderful family—father, mother, and their beloved son—emerges from the apparent wreckage of their lives. Homer also understands that in the most difficult human enterprises a mortal has to pass through Hell, and Odysseus does that, too, seeking among the dead for the secrets of life among the living. Meanwhile, on Mount Olympus, the immortal gods recline on golden benches, drink from golden cups, and smile and sometimes weep at the vanity and ambition of those creatures down below, with their loves and hates and desires and fears. And their mortality.

Before leaving *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, I want to say a word about translations. There are many, and some are better than others.

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I have read at least four different translations and skipped through a fifth—*Pope's Iliad*, as it was called as though he had written it himself. Despite the praise that famous version received when it was published in the eighteenth century I believe it is unreadable today. The versions of the two poems published in the Loeb Classical Library, by A.T. Murray, seem to me even worse, although these were *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* my father knew and loved and on the basis of which he wrote his superb commentaries in *The Noble Voice*. Translations of both epics by Richmond Lattimore are said to be closer to the Greek than most others but perhaps as a result they are not easy to read. A more passionate version of *The Iliad* by Robert Fitzgerald seemed preferable when it appeared thirty years ago. But none of those, in my opinion, can be compared with the translations of both poems by Robert Fagles that were published at the end of the last century. His *Iliad* is powerful, almost overwhelming, his *Odyssey* utterly charming, and I recommend them to anyone who wishes to read—or reread—Homer's two great epics. I can't imagine any reader not being transported by Fagles into Homer's magical world.

HESIOD

fl. 700–650 BCE ?

The Homeric Hymns

Very little is known about Hesiod. He probably lived from about 700 BCE to about 650, which would make him perhaps half a century younger than Homer. He wrote a "Theogony"—that is, an account of the history of the gods, starting with Chaos and Night and coming down to the present day (his, not ours). Not all of it survives and what does is rather confusing. The better-known "Works and Days" also survives in lengthier fragments. It contains some good advice about both farming and living, but perhaps not enough to warrant finding and reading it.

"The Homeric Hymns," which may or may not have been written by Hesiod, are well worth the trouble—at least the four that survive

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more or less intact. One is the famous story of Demeter (or Ceres), the goddess of agriculture, whose daughter Persephone is abducted by Hades (Pluto), God of the underworld. Her mother, in despair, travels the world in search of her, and when she discovers her whereabouts she asks Pluto to let her daughter come back to the light. Pluto, the third brother of Zeus (Poseidon is the second), is a great god and doesn't have to release her, but he relents on condition that Persephone spend one half of the year with him beneath the surface of the Earth, the other half with her mother above it. Demeter must accept this, which explains the origin of the seasons.

Other "Hymns," more or less intact, are addressed to Apollo and Hermes. They tell delicious tales of these gods that were retold by Greek and Roman poets many times in subsequent centuries.

The "Hymn to Aphrodite" is a fine story and is sexy in a way Homer never was. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, has tricked many male gods into falling for mortal women, and Zeus, to punish her, causes her to fall in love with a mortal man. His name is Anchises and he is very handsome; he is also a son of Dardanus, the founder of Troy. At the time Aphrodite falls in love with him, Anchises is herding his father's cattle high on Mt. Ida.

When Aphrodite feels the pangs of love that Zeus has instilled in her heart she flies to Cyprus, to Paphos, where her sweet-smelling temple is located. She enters, closing the glittering doors, and the Graces bathe her with the heavenly oil that blooms upon the bodies of the eternal gods. Then Aphrodite dresses in all her rich clothes, decks herself with gold, and flies to Mt. Ida, accompanied by wild creatures, wolves and lions and bears and leopards, male and female, that she enchants with desire so that they mate, two and two, around the house where Anchises lives and where he is strolling, playing his lyre.

The goddess approaches and stands before him, looking for all the world like a pure maiden, averting her eyes as a mortal girl would do. Anchises, seeing her rich garments that shimmer like the moon over her tender breasts and the rich jewels that sparkle on her wrists and around her lovely neck, is seized with desire. He thinks she must be a blessed goddess, and so kneels and addresses her with respect and awe. But Aphrodite answers that she is no goddess. "I am just a

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mortal girl," she declares, "and I was playing with the other maidens around the temple of Artemis when the Slayer of Argus took me up and carried me here, saying I should become the wife of Anchises and that I would bear him goodly children. I beseech you by Zeus and by your noble parents," she continues, "take me now, stainless and unproved in love as I am, and show me to your father and mother and to your brothers. And send a message to my parents and they will send you gold and other splendid gifts, which shall be my marriage portion."

Hearing this declaration, Anchises is even more overcome by love and he swears: "If Hermes has brought you here to me to be my wedded wife then neither god nor mortal man shall restrain me until I have lain with you in love right now. Willingly will I go down into Hades, O lady, beautiful as the goddesses, once I have gone up to your bed!"

Whereupon he takes her by the hand. Aphrodite, with face turned away and downcast eyes, moves to the couch, whereon are spread skins of bears and lions Anchises has killed on the mountain. He first takes off all her beautiful jewelry, then loosens her girdle and strips off her bright garments, folds them carefully, and lays them down on a silver-studded chair that stands nearby. "And then by the will of the Gods and destiny he lies with her," says Hesiod, "a mortal man with an immortal Goddess, not clearly knowing what he does."

In the evening, Aphrodite rises and clothes herself again and stands by the couch. Her head reaches to the roof-tree and a radiance shines within the room. Arousing Anchises, she says to him: "Up, son of Dardanus—and tell me whether I look as I did when you first saw me!"

Anchises cannot look at her. Trembling, he speaks: "As soon as I saw you, Goddess, I knew you were divine but you did not tell me the truth. I beseech you now, have pity on me, for he who lies with a deathless Goddess is no whole man after."

Aphrodite does take pity on him, saying he should fear no harm from her or any of the Gods for he is dear to her and to them. And she tells him she will bear a son that she will care for until he is five years old, when she will bring the boy to Anchises, who must say that his mother was one of the Nymphs that live on the mountain. "But if you foolishly

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boast that you lay with Aphrodite of the rich crown," she warns him, "Zeus will strike you in his anger. Take heed! And name me not!"

The boy's name is Aeneas. He is fated to reign among the Trojans and their children and children's children, time without end. However, years later, Anchises is playing at a game with some other men and, having drunk too much, boasts that he once lay with the Goddess of Love. Of course they don't believe him; nevertheless, Zeus strikes him blind.

AESCHYLUS

523?–456 BCE

The Oresteia

Little is known about Aeschylus. An Athenian, he was the son of Euphorion: he had a son named Euphorion, who also became a dramatist. Aeschylus was born at some time during the last quarter of the sixth century BCE, but the traditional date of 525 or 524 may be too early. Perhaps he was born in 513 or 512, which would have made him about twenty-two when he fought in the victory over the invading Persians on the plain of Marathon (490 BCE). He may also have fought a second time at Plataea when the Persians invaded again and were defeated a second time (480).

Aeschylus won his first drama prize in 484 when he was probably not yet thirty, and he continued to win, often in competition against other dramatists, until the end of his life. (Sophocles sometimes beat him but Euripides never did.) The death of Aeschylus occurred in 456 or 455 BCE. In Sicily, the rich western colonial empire of Greece, a monument was set up by his Sicilian hosts. They were not democrats like the Athenians, but tyrants, and the monument glorified his military service but made no mention of his plays. The titles of some eighty plays are known and fragments of a fairly large number survive. But only seven plays of Aeschylus have come down to us complete.

Drama was probably invented by the Athenians when Aeschylus was a boy. The legendary Thespis, who was honored as the inventor

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of tragedy, is said to have produced the first true plays shortly before 500 BCE. Those first plays were relatively primitive dramas; they had evolved only slightly from the poetic rituals that had been celebrated in Greek cities throughout the sixth century. Usually they consisted of exchanges on religious themes between a masked actor—often the poet himself representing a god—and a chorus that danced as well as sang. Aeschylus is said to have introduced the device of a second actor, which was an immense change. Henceforth the action of the drama was played out between individual (masked) actors, while the role of the chorus became more and more that of a commentator on the action. Aeschylus may also have been the first to address political issues instead of, or in addition to, religious themes. But of this we actually know very little. What we have is seven stunning plays, which are extraordinarily different from one another.

The Athenian playwright who desired to compete in the annual dramatic competitions in honor of the god Dionysus was usually required to present four plays, not just one, for the judgment of the audience, which consisted of all the male citizens of Athens. Three of those could deal with a single story, often drawn from a body of religious writings centering on the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer, or could treat separate mythical occurrences. The fourth, a satyr play or farce, provided comic (i.e., Dionysian) relief. Only one trilogy on a single theme survives: the *Oresteia* (story of Orestes). It was produced in 458 and won first prize in the competition that year. The satyr play that must have followed the trilogy is lost.

The *Oresteia* of Aeschylus is based on one of the most famous, bloody, and terrible Greek myths, the story of the House of Atreus. Many surviving Greek plays and even a few Roman dramatic works (as well as some modern plays, by Eugene O'Neill, for example) were written about this myth. The story cannot be told quickly, but it's necessary to know something about it before reading the trilogy, as there are many oblique and glancing references to various aspects of the myth that are not dealt with explicitly.

Agamemnon is the king of Mycenae when Helen, his brother Menelaus's wife, is seduced by Paris, prince of Troy, who takes her home to his city. After years of ineffectual raids against the Trojans, Agamemnon gathers a large army to help Menelaus retrieve his bride.

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A flotilla of ships sails to Aulis, but the winds die and the army chafes under the enforced delay. A seer tells Agamemnon the expedition can proceed only if he will sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia. By a trick he succeeds in getting his wife, Clytemnestra, to bring their child to him at Aulis. There he kills her. The wind springs up, and the army sails on to Troy and finally conquers it. Agamemnon returns to his kingdom to find his wife living with his cousin, Aegisthus. The guilty lovers murder Agamemnon in his bath. This is the subject of the first part of the trilogy.

Agamemnon and Clytemnestra had three other children, notably a son, Orestes, and a daughter, Electra. Orestes returns home from his travels to find his father dead and his mother ruling his kingdom with her paramour. With the help of Electra, Orestes murders his mother in revenge. This is the subject of the second part of the trilogy.

At the end of the second part (*The Libation Bearers*), Orestes flees the stage pursued by Furies who will avenge the death of his mother. Most of the action of the third play of the trilogy, *Eumenides*, consists of a trial on the hill called the Areopagus, in Athens. Orestes is charged by the Furies with murder most foul; he is defended by the god Apollo, on the grounds that the murder of a father is more serious than that of a mother. The jury of Athenian elders—the Chorus in the play—is evenly divided, and Athene appears in all her splendor and casts the deciding vote for acquittal. Feuds must end, she declares, and all must be forgiven. The Furies are changed from hideous hags to gentle, beneficent Eumenides who inhabit the world underground and are propitiated by a promise of respect and honor from the Athenians forever.

Aeschylus's audience would have known the story well—as well as (or even better than) a modern audience would know a familiar story from the Bible. For them there would be no suspense, in the ordinary sense, as they would be aware in advance that Clytemnestra was going to kill her husband on his return from the conquest of Troy and that their son in turn would kill his mother and then seek justification and, ultimately, forgiveness before a court of gods and men. But there was suspense of a sort, as the audience would not know how Aeschylus was going to treat the familiar myth, how he would use it to comment both directly and indirectly on current events, and what

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conclusions he would draw from it about human life and the relation between humans and their gods.

Aeschylus's conclusion—that a blood feud, particularly within a royal family, cannot be allowed to proceed indefinitely and that society, in order to sustain itself, must develop institutions that can control the anger and hatred of individuals—is of course important. If the *Oresteia* did no more than to present this crucial political idea at such an early date, it would deserve much of its fame. But it does a great deal more than that. It is not only a political treatise in dramatic form, but also a lyric tragedy. As such, in the grandeur of its conception, it is almost unique.

This is particularly true of *Agamemnon*, the first and by far the longest of the three parts of the trilogy. The play has three main characters: Agamemnon, the returning hero; Clytemnestra, who waits with implacable hatred in her heart to kill him when he reenters his home; and the girl Agamemnon brings back with him as a spoil of victory, the princess-prophetess Cassandra, who has given her name to the deepest kind of pessimism about the future in which she sees her own death with awful clarity. But despite the majesty of these masked figures, it is perhaps the Chorus of Old Men of Argos that will endure longest in the minds of readers.

The choral songs in *Agamemnon* are beautiful and moving poems. The Chorus in its odes obeys no common limitations of space or time. Seeming to wander from subject to subject but actually following trains of thought that are inevitable, the Chorus "remembers" the departure of the army under Agamemnon many years before, the brutal murder of Iphigenia in order to placate the impatient troops gathered at Aulis, the seduction of Helen by Paris and the devastation this brings down on Paris's city, the conquest of Troy and the slaughter of its men and enslavement of its women and children, the overweening pride of the conquerors as they run riot through the burning city and their subsequent punishment by the deeply offended immortal gods, and the awful consequences, still to come, of all these events. The Chorus sings of the future and the past, of the distant and the near, and it says things about men and war, about justice and pride, about love and honor, about hatred and shame that for their profundity are hardly surpassed in all of literature.

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The original Greek verse of the entire *Oresteia* is antique and difficult, and perhaps no translator is capable of perfectly understanding, to say nothing of conveying, every allusion and meaning. But the reader who will take the trouble to read slowly, carefully, and thoughtfully—and more than once, for this three-part play richly rewards multiple readings—will come to realize that Aeschylus, especially in *Agamemnon*, creates a tragic intensity that has been seldom achieved since.

SOPHOCLES

496?–406 BCE

Antigone

Oedipus Rex

Oedipus at Colonus

Ajax

Philoctetes

The life of Sophocles epitomized perfection. He won every prize, gained every honor. As a youngster he was the favorite of his teachers because of his exceptional brilliance and personal beauty. He won first prize with the first set of plays he produced. He was president of the imperial treasury and was elected general to serve with Pericles in one of Athens's wars. He was several times an ambassador and managed the city's affairs after the defeat in Sicily, late in the Peloponnesian War. He was the friend and confidant of every Athenian leader from Pericles on. He was also the leader of the cultural life of his city. Best of all, he was born about 495 BCE, just as Athens was emerging from the relative darkness of the sixth century into its short-lived but immortal splendor. He died in 406, just before the final defeat by Sparta, which ended that great age. It can almost be said that Sophocles *was* fifth-century Athens: he was conterminous with it and created more of it than any other man.

In this unbroken string of successes were dramatic moments. A notable one occurred at the very end of his life. He was almost ninety

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years old when his son sued for control of his father's financial affairs, on the grounds that the old man had become incompetent. Sophocles appeared before the judges with a manuscript in his hands. It was *Oedipus at Colonus*, his last play; he begged the court's leave to read from it. His voice was weak but the words of the superb choral song were rich, strong, and beautiful. His competency was confirmed and the judges chastised his son.

Sophocles wrote a number of plays dealing with the myth of Oedipus, which must have retained a fascination for him throughout his life. Here is the basic story: Laius, King of Thebes and husband of Jocasta, is told by an oracle that their son, Oedipus, will grow up to kill him. In his superstitious fear he takes the boy from his mother and nurses and gives him to a faithful shepherd with instructions to expose him to the elements. The herdsman, his heart touched by the baby, cannot kill the child and gives him to a certain Corinthian, who rears him as his own son. However, during a drunken brawl, a man tells Oedipus he is not his (supposed) father's son, and Oedipus sets out to search through the world for his real father. At "a place where three roads meet," in the lonely mountains between Thebes and Delphi, he is ordered by a noble in a chariot to step aside at a narrow place in the road. Oedipus, in the impatient fury that often overtakes him and is so characteristic, kills the man in the chariot and soon goes on to Thebes. There he learns the king has recently been killed by robbers and that a new husband is being sought for the queen. The oracle has said she should marry a man who can solve the riddle of the Sphinx, which Oedipus has no trouble doing. He marries the queen and rules for many years over Thebes, bringing the city great prosperity. He and his wife have four children, two sons and two daughters, one of whom is Antigone.

Then, in the glory of his middle age when he has achieved all that a man can achieve and looks forward to an old age filled with peace and honors, a terrible plague descends on his city. Oedipus, concerned as always for his people, sends to Delphi for advice from the oracle. The message comes back: there is a frightful pollution within the city that must be removed. With his customary energy the king sets about to discover it. He questions, interviews, threatens those who won't answer his questions. Slowly the truth emerges: he

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himself is the pollution. Fulfilling the old prophecy, he has slain his father at the place where three roads meet and married his own mother Jocasta who, learning the truth, hangs herself. Oedipus tears out his eyes so he can no longer see her body swinging from a beam.

But the line of Thebes is not yet finally extinguished. The two sons of Oedipus dispute the kingship. One, Polyneices, leads an army against the city; the other, Eteocles, leads the defenders. In a battle before the city's gates both Eteocles and Polyneices are slain. Creon, aged brother of Jocasta, inheriting the city's rule, decrees that the patriot Eteocles shall receive a proper burial but that the body of the traitor Polyneices shall be left on the field to be devoured by dogs and vultures. Antigone refuses to heed the decree and buries her brother, whereupon Creon condemns her to death. So ends the line of King Laius.

Antigone is Sophocles' earliest surviving play. It deals with the end of the great myth, with the disobedience of Antigone and her insistence before the tyrant Creon, the uncle whom she once loved, that there is a higher law than that of man, a law that all must obey whether or not temporal rules permit it. Antigone is condemned for her refusal to obey Creon; she will be immured and sealed up in a cave, there to starve to death. Her last speech before she disappears into the cave is inexpressibly moving. She is the beloved of Haemon, Creon's son; they were to be married. Haemon pleads for her life, but his father is relentless; he has the mark of Oedipus upon him. Haemon therefore joins Antigone in the cave and dies with her. Creon learns too late what he has done—and what he should have done.

The critic George Steiner once told me that *Antigone* has been more often played on the stages of the world than any other play, ancient or modern. This judgment of the people cannot be denied. *Antigone* is the perfect tragedy, period. It defines tragedy. Read it first, even though it tells the end of the story.

Oedipus Rex is the most perfect Greek tragedy. Aristotle thought so and said so in the *Poetics*. Who are we to disagree?

The play was written during the middle of Sophocles' career, when he was at the height of his powers. Oedipus has sent to Delphi for advice about the plague and when the answer arrives he begins his investigation. Relentlessly, implacably, he approaches the truth. All

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see the truth before he does. He alone is blind to what has really happened. And all warn him not to go on seeking. But he can't stop, he won't be shunted aside on this or any other road. Finally he too knows everything and tears out his eyes. At the end of the play, a poor, broken, blind old man, he is led off the stage by his faithful daughters, who must share his exile.

The power of *Oedipus Rex* to hold the imagination and, in fact, freeze the blood is undiminished after more than twenty centuries. Or after numerous readings, which is perhaps the more astonishing. You know as well as did the Athenian audience—some play about the Oedipus myth was presented every two or three years—what will happen. But the inexorable fate, the ananke or "necessity," that slowly surrounds the king, a fate entirely of his own making although he doesn't know that, sends shivers down the back again and again.

Aristotle said the play was the most tragic of all because it most effectively served to rid the soul of the two emotions of pity and fear—emotions that stand, he said, in the way of self-knowledge and understanding. Perhaps that's still true. Certainly the penalty for Oedipus's failure to know and understand himself is very clear and very terrible.

Oedipus at Colonus was Sophocles' last play and, in a sense, the last play of Athens, for it was presented in the year of the final defeat by Sparta, after which Athens was never the same city.

Sophocles poured his soul into this play, his last creation. Old and blind, Oedipus arrives before Athens. Haughty as ever, he sends for the king to appear before him. The king sends messengers instead, who, upon hearing Oedipus's demands, are shocked. What, allow this vile old man, this pollution of his city and his people who is even more filthy in his soul than in his body, to enter the city? Surely the gods would punish the city for so doing. Oedipus waits, angrily, for King Theseus himself to appear. Finally he does, and in a great colloquy the old man teaches the young one some things about life and the real meaning of the divine. He has been singled out by the gods, the old man says, as a force both for good and for ill. Good and ill are inseparable but now, after so many years of suffering, the good is predominate, and the Athenians should take him in. Theseus is convinced. But Oedipus, struck by a sudden vision, is led off by his

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daughters. They return to tell of how a god came down and took their father away—or something of the kind occurred; it was hard for them to see, and they didn't understand it. The place, Theseus declares, shall be forever holy.

The place was Colonus, a suburb of Athens. Sophocles had lived there and knew it well. Once it had been beautiful, with its olive trees gray-green in the brilliant Mediterranean light. Now, in 406 BCE, as the play is being produced, Colonus is a wasteland. The Spartan armies have burned it to the ground, houses and olive trees and all. The beautiful choral lines describe another city in another world.

The story behind the play that Sophocles called *Ajax* must be known if the play, which is unlike any other surviving Greek tragedy, can be understood. After the death of Hector, which ends Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles proceeds to decimate the Trojan troops. But he himself is killed by Paris, the abductor of Helen, who shoots an arrow into his most vulnerable spot. The Achaeans mourn the death of their champion, and after a suitable time there is a great funeral. A pyre is raised higher than that of any man who ever died. After the body is burned, a vote is taken to decide who shall receive the greatest honor the Achaeans can give, the bestowal of Achilles' armor. Because he valiantly defended the ships when Hector in his last attack had set them aflame, Ajax assumes he will be honored by his peers. But Odysseus, by a trick, wins the election and gains the prize.

Grief-stricken and mortally insulted by this rebuff, Ajax goes mad. In the insane belief that he's killing Odysseus and all his followers, he instead attacks the cattle of the army, killing every beast. He awakens from his madness surrounded by the bleeding bodies of cows and pigs, and in his remorse he falls on his sword.

The play is a kind of trial, not of a question of fact—the facts are not disputed—but of a question of honor and reputation. Should the memory of Ajax be black or white; should he be honored despite his crime or expunged from men's minds because of it?

Sophocles' answer is curious. What Ajax has actually done, in saving the ships on the one hand and in destroying the food supply of the army on the other, balances out. If it is a question of choosing between the good Ajax did and the bad he did, no choice can be made. But that's not the question. The real question is whether Ajax

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was a hero. But what is a hero? He—or she—is a man or woman who is called by the gods to do great things. Good things or terrible things these may be, but they must be important and memorable and significant. Both of the things Ajax has done are great in this sense. It doesn't matter, therefore, whether you are for him or against him, whether you like him or loathe him. He has been chosen by the gods, for reasons you can't understand, and so he must be honored and loved with all the devotion due to the gods themselves.

This enigmatic doctrine also applies to and helps to explain Sophocles' feelings about Oedipus. It applies all the more to the hero of the next to last play he wrote, *Philoctetes*.

The story of *Philoctetes* is a strange tale that is not included in any other ancient work. He was known as the greatest Argive archer, having inherited the bow of Heracles from his father. He was drafted by Agamemnon for the expedition against Troy, but on the way he was bitten by a snake and left behind, deserted on an island. His wound won't heal and the smell of it is unbearable to his companions. However, a seer tells the Argives that without Philoctetes' magic bow they will never conquer the Trojans, so Odysseus and Diomedes return to the island.

The action of the play takes place on this lonely island, where the hero ekes out a meager existence with the terrible recurrent pain of his wound to remind him of his hatred of the men who used to be his friends. The deceit of Odysseus in obtaining the bow is brutal and cruel, but the play ends happily when Philoctetes relents and forgives his erstwhile friends and Odysseus, in a rare moment of sentimentality, gives him back his bow. Together the three depart for Troy once more, to end the war.

The idea of the indispensable man with the magic instrument—the bow—and the frightful wound inspired the critic Edmund Wilson's book, *The Wound and the Bow*. Wilson found Freudian psychological depths in the Sophoclean idea. The artist, Wilson said, is often a man like Philoctetes who possesses a gift of immense value but suffers from an incurable psychic wound, a neurosis that can only find relief in artistic creation. It's true that many great writers, painters, composers, and others have been men and women apart, living lives filled with suffering on lonely islands of their own making

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and finding their only happiness in their art. We must always invade their loneliness, Wilson said, and at the end they can obtain some kind of peace.

Philoctetes thus becomes the symbol of artists everywhere. The theory is credible, I think, all the more because it extends to Oedipus as well, and perhaps to Antigone—to the protagonists of how many other Sophoclean plays we cannot tell, since most of the rest of the one hundred and twenty or so he wrote are lost. Oedipus, too, has both a wound (his crimes, which are a pollution) and a bow (the divine blessing that will descend on the place of his death).

In these two plays, and perhaps in others, was Sophocles consciously suggesting something about art and even about himself? We can't tell, of course, and in the end it doesn't matter. The greatest works of art almost always have more in them than the artist meant to put there.

EURIPIDES

484?–406 BCE

Alcestis
Medea
Hippolytus
Bacchantes
The Trojan Women
Iphigenia Among the Taurians

Euripides was an enigma to his contemporaries, and he remains an enigma today. Aristotle said he was "the most tragic of poets," which in the context was high praise indeed. Socrates never went to the theater unless a play of Euripides was being presented, and he would walk all the way to Piraeus to see it. But Aristophanes and the other comic poets never ceased to ridicule Euripides for his background (his mother was supposed to have been a greengrocer who sold inferior lettuces) and for his supposed lack of a sense of humor, and for this or some other reason he had difficulty winning prizes in the dramatic

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competitions. He presented plays for fourteen years before he ever won a prize, and he was often defeated by inferior playwrights in the years thereafter. Nevertheless, he acquired a great reputation while alive and an even greater one after his death. He was called "the philosopher of the stage," and more of his works survive than of any other classical dramatist because they were so often copied down by teachers and students. Altogether, as I say, he was and is an enigma. Many readers do not understand him to this day.

Euripides was born in Athens about 484 BCE and died in Macedonia in 406. Nineteen of his plays are extant, out of a total of perhaps eighty-five that he wrote. All are worth reading and seeing performed if you have a chance to do so, but some are better than others. Of special interest are the six plays listed above.

Of the plays that survive, *Alcestis* is the earliest, though it is not a particularly early play in the works of Euripides. Nevertheless, it seems less mature than some of the others—but more playful.

Early in the fifth century BCE, when tragedy was new, playwrights were required to present four plays on a single theme: three tragedies and a "satyr play" or farce. By the time Euripides was composing *Alcestis*, for the Great Athenaeia in 438, these requirements had been dropped, so *Alcestis* is probably a self-contained work. The custom at the time was for the playwright to choose a particular mythical subject or story and write a play about it that adhered more or less closely to the original theme. The basic events could not change, but many minor changes could be made; modifications of emphasis could add up to a substantial alteration of the story's meaning.

In this case, the myth was an old one to the effect that Admetus, an ancient king of Pherae, was informed by Apollo that he would have to die unless he could find someone to die for him. He asked his wife, Alcestis, to do so. She agreed, but at the last moment was saved from death by the intercession of the hero Herakles. A simple story, suggesting the early Greek notion of the responsibilities of a faithful wife, but Euripides made a very different thing out of it. He was fascinated by these questions: What kind of man would ask his wife to die for him? Wouldn't a husband ask someone else, his parents for example, instead? Why did Herakles save Alcestis, and how?

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The long conversation in the play between Admetus and his parents is both funny and sad. They deserve him as a son, and he them as parents. The contrast with the nobility of Alcestis is stark. Herakles comes to the house while preparations are being made for her death, but Admetus tells Herakles nothing of this. He is torn between conflicting religious obligations: one to his wife, the other to his guest. He is a good man according to Greek cultural beliefs, which held that a guest was sacred because he might be sent by Zeus, king of the gods. Admetus is brokenhearted but feels he has no other choice.

Herakles, who is drunk, discovers what is happening and, because he loves both Admetus and Alcestis, he sets out for Hell to bring Alcestis back. He wrestles with Death and rescues the wife of his friend, and all ends happily. Except that it doesn't.

He returns with a woman who is wearing a veil that covers her face. Is she Alcestis—or is she another young woman who can take her place in Admetus's bed and as the mother of their children? Herakles refuses to say who she is. He forces Admetus to accept her—which he does, although he's not certain. But Admetus has sworn an oath that he will never take another wife, and when he reaches for the veil he is astonished—but Euripides leaves us to guess. The woman turns her back on the audience, and we are left to ponder the end of the story.

I recommend the translation by William Arrowsmith. His interpretation is brilliant, but I'm not going to tell you what it is. Read the play, which is powerful despite its apparent slightness.

Medea and *Hippolytus* also present theses about women, although different ones. (Euripides was fascinated by women, which partly explains why the comic poets mocked him.) Medea has arrived in Athens as the wife of Jason, who led his Argonauts into the wilds of Thrace and there found and wooed her. She fell in love with him and helped him escape from her savage father, killing the latter in order to save her lover. But now, as the play begins, Jason has received an offer he can't refuse. The king has promised that if Jason frees himself from his marriage to Medea he can marry his daughter and become the heir of the kingdom.

Jason tells Medea of the king's promise and is astonished that she doesn't view it as a great opportunity for the family, as he does. A

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divorce will be easy and painless, he explains, because Medea, as a foreigner, is not a citizen. Nevertheless she needn't worry, because he will always care for her and the children.

He has reckoned without her fury. Medea is a sorceress—this is always a danger when you bring back a woman from a wild country, says Jason. Apparently mollified, she presents him with a gift for the prospective bride. It is a lovely cloak, but when the princess dons it she dies a horrible death. Jason returns home in a fury. "Look, you've spoiled everything!" he shouts.

"You do not know the half of it," Medea says. She stands on the balcony of their house with Jason in the street below. "I have a gift for you, too," she says, and shows him the bodies of their children, whom she has slain. Maddened, Jason seeks to destroy her, but she escapes in a chariot drawn by dragons. Jason is left to mourn the loss of his kingdom, his beautiful new bride, and his young sons.

The pusillanimity of Jason and the magnanimity of Medea, despite her savagery, present a remarkable contrast. The civilized man is the villain of this piece despite the appearances; equally villainous are the laws of Athens, which view foreigners as having no rights. This is a dark and disturbing play.

Hippolytus is the son of Theseus, who is married to Phaedra, the young man's stepmother. (When Racine rewrote this play in the seventeenth century, he changed the name from *Hippolytus* to *Phèdre*.) Hippolytus is obsessively chaste. He has sacrificed his sexuality to the goddess Artemis and is therefore shocked when he learns his stepmother has fallen in love with him. Phaedra, devastated when she realizes she has been refused, commits suicide, leaving a note accusing Hippolytus of having seduced her. Hippolytus flees his father's revenge in vain, neither understanding the other until it is too late. Theseus kills the boy, who lives long enough to die in his father's arms after Artemis has explained everything. Theseus survives, but he has lost both his wife and his son.

The play is about chastity and the dangers of tempting and then refusing the advances of the great and powerful. (The Biblical Joseph, tempted by Potiphar's wife, manages to survive in a similar situation.) Hippolytus is caught in a net of fate, but Euripides doesn't leave the audience in any doubt that he has placed himself there. His fervent

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devotion to Artemis is at the expense of what should be an equal devotion to another goddess, Aphrodite. Humans should live moderately and avoid excess, even excess of virtue.

Bacchantes is the play in which Euripides surprised his audience and showed them he was a devout believer after all, despite his mockery of the gods. Pentheus, king of Thebes, is a rationalist, as Euripides was thought to be. A person claiming to be the god Dionysus comes to his city demanding homage. "Nonsense," says Pentheus. "We can't admit your frenzies, your abandoned singing and dancing, your illegal celebrations here. This is a law-abiding town!" Dionysus departs. His revenge is terrible. A messenger comes to Pentheus: Bacchantes, or followers of Dionysus, are engaging in an orgy in a nearby forest and—horror of horrors—his mother is among them. In high rationalist dudgeon, the king rushes off to put a stop to this, but the Bacchantes, led by his mother, attack him and tear him to pieces. They eat the shreds of his body—his mother among them. Only when he is dead and their terrifying passion is spent do the celebrants realize what they have done—his mother among them.

A strange play, this. Rationalists have often wondered whether Euripides really wrote it. But certainly he did write it: It is pure Euripides. Dionysus is only the symbol, he is saying to us, of something that is in us, all of us, that we mustn't deny. To deny the wild, orgiastic element in our being, to give it no outlet, to dam it up, is to create a force so great it will destroy men and cities. Better—more rational because more human—to allow Dionysus his due.

The Trojan Women is Euripides' great anti-war statement. Written toward the end of the glorious fifth century, when Athens was falling to pieces, it reminds us about war's consequences. The Achaeans have won and sacked Troy. Now the captured Trojan women are lined up and counted off prior to being placed on board the ships, where they will begin their slave existence. Andromache, widow of Hector, holds her little boy in her arms. She and her mother-in-law, Hecuba, the widow of King Priam, bewail their fate.

A messenger arrives to inform Andromache that the Greeks have decreed her son must be killed, thrown from the battlements—whether in punishment or in fear of what he may become when he grows up is not made clear. After a heartbreaking farewell, the boy is

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snatched from his mother's arms.

Menelaus next appears, ordering his servants to go to the tent where Helen, herself one of the captives, is hiding. She is dragged forth, in all her astonishing beauty, so that he may decide whether he will kill her now or later. Hecuba urges him to kill her immediately but, already beginning to feel the strength of "the ancient flame," he spares her and allows her to speak for herself. She argues that she has really done well instead of ill and, besides, the whole thing was not at all her fault. Hecuba is infuriated but can do nothing against such beauty and willfulness.

Hecuba has all the more reason to weep as soldiers appear on the battlements of her city and set it on fire. The play ends with the citadel crashing down in ruins and the line of enslaved women weeping as they move toward the ships.

Because of such scenes as these, the play is hard to stage. For the reader, however, this masterly playwright tightens the screws with each successive scene, each successive revelation: there is no limit to the hatred and fear the winners feel toward the losers in this war, and the losers toward the winners. So it is with all wars, Euripides is telling us. War brings out the worst in us, and its glory is a cheat and a fraud. In war, pitiless, indomitable force is the only reality, for victor and vanquished alike. His message predates Simone Weil's by more than two millennia.

Iphigenia was the eldest daughter of Agamemnon. After Paris has taken Helen to Troy, Agamemnon and Menelaus together raise an army to get her back. They reach Aulis, a harbor on the eastern coast of Boeotia, but there, for weeks, the weather hinders their future progress. Agamemnon, his army melting away before his eyes, is at his wit's end. He asks the seer for advice. "If you will sacrifice your daughter to Artemis," the seer tells him, "the wind will change and you will be able to go on." Agamemnon struggles against his better nature but the worse wins out, and he tricks his wife Clytemnestra and his friend Achilles to get the girl, then kills her on the altar of the gods.

Except that unknown to him he doesn't kill her. She is snatched away by the gods, who can't accept this injustice, and spirited away to the land of the Taurians, a wild and savage tribe who live at the

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end of the world. There she becomes their priestess, her duty to sacrifice to the gods all Greeks who are captured and brought before her. Now, in one of Euripides' last plays, *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, a young man is brought before her, victim of a shipwreck. In a beautiful and moving recognition scene, she realizes he is her little brother, Orestes. She determines to try to save both him and herself.

She does save them both, but only with the help of Athene and only in circumstances made so absurd by Euripides that you know he doesn't mean it. Great goddesses don't appear in real life and rescue mariners from storms and enemy warships. For that matter, chariots drawn by dragons don't rescue women like Medea from their husbands and the law. As always, Euripides uses the myth on which his play is based to comment on the ordinary lives we all live. There is cruelty and bestiality in the world, and wishing it were not there, or counting on the gods to correct it, will not help us. We must face the humanity within us, fearlessly and frankly, and learn to live the best lives we can. That we will never do as long as we lie to ourselves and believe ourselves to be better than we are.

ARISTOPHANES

450?–380? BCE

Acharnians

Peace

Lysistrata

Clouds

Birds

Frogs

Aristophanes was born circa 450 BCE—certainly, a very long time ago. Curiously, if he had been born in 350, only a century later, it would not have seemed such a long time ago. The reason is that during the century from 450 to 350 the so-called New Comedy was invented, and New Comedy is essentially what comedy is today. In New Comedy boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy finds girl again, the

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ingénue is delectable but dumb, the boy is a scapegrace but highly forgivable, there are one or more rascally servants who turn out in the end to have hearts of gold, and the play ends with everybody looking foolish but happy on a stage full of lovers. These formulas were developed in the fourth century BCE, perfected by the Roman comic dramatists Plautus and Terence, further perfected by such "modern" dramatists as Shakespeare, Molière, Sheridan, and Shaw, and adapted in many hit comedies and, especially, present-day musicals.

Aristophanes was a practitioner—the greatest of all—of the so-called Old Comedy. This had a strong religious bent and made full use of a chorus that played an important role. The characters were often gods or demigods, like Dionysus or Herakles, and the dialogue and action were often extremely lascivious and utterly ridiculous. The plays of Aristophanes are deliciously funny if you like that sort of thing. Most people do.

The best way to introduce Aristophanes is to describe the absurd situations of some of his plays. *Acharnians*, his first play (he probably wrote about forty, but only eleven survive), follows a farmer, Dicaeopolis, who, sick and tired of the war that has been going on for years between Athens and Sparta, goes to Sparta to negotiate his own private peace treaty. The fact that such an action is impossible and would be considered treason in the real world only makes the point more strongly: war is folly. The play contains two ironic scenes—skits, we would call them—that take place in the marketplace of Athens, the Agora. In the first, a needy Megarian, impoverished by the war, enters with a bag over his back in which, he says, are two piglets. A buyer sticks his hand in the "poke" and finds indisputable evidence that the contents are two naked little girls, not two little pigs. The Megarian then admits that he's selling his daughters rather than have them starve to death at home. In the second skit a rich Boeotian wants to take back a really typical Athenian item from the fair and ends up buying an informer. The satire throughout the play is heavy but funny.

Peace was staged in 421 BCE, several months after both the Spartan and the Athenian leaders of the respective war parties had been killed in battle and shortly before the Peace of Nicias was

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signed, interrupting but not ending the Peloponnesian War. Peace is a lovely young girl, quite nude, who is immured in a cave. The action of the play involves various attempts to release her. Finally Peace emerges, triumphant in her beauty, and everybody celebrates. What a fine idea!

Lysistrata (411) also has a relevant background in the politics of the day. Athens has suffered devastating defeats. A revolt of the Athenian oligarchs has led to a new government that may or may not intend to sue for peace. The heroine, Lysistrata, leads a revolt of the women of Athens, who seize the Acropolis and undertake a sex strike that will not be ended until the men declare peace. The men of course endeavor to have sex with their women without having to pay the price of peace, but (in the play, at least) they fail. Another fine idea.

Clouds (circa 423) is a satirical attack on the Sophists, or professional intellectuals and teachers of the day. The hero, named Socrates, runs a Think Shop where young people are taught to win arguments in ridiculous ways. The real Socrates is said to have sat in the first row when the comedy was performed and laughed harder at it than anyone else, although some scholars believe this attack on him by Aristophanes—an unfair attack, they point out, because no one was more opposed to the Sophists than the real Socrates—did him no good when he was later tried and convicted for corrupting the Athenian youth.

Maybe the two best plays of Aristophanes are *Birds* (414) and *Frogs* (415). The birds in the comedy named after them have banded together to create a utopian community, Cloudcuckooland, where there is permanent peace and everyone loves one another. The play is funny yet bittersweet too, because—again—of the evident impossibility of such a good government ever actually existing on Earth. Aristophanes is thought by some critics to have been responding to Socrates' and Plato's ideas in this play: Cloudcuckooland is the comic version of the Platonic Republic. The play is a profound study of utopianism as well as being funny.

Frogs takes place in Hell. Dionysus, god of drama (as well as other things), has disguised himself as the hero Herakles and has set out to bring back to life his favorite tragedian, who is Euripides. When

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Dionysus arrives in Hades he also meets Aeschylus, and a literary competition is arranged. Aeschylus wins, not Euripides, and so Dionysus returns with Aeschylus in tow, instead. The literary subtleties are brilliant but the play is intelligible to anyone whether he or she knows the works of Aeschylus and Euripides or not.

The combination in Aristophanes of broad farce and dirty jokes, profound satiric themes, and lovely choral songs may be unique in the history of drama.

AESOP

—

Fables

Enough of all this literary seriousness, high or not. The Classical Greeks also had a lot of fun, in the theater and out.

All the evidence suggests that Aesop was not a real person. As early as five centuries before our era the name "Aesop" came to be given to all stories in which animals talked and acted like human beings. Thus it is actually redundant to refer to "Aesop's Fables." A fable is an Aesop, as it were, and an Aesop is a fable.

Let us retain the traditional usage. The question is why fables, and Aesop's fables in particular, are important as well as popular.

Actually, it's not easy to answer the question. It may help to remember the inveterate human habit of treating animals as though they were people. Farmers, pet owners, and other people who live in some sort of intimacy with animals talk to them all the time. Why? The animals don't answer back. What kind of conversation is it that is so completely one-sided and at the same time so satisfying?

Or *do* animals answer back? Every pet owner believes his or her pet not only understands but also responds. People who don't own pets think this is nonsense.

Conversations with animals are not always confined to repartee between one human and one animal. Often a single animal plays an important, though dumb, part in a conversation involving two or

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more persons. Husbands and wives can converse with one another through or via their pets.

Wife to dog: "Duke, the garbage has to be taken out. Help Daddy take out the garbage." Duke looks baffled.

Husband to Duke: "Let's take out the garbage, Duke." Duke jumps with joy. The garbage is taken out without the wife having to ask the husband to do it. Nor has she called him by his name nor he her by hers. Taking out the garbage is an unpleasant duty which by this round-about device has been made as pleasant as possible. If the wife had said, "George, take out the garbage," she would probably have started a fight.

The fables of Aesop—indeed, all fables—express home truths that in another guise would be hard to accept. Putting them in the form of a fable makes them palatable, even enjoyable, without detracting from their effectiveness. Take the fable of the Wolf and the Dog. The Wolf meets the Dog after a long separation. The Dog is sleek and fat, the Wolf skinny and hungry. The Dog explains that he has found an exceptional situation in which he receives regular meals, a warm place to sleep, and so forth. The Wolf could have it too. The Wolf says, "Let's go!" But as they trot side by side the Wolf notices a worn place in the fur of the Dog's neck. "What's that?" he asks.

"That's where my collar rubs," says the Dog, continuing to trot home.

But the Wolf has stopped in the road. "No thanks!" he says as he runs back to the forest.

The moral of this fable doesn't need to be made explicit. We all know how to apply it to our own lives. None of us is completely free. We all wear collars of one sort or another. Even the Wolf wears the "collar" of necessity. He has to seek his sustenance and sometimes fails to find it. He is almost always hungry. What is your "collar"? What is mine? As you think about this fable you may begin to ask the question in a way you never did before. An explicit discourse on freedom and necessity, about the kinds of deals we make with life—which are different for everybody and even different at various times in everybody's life—might have little effect or none. It would go in one ear and out the other. Distancing the story by putting it in the mouths of animals serves to bring it closer to home. Even more

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important, maybe, is that these home truths can be immediately perceived by children, who may need them the most.

All of Aesop's fables are like that one. All are wonderful. If there ever were any bad ones, they have long since fallen by the wayside.

HERODOTUS

484?–425? BCE

The History

Herodotus was born about four years after the battle of Salamis, in Halicarnasus in Asia Minor, around 484 BCE. This Greek colony had been subject to Persia for many years and remained so for half of Herodotus's life. The Persian tyranny made free life impossible, and the future historian prepared himself by wide reading of the "classic" literature of his time. In his *History* he shows familiarity not only with Homer but also with Hesiod, Sappho, Solon, Aesop, Simonides, Aeschylus, and Pindar.

More important were his incessant travels all over the world as he knew it, from Sicily in the west to the islands of the Aegean and to Susa in Persia, Babylon, and Colchis, as well as Scythia, Palestine, Gaza, and other places in Asia Minor. He traveled to Egypt and remained there for years, learning the language and discoursing with priests about the history and customs of their ancient land. Wherever he went he continued writing his *History*.

When he was about thirty, the tyrant of Halicarnassus was overthrown with the help of the Athenian navy and Herodotus returned to his home. But not to stay: After less than a year he went to Athens, where he was welcomed into the brilliant Periclean society. He gave readings of his *History* to enthusiastic audiences. Uncomfortable with the fact that he was not a citizen, he left Athens and joined a new colony Pericles had founded at Thurii in southern Italy. From that time forth we know nothing of him. He probably died around 425. We can guess that he never stopped writing until his death.

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Herodotus was the first historian: no one before him had ever written a book that could be called a history. And few after him, writing history, have wanted or been able to ignore his work.

Herodotus didn't think of his book as what we might call a finished history. It was not a completely consistent or coherent account of its subject matter, nor did Herodotus really desire it to be that. He preferred to call what he had done "researches," and we may think of him as preparing the way for another, more formal historian, who would write the "true" history of his time. Such a history did not get written for two millennia after Herodotus. Such is the power of a great—even if defective—book!

His time was the first half of the fifth century BCE, the great age of Greece, before it ruined itself in the terrible waste of the Peloponnesian or Greek Civil War. Herodotus tells how Hellas forged a unity against the common enemy—the Persians, how it defeated the Persian army and navy (vastly larger and more powerful than anything the Greeks could pose against them) by adhering to a set of ideas that were radically different from those by which the Persians lived. It is a moving story that still deeply influences how we think about the ancient Greeks, and how we think about ourselves.

Let us take a moment to review the background of the events that Herodotus describes in the *History*. Even late in the seventh century BCE, Greece consisted of small settlements surrounding the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea, trading and fighting with one another and with neighbors of other races, but having very little conception of "Greekness." Around 600 BCE, Greece emerged as a coherent entity on the world stage, but it was still small and weak compared to the great Persian Empire, which stretched from Asia Minor all the way to India and was, compared to Greece, almost unimaginably rich and powerful.

But the Persians were ruled by a despot. They and their subject peoples were not free. The Hellenes were free, and each Greek thought himself to be the equal of all others. So said Herodotus, ignoring the large numbers of slaves who did most of the work.

The Greek settlements along the Ionian coast of the Mediterranean—in what is today Syria, Lebanon, and Israel—began to irritate the Persians. The emperor decided to punish and control

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them. He sent expeditions, small at first then larger, but—to the dismay of everyone on the Persian side—these Greeks did not fall down and beg for mercy, as subject peoples were supposed to do. Instead they fought. And often won.

So the Great King (as the Greeks called him, using the word for king that in Greek meant "tyrant") sent a larger force, an army that landed on the plain of Marathon, twenty-six miles across the mountains from Athens. A joint Spartan and Athenian army under Miltiades the Spartan attacked in September 490 and routed the Persians, killing 6,400 with a loss of only 192 men. It is one of the most famous battles ever fought.

Darius, the Persian emperor, died and was succeeded by Xerxes who, infuriated by the defeats, determined to send an army and navy to Greece that no force on Earth could resist. Herodotus tells of the gathering of the soldiers and sailors in the early spring of 480, of the long days it took for the troops to march past certain points, of the thousands of camp followers and others who accompanied the immense horde as it slowly advanced across Asia Minor to the Bosporus, the narrow strip of water that divides (not far from the site of modern Istanbul) Asia from Europe.

Here bridges were constructed for the troops to cross. A storm rose and broke the bridges. Xerxes grew angry and ordered the sea to be whipped. Hundreds of Persians, armed with whips, strode to the shore and lashed out at the waves. Herodotus thought the gods were offended by this act of hubris and decided then and there to punish Xerxes.

New bridges were built. The army crossed the straits and marched on. The Greeks met them at Plataea and defeated them again. The Persian navy, the most redoubtable sea force up to that time, was trapped by Themistocles the Athenian on a lee shore in the Bay of Salamis, just a few miles from Athens. Themistocles sank many of the Persian ships and captured the others. Persia retreated and did not try again to interfere in Greek affairs for a century.

This utterly surprising victory by Greeks—who fought freely, Herodotus said, and not out of necessity (in battle the Persian captains whipped their men into action, as they had whipped the sea)—initiated one of the most creative and innovative half-centuries in the history of Western man: the period from about 480

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BCE until the beginning of the Peloponnesian War in 430. Athens became the "school of Hellas," as Pericles would call it. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides invented and refined the art of the drama; Phidias and Myron carved sculptures that come down to us (for the most part in Roman copies) as among the highest achievements of art; and the Athenians, united by passion and an idea, built the Acropolis and its great shining monument to Athena, the Parthenon. Equally important achievements occurred in the other arts, in mathematics and science, in language and in philosophy. Perhaps there has never been a time quite like it.

The sense of that time and Athenian freedom breathes in Herodotus's book. It is full of wonderful, curious stories, many of which he knows are probably not entirely true—but, as he says, it would be a shame not to tell them, they are so interesting. Equally, it would be a shame not to read the *History*, it is so interesting.

Nota bene: Recently a spate of so-called historical films about the classical age of Greece have appeared. They are a sorry lot, which would not be important except that many young people, for example my younger grandson, believe after seeing them that they know everything about Greece in the old days and don't have to read Homer and Herodotus and Thucydides, and so forth. All I can say to them and to you if you agree with them is that you are missing something wonderful.

THUCYDIDES

460?–404? BCE

History of the Peloponnesian War

Thucydides, an Athenian, was born around 460 BCE. He was old enough, as he writes in his history, to understand the importance of the Peloponnesian War when it began in 431 and to foretell that it would probably be a long war. He was of Thracian descent on his father's side, and he had property in Thrace including mining rights in its gold mines.

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Thucydides was in Athens during the great plague of 430–29 BCE and was himself infected. In 424, he was elected a general for a year and was given command of a fleet. But, failing to prevent the capture by the Spartan general Brasidas of an important city, he was recalled, tried, and condemned to exile from Athens. He did not return to his native city until the war was over, in 404, and he probably died very soon thereafter, for his *History of the Peloponnesian War* is unfinished. The narrative, in fact, does not continue beyond the year 413. The last surviving book apparently consists of notes for a continuation of the narrative that Thucydides didn't have time to complete.

The sculpture collection of the Vatican contains many famous works from antiquity, but perhaps none is more impressive than the portrait bust of Pericles the Athenian. Pericles ruled Athens as "first among equals"—that is, more or less by the common consent of his peers—during the third quarter of the fifth century BCE. We have the impression, both from the bust with its steady, firm gaze and from what Thucydides says about him, that Pericles was the leader of Athens because he was the most intelligent and capable man in the city. Extraordinary and fortunate city to choose its best man for its ruler!

We meet Pericles near the beginning of Thucydides' account of the travails and tragedy of Athens during the last decades of the fifth century. An Athenian armed force has obtained a certain victory, Thucydides tells us, but at the loss of a number of young lives. Pericles is asked to deliver the funeral oration and takes the opportunity, Thucydides says, to explain not only the immediate cause of the fighting but, more generally, what those young heroes had been fighting for—which, in short, was to explain what Athens was and meant. The speech is one of the half dozen most famous orations. Perhaps only Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is comparable to it.

In the speech, Pericles takes pains to say that Athens is democratic, in contrast to many of its neighbors, and to explain why democracy is the best of all the forms of government. There are perils in democracy, Pericles admits. Democratic citizens do not always do what they are told to do. But that is also democracy's strength. Finally, he says, Athens is the "school of Hellas"—the example that all the rest of Greece should follow and would follow, he suggests, if it were not impeded by tyrants.

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The speech is moving to this day, especially when one contemplates the tragic fall that Athens suffered only a few years after the speech was given on that bright day at the outset of the Peloponnesian War.

This celebrated conflict was a civil war between Athens and its followers—the liberal, seagoing, commercial cities and states of Hellas—and Sparta and its followers—the oligarchic, conservative, agricultural, and land-bound cities and states. At war were not only all the men and cities of Greece, but also sets of ideas about how human beings should live and work together.

At first, Athens was successful, but as the war went on its fortunes worsened. The plague of 430–429 killed many in the city, including Pericles himself, and the city was left without a great leader. Furthermore, frightened by the apparent success of Sparta, Athens began to adopt Spartan methods, not only of fighting but also of ruling.

In the end, Athens had become a worse tyranny than its enemy. It was finally defeated and humiliated, after nearly thirty years of intermittent warfare. In its frustrated bitterness and fury, it turned on what was left of its own best self and, among others, executed the philosopher Socrates because he had never ceased to tell it that its only chance to win was to remain true to its ideals.

One of the supreme creations of the Athenians during the half century before Thucydides wrote his *History* was dramatic tragedy. There is no question that Thucydides was influenced by the tragic dramatists of his era and conceived of himself as writing a kind of tragic history or historical tragedy. Certainly "tragic" is the right word to describe the fall of Athens. At the beginning of the war, Athens was the best and the brightest of its time and its world. At war's end, owing to the city's own tragic flaw, it had become a broken shadow of its former self. How this happened, how the city took each downward step without understanding where it was headed, is described by Thucydides in cool, objective, nonjudgmental prose. You wonder how he, an Athenian, could exercise such restraint; you sometimes forget that he loved his country with all of his heart.

In short, he wrote one of the great histories, an inspiration and a model for other historians ever since. It continues to be read for its facts and its insights about the Greece of Thucydides' time. But it is

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