

"AESCHYLUS AND HIS RELATION TO
THE GREEK DRAMA"

by

ARTHUR HELDER.

----- O U T L I N E -----

1. The Drama up to the time of Aeschylus and its influence over him.
2. His Birth and life up to the writing of his dramas.
3. His dramas.
4. His later life and death.
5. His influence upon the dramatic world in general.

Aeschylus and his relation to the Greek Drama.

The correct understanding of the Greek drama depends largely upon the ability to eliminate most of our conceptions of the present day drama. If we can imagine ourselves among the Greek people as they assembled two thousand years ago to pay homage to Bacchus or Dionysus, as he was more familiarly known, if we can watch the throngs of pilgrims on their way toward the place where the solemn rites were to be witnessed in ancient Athens, we may gain some notion of the drama as it was presented. Thousands of spectators assembled at the theatre of Dionysus, the place of homage paying. This was a large roofless structure having, at one end, a huge stone platform back of which Nature formed a scenic background. Upon this platform stood the actor as, aided between times by the chorus, he narrated mythical stories and legends. The chorus was made up of some fifty or more persons who sang songs that tended more or less to the continuation of the tales of the actor and that were also in keeping with the sadness or joyousness of the story.

The arrangement of the stage varied somewhat in the different structures. In some buildings it occupied the center while in others it was at one end. The chorus, entering close by the orchestra, paced to and fro or engaged in solemn choral dance during the chanting of the choral odes. In the center of the orchestra arose the thymele, an elevated altar as high as the stage and made up of a series of steps upon which the chorus stood when not performing. This thymele was usually built in the center of the whole edifice and from it were drawn all measurements of the semicircular amphitheatre.

As the presentation of a drama was a religious function, the citizens of wealth and prominence emulated one-another in the equipment and training of the chorus. This chorus performed its stately dances around the burning altar of Dionysus while they sang the Dithyrambus in honor of their god. During the intervals between the song and dance, many rude performances arose, in some of which the young men sacrificed a goat. Here we have the beginning of tragedy, from a Greek word which meant, "The Goat Song".

The so-called dialogue together with the choral song was first given by Thespis, B. C. 535, in the form of a tragedy. He also introduced certain alterations in the costuming of the actor. Later Pratinas systematized the so-called "artistic form" of tragedy. He, also, introduced temporary wood-scaffoldings which were removed after the performance was over and put away to be set up again when the time came for another ceremony. In the earlier part of the fifth century, B. C., we find Phrynichus making an advance in tragic development by the employment of movement upon the stage. This addition was the result of his endeavor to bring before his Athenian audience the scene of the capture of Miltax by the Persians. In the fifth century B. C., tragedy became very popular and many poets entered into the annual competition for popular favors and prizes. It is during this period that we find Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the three great names in Greek tragic art.

Of the writers who competed for the prizes at these annual festivals, Aeschylus stands supreme in both depth of thought and manner of expression. He was born in 525 B. C. of an Eupatria family, at that time one of the oldest and proudest of Attica. Thus born and reared amid the opportunities and possibilities of wealth and favor, Aeschylus did not lack any essential to make his education broad and

thorough. Still further, he was endowed with those natural gifts that enabled him to become the leading writer of ancient tragedy. His personal temperament was in keeping with his genius. At a comparatively late period he participated in the public festivals to Dionysus in competition for the tragic prize. His first prize was won at the age of fifty and out of the seventy tragedies that he wrote thirteen received the prize.

Aeschylus joined the Grecian forces and fought at Marathon against the Persians. It was from this experience that he obtained material for his great tragedy, "The Persians," produced some years later.

As a dramatist, Aeschylus stands very high and is distinguished by a style all his own. His influence was early felt by his introduction into the play of a second actor and of new subjects, although still confined to the Dionysiac cycle. He turned to the historic legends rather than to the problems of his time for material of his dramas. The poems of Homer supplied him with an almost inexhaustable amount of material more lofty and noble than the subjects of the old Dionysian mimes or the dramas of Thespis. He was likewise the first dramatist to employ those strange compound words which he no doubt coined to startle the ears of the spectators as he had startled their eyes by his hideous animals and dragons.

There is a vastness without limit pervading the tragedies of Aeschylus. This vastness is well illustrated by his discription and use of the Caucasus mountains in "Prometheus Bound," of the sea in "Oceanides" and of the darkness of the bottomless depths in "The Eumenides." On the other hand his beautiful style of expression is well shown in "Agamemnon." When speaking of the heat he says,--

"And the heat, when Ocean on its noon-tide couch, windless

reclined and slept without a wave." In "The Libation Pours" we find the ghastly statement that :-

"Because of blood that mother-earth has drunk,

The guilt of slaughter that will vengeance work
Is fixed indelibly."

In some instances Aeschylus moves his audience with awe and with the thought that crime is to be avenged:

"The anvil-block of vengeance firm is set

And Fate, the swordsmith, hammers on the bronze
Before hand; and the child

Is brought into its home,
And in due time the debt of guilt is paid

By the darked souled Erinnys, famed of old,
For blood of former days."

The variety of dramatic talent exhibited by Aeschylus is especially marked as, for instance, in the tragedy of "The Persians" the spectator sees after the terrible conflict:-

"The hulls of ships of the vanquished foe floating capsized
nor could the sea be seen,

Strewn as it was with wrecks and carcasses.

And all the shores and rocks are full of corpses.

And every ship is widely rowed in flight.

All that composed the Persian Armament."

This battle scene well illustrates that vastness and terror which Aeschylus frequently excites in the minds of the spectators. In such tragedies as "The Persians", he moves us to the very verge of fear. He made his own world and inhabited it with people to suit his own taste and fancy.

The works of Aeschylus are thought by some to be the greatest

of ancient dramatic writings. There is something both forbidding and attractive in his writings. He has a fascinating manner of expression that would move the reader to an intensity of interest and holds him spellbound in an amazed wonderment of the present together with a fear and breathless expectancy of the future.

If we compare the works of Aeschylus with those of Sophocles and Euripides we are, no doubt, safe in saying that although Sophocles was a writer of great tragedy, he lacked that volume of intensity and that strength of character-portrayal which are so marked in the productions of Aeschylus.

Euripides, on the other hand, is in some cases offensive and corrupt. His life was spent in the basest of society and a more or less prominent tint of that social influence has crept into his writings, thus causing them to hold a less popular place than those of Sophocles and Aeschylus.

Aeschylus came to suffer much from envy and ill-will. Under his burden he left Athens never to return, and settling at Gela under the Patronage of Hucron, he spent the last three years of his life engaged in writing. His name will ever stand among the first of those who have enriched the world by their literary art.