

AESCHYLUS some notes on his life and career

The first of classical Athens' three great writers

With him tragedy develops from static, largely choral recital to the presentation of action.

Man is at the centre of his drama as a POLITICAL being. This reflects Aeschylus' concern with the times.

Born during a TYRANNY, lived during the struggle for democracy and participated in the struggle against invaders from abroad. Later witnessed the political battles between liberals and conservatives in Athens.

It is the tension between the often conflicting concerns of a leader for his people and for himself that provides the focus of tragic action in Aeschylus' plays.

BIRTH: 525 BC

His youth spent in the political peace of the reign of the sons of Peisistratus.

His family came from Eleusis. We only know his father's name - EUPHORION

DRAMATIC CAREER:

He competed for the first time shortly after c.500 BC when the City Dionysia is thought to have been reorganised.

484 BC date of his earliest success (name of play is unknown)

490 BC fought at Marathon against the Persians - one tradition says he was carried off the field injured.

480 BC he fought against the Persians again at Artemisium, and then at Salamis.

Aeschylus profoundly influenced by these events: saw how miraculous was Athen's deliverance and how much it owed to the foresight of and planning of Themistokles. Can see this in PERSIANS (his ONLY historical play) in 472 BC - won first prize. A celebration of the force and vigour of the democracy against foreign ambition.

He went to Syracuse to present this play to the tyrant figure Hieron I at his request - surprising given his abhorrence of tyranny - and this is not the first time he had been there but it is probably explicable by the suggestion that he was making a plea for justice and justice - a combined effort against the barbarian invaders (Persians and Carthaginians)

Aeschylus was acquainted with a number of other writers - notably PINDAR, lyric poet, who had won a dithyrambic contest in Athens in 497/6. They had much in common:

a taste for unusual metaphors and grandiloquence. But they were different in that

Aeschylus' view of man was city-centred and democratic whereas PINDAR's was supranational and rootless (ideal man of the Athletic contests).

Phrynicus was an older tragedian from whom Aeschylus inherited certain techniques.

Sophocles fell under Aeschylus' influence, confessing that his early style showed Aeschylan "weightiness".

His later career marked by great success - though one stunning defeat at the hands of Sophocles:

in 468 BC. Some suspect rigging of the judging here! (the conservative politician CIMON fixed it against Aeschylus because of his support in the Persians 4 years earlier for Themistokles, his bitter rival) Also said that he went off in a huff to Sicily again!

467 BC Oedipus Trilog - only Seven Against Thebes survives: 1st Prize

A drama 'full of Ares' - to quote Gorgias (professor of rhetoric) showing Thebes under attack from invading force from Argos. (cf Persian threat to Athens in 480BC)

Eteocles, the play's hero, defends his city against his own brother Polynices who leads the army from Argos. They both die at each other's hands - under the curse of blood from which the ill-starred family of Oedipus suffers.

460's The Danaid trilogy - only The Suppliants survives

a drama which presents the agonizing dilemma of a leader who is approached by foreign refugees demanding asylum and protection. If the King grants their request he is likely to embroil his people in a bloody war. (cf Athens' experience when approached by Ionian revolutionaries in 499BC and also the by the Argives who had given shelter, more recently, to the outcast Themistokles)

462 BC Reforms of Ephialtes and exile of Cimon - not without political wrangling and actual bloodshed.

458 BC Oresteian Trilogy - Aeschylus now 67

reflects the atmosphere of citizen armed against citizen, "tribal war" in the poet's own phrase. But Aeschylus resolves the problem:

strife gives way to harmony, bloodshed to peace, revolution to the rule of law.

Old divinities like the Furies are transformed and given a constructive function in Athena's city - becoming "Well-Wishers" or Eumenides.

After ORESTEIA: Aeschylus returned to Sicily (cf Aristophanes 'Frogs' where Aeschylus says he did not get on with the Athenians)

456/455 Died at Gela, according to tradition , when an eagle dropped a tortoise on his bald head!

Accorded "heroic" honours by the Gelans - came to be a place of pilgrimage by later writers.

HIS INFLUENCE:

introduced second actor (allowing more variety and dynamic tension in plot construction and dialogue)

works known for spectacular scenic effects (but not scenery), costume and masks.

reduced size of chorus to 12 and according to Aristotle "reduced the chorus' role and made the plot the leading actor".

he dispensed with choreographer - did it himself; probably acted in most of his plays.

Romans found his language difficult ('rough and disjointed' - Quintilian), lapsed still further until rediscovered in 18th Century (Agamemnon was a favourite of Napoleon!) Modern writers like Eugene O'Neill and Paul Claudel much influenced by him.