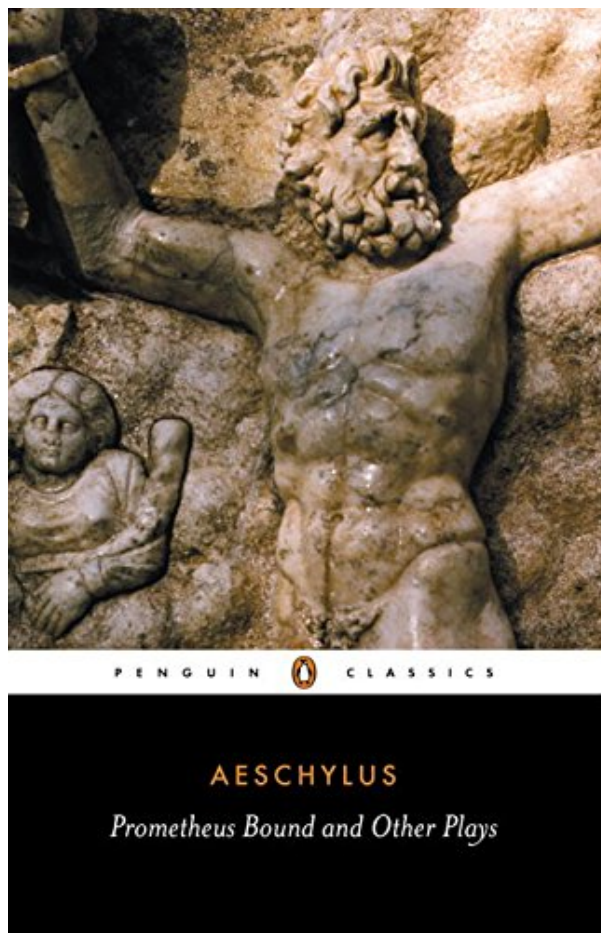


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Aeschylus (525–456 BC) brought a new grandeur and epic sweep to the drama of classical Athens, raising it to the status of high art. In *Prometheus Bound* the defiant Titan Prometheus is brutally punished by Zeus for daring to improve the state of wretchedness and servitude in which mankind is kept. *The Suppliants* tells the story of the fifty daughters of Danaus who must flee to escape enforced marriages, while *Seven Against Thebes* shows the inexorable downfall of the last members of the cursed family of Oedipus. And *The Persians*, the only Greek tragedy to deal with events from recent Athenian history, depicts the aftermath of the defeat of Persia in the battle of Salamis, with a sympathetic portrayal of its disgraced King Xerxes.

Philip Vellacott's evocative translation is accompanied by an introduction, with individual discussions of the plays, and their sources in history and mythology.

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Surprisingly Fresh

By John H.

It's hard to give an overall review on this, as it's a collection of plays from antiquity where most of the surrounding context is lost. Aeschylus' plays were usually in trilogies and with only one part of a trilogy intact, it makes it hard to appreciate certain aspects of these plays. You can tell that Aeschylus tried to push the envelope, and come up with new technique for what was a relatively new medium at the time. From reading the introduction by the translator Philip Velacott, I get the strong sense that these are just glimpses into what were very moving trilogies.

Prometheus Bound is an introduction to a trilogy of plays featuring the titular Prometheus first being chained to a rock, then explaining to various passersby his story. The initial violence of the opening scene is jarring, but the majority of the play itself is very subdued, with Prometheus telling of his crimes against Zeus but that he has no regrets of bringing humanity it's greatest gift and bears his punishment gladly. This sacrifice is a pretty common thread across Western myths, but it shines very powerfully here.

The Suppliants basically sets the stage for a deeper, more moving trilogy where the bulk of the story is lost. Because of this, the play suffers drastically, as it just provides the context for something with a lot more action. I feel like this was very uninteresting and plodded along too slowly to be very memorable - but then again, it's just a teaser for the murderous undertaking to follow.

Seven Against Thebes was the real standout gem for me. Since it's the last part and apex of a trilogy rife with murder and struggle, it doesn't really hold back. In this story the citadel of Cadmea is under attack by seven bloodthirsty warriors. It's up to the heroic defenders to stave them off. Although all the action happens off-stage, things end in a bloody mess, with the two sons of Oedipus killing each other. As with most Greek plays the inclusion of the chorus bogs down a lot of the action, but you can tell that Aeschylus is really trying out new techniques here, with the chorus actually interacting with the characters more than the other plays. I really liked the descriptions of the attackers and quick follow up of the defenders, I'd love seeing this play on stage.

As for The Persians, not much of note actually happens. It's basically a retelling of the loss of the battle of Salamis being relayed to the Persians back home. It's interesting enough, and clearly meant as more of a comedy which points out the hubris in Xerxes' battle strategies, but I feel like this was the weakest of the bunch and lost interest quickly. As a play, I'm sure it was very entertaining with the funny costumes and constantly poking fun at the Persians, but it's a bit flat and dry to just read through here.

One quick note - Velacott's translation really feels fresh and interesting, and his introductions and various comments throughout really help build a pretty deep understanding of the context and untranslatable humor behind the scenes. As is usually the case with ancient works, the translation is very key to the appreciation of the style, and here the wit of the original shines through.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Is it not clear we must think deeply, or perish?

By Phillip McCollum

I've never been one to watch plays, let alone read them. I was a kid who grew up entertained by the boob-tube and video games. In my youthful mind, I couldn't have told you which was the harsher punishment - being forced to sit through a "boring old" play or a spanking.

Nope, the tragedies in my life weren't Greek; they were running out of grape popsicles or not having a videotape nearby to record a new episode of the Transformers cartoon.

With age comes wisdom and patience (so it's said), and I've come to appreciate good stories, no matter the medium. In the quest to broaden my horizons of Western literature, the next thing on my plate was the only surviving set of plays by Aeschylus.

As Wikipedia will inform you, Aeschylus is the first Greek tragedian whose works are still intact. It's estimated he wrote up to ninety plays, but we're only left with seven. Four of them are parts of incomplete series', and the other three form a trilogy known as The Oresteia. That one's next on the TBR pile, but here's my take on the first four:

** Prometheus Bound - My second favorite of the four, it tells the story of the Titan Prometheus, bound to a mountain by Zeus. His crime? Caring for the human race while Zeus wanted to destroy them and start over. Prometheus gave man the gifts of intellect and science, the most notable being fire. This little play packs a wallop of metaphor and sarcasm. I loved it.

** The Suppliants - Ties into the unhappy story of Io from Prometheus Bound. Her descendants, great-great-great-great-etc grandchildren of Zeus, have run off from Egypt to seek asylum in Argos, land of their ancestors. The women are escaping forced marriage to their cousins in Egypt. Interesting, but probably my least favorite. Maybe it got better in the missing parts of the play.

** Seven Against Thebes - My favorite in the group. The city of Thebes is under siege by seven Argive armies, led by the exiled brother of Eteocles, king of Thebes. I loved the way the heroes and villains were described in this play. Such great imagery.

** The Persians - The first interesting thing about this play is it's based on the real battle of Salamis, where Greeks fought back the Persian army led by Xerxes. Aeschylus was a soldier at the time, and while this account is obviously fictional, his experience gives the play another dimension. The second interesting thing? It's told from the perspective of the Persians while they await news from the battle, only to discover their efforts were for naught. The ghost of King Darius, Xerxes' dead father, chastises the arrogance of the Persian empire.

If you find Homer's epic poems are a little too intimidating, give Aeschylus a shot. His are short, but wonderful works giving insight to the world of Greek lore and culture. My only hope is that someday, the rest of his plays will be found in a cave somewhere.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Another great reading.

By Pizzicato

I've always been a fan of Greek literature, and Prometheus Bound and Other Plays doesn't disappoint me. It is a demonstration of Greek beliefs; the portrayal of a wise god doomed for his intentions to help humanity, the Danaids and their quest to find freedom from their cousins, a conflict between brothers announced by their father, and the failed Persian expedition in Greece. Aeschylus uses his plays almost as if they were fables, leading to reflection, although more complex and harder to interpret. These plays, like many others of Classical Greece, are examples of the birth of theater as a form of expression; a new way to criticize, opine, protest, etc. Theater is one of the great gifts we have inherited from the Ancient Greeks, and with this book we are exposed to that gift.

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