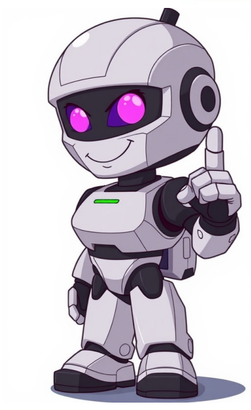
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Greek Tragedies, Volume I contains: Aeschylus's "Agamemnon," translated by Richmond Lattimore Aeschylus's "Prometheus Bound," translated by David Grene Sophocles's "Oedipus the King," translated by David Grene Sophocles's "Antigone," translated by Elizabeth Wyckoff Euripides's "Hippolytus," translated by David Grene. Sixty years ago, the University of Chicago Press undertook a momentous project: a new translation of the Greek tragedies that would be the ultimate resource for teachers, students, and readers. They succeeded. Under the expert management of eminent classicists David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, those translations combined accuracy, poetic immediacy, and clarity of presentation to render the surviving masterpieces of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in an English so lively and compelling that they remain the standard translations. In this highly anticipated third edition, Mark Griffith and Glenn W. 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King of the ships, who tore up Ilion by the roots,what does he know of this accursed bitch, who lickshis hand, who fawns on him with lifted ears, who likea secret death shall strike the coward's stroke, nor fail? In my last blog post I was lamenting a lack of sincere emotion in so much of our contemporary culture. Well, where better to look for genuine feeling than in Greek Tragedy? My personal library of classical books is in storage, so, on a trip to the South branch of the Des Moines library primarily devoted to borrowing Kinks and Portishead CDs, I checked out a 1958 printing of a 1947 collection edited by Dudley Fitts entitled Greek Plays in Modern Translation. First up, Agamemnon by Aeschylus, translated by Richard Lattimore. I read the three plays that make up the Oresteia (Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, and The Eumenides) in the 1990s, I believe in a Penguin paperback edition. I can't remember who the translator was. I don't know any Greek, so of course I can't judge the faithfulness of the Lattimore translation of Agamemnon that I read this weekend, but I can say I quite enjoyed it. The plot is full of people driven to extreme actions and emotion, I like the themes of curses, vengeance, treachery and envy, and I thought the poetry good, featuring a number of great metaphors. Frederic Lord Leighton's depiction of Clytemnestra watching for the signal fires The play is set in the Greek city of Argos. Agamemnon, King of Argos, has been gone for ten years, leading the Greeks in their siege of Troy, but today the fires that signal his return have been sighted. In the first half of the play the chorus (consisting of the elders of Argos), Klytaimnestra (Agamemnon's wife) and a herald arriving ahead of the king, all describe the hardships they have endured due to the long and destructive war. Perhaps most shocking is the fact that before the Greek fleet could depart those ten years ago, the gods required a human sacrifice, and Agamemnon laid his and Klytaimnestra's own daughter, Iphigenia, on the altar and sacrificed her, but every citizen of Argos has suffered. Many houses have received shipment from Troy of an urn full of ashes, the last remains of a son or husband killed on the Asian battlefield, and the chorus asserts that life in Argos has been precarious in the absence of its leaders. The herald, who fought at Troy, describes the horror of battle and the dreadful conditions in which the fighting men of Greece have been living for years. Both the herald and the chorus members admit that during the war they asked the gods for death as a release from their misery, and Klytaimnestra claims to have attempted suicide. The people of Argos resent Paris, Helen, and Agamemnon for getting them into this terrible war. I liked how Helen was described as being like a lion cub, fostered in a home, an adorable playmate for the kids, only to grow up and repay the people's kindness by becoming "a priest of Destruction" who killed its benefactors' sheep and turned the home into an abattoir. Halfway through the drama Agamemnon arrives on a chariot, Kassandra, the Trojan prophetess whom he has taken as his mistress, riding at his side. Klytaimnestra literally lays out a red carpet for him, so that he need not touch the ground between his chariot and his palace. Here's a neat bit of foreshadowing from Klytaimnestra: ...My maidens there!Why this delay? Your task has been appointed you,to strew the ground before his feet with tapestries.Let there spring up into the house he never hopedto see, where Justice leads him in, a crimson path. Agamemnon is reluctant to walk on the valuable tapestries that make up the red carpet, warning that such veneration is fit only for the gods, and will excite a dangerous envy among the people, but after a little intermarital spat he agrees. Klytaimnestra tries to convince Kassandra to also enter the palace, but the Trojan prophetess refuses. In a good series of passages Kassandra receives a terrible prophecy, that Agamemnon will be murdered, and that she will suffer the same fate. In one of my favorite metaphors she describes the adulterous Klytemnestra as a lioness (again with the lions): This is the woman-lioness, who goes to bedwith the wolf, when her proud lion ranges far away,and she will cut me down... Recognizing that she is unable to escape the verdict of fate, Kassandra enters the mansion, but not before prophesying that her murder (and that of Agamemnon) will be avenged in turn. The chorus hears Agamemnon's cries of pain, and when the palace doors open it is revealed that Klytaimnestra has murdered her husband while he sat in a bath, after tossing heavy robes on him to impede his movements, and also dispatched poor Kassandra. The chorus of elders is aghast at this horrible crime, but Klytaimnestra explains that she has merely exacted justice for her husband's own atrocity: No shame, I think, in the death giventhis man. And did he notfirst of all in this house wreak deathby treachery?The flower of this man's love and mine,Iphigenia of the tearshe dealt with even as he has suffered.Let his speech in death's house be not loud.With the sword he struck,with the sword he paid for his own act. Roger Payne's rendering of Clytemnestra murdering Agamemnon; hey, where are the robes? Klytaimnestra's lover, Aigisthos, appears, and explains that he planned the assassination. He too asserts that his act has been just; Agamemnon's father murdered Aigisthos's brothers when he was but a baby, and cunningly cut up their flesh and fed it to Aigisthos's father. Murdering Agamemnon has been the fulfillment of Aigosthos's father's vow of vengeance. The play ends with the chorus calling Aigisthos a coward for having a woman do his dirty work, Aigisthos threatening the old men, and further foreshadowing of the fact that Orestes, Agamemnon's son, is going to avenge the king. Besides the lion metaphors, there are several great metaphors built around nets, perhaps reminding us that we are all trapped by fate (and how important fishing is to the Greek economy.) Early in the play Zeus is said to have "slung above the bastions of Troy/ the binding net, that none" might escape "enslavement and final disaster." Klytaimnestra lists as one of the hardships she has suffered in her husband's absence all the unfounded rumors that he has been wounded or killed: ...Had Agamemnon taken allthe wounds the tale whereof was carried home to me,he had been cut full of gashes like a fishing net. Both Klytaimnestra and Aigosthos describe Agamemnon as having been caught in a net: Klytaimnestra: That he might not escape nor beat beat aside his death,as fishermen cast their huge circling nets, I spreaddeadly abundance of rich robes, and caught him fast. (I like the phrase "deadly abundance of rich robes," which reminds the reader of one of the minor themes of the play, the idea that a display of wealth on the part of the upper classes can inspire envy and revolution among the lower orders.) Aigisthos: Now I can say once more that the high gods look downon mortal crimes to vindicate the right at last,now that I see this man--sweet sight--before me heresprawled in the tangling nets of fury, to atonethe calculated evil of his father's hand. John Collier depicts Clytemnestra after having committed the deed.; everybody has his own idea what weapon she used Agamemnon, only 50 pages in this edition, is a great little melodrama, packed full of the kind of sad wisdom about how people are all jerks ("In few men is it part of nature to respect/ a friend's prosperity without begrudging him") and we are all doomed that appeals to your humble blogger, as well as some solid poetry. Definitely worth the reader's time. Greek Tragedies, Volume I contains Aeschylus's “Agamemnon,” translated by Richmond Lattimore; Aeschylus's “Prometheus Bound,” translated by David Grene; Sophocles's “Oedipus the King,” translated by David Grene; Sophocles's “Antigone,” translated by Elizabeth Wyckoff; and Euripides's “Hippolytus,” translated by David Grene. Many years ago, the University of Chicago Press undertook a momentous project: a new translation of the Greek tragedies that would be the ultimate resource for teachers, students, and readers. They succeeded. Under the expert management of eminent classicists David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, those translations combined accuracy, poetic immediacy, and clarity of presentation to render the surviving masterpieces of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in an English so lively and compelling that they remain the standard translations. 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Aeschylus had already composed a Theban trilogy, of which an Oedipus (lost) was the second play, and we may assume that the largest outlines of the story were familiar to all. Or at least so much: that it was predicted that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother; that, unwittingly, he did both; and that these offenses were discovered and made public. Concerning details, there were certainly variations. There were different stories about how, when, and where Oedipus died; Euripides in his lost Oedipus had the hero blinded by the henchmen of Laius; the traditions a...CoverCopyrightTitle PageContentsAeschylus: AgamemnonAeschylus: Prometheus BoundSophocles: Oedipus the KingSophocles: AntigoneEuripides: HippolytusTextual Notes Agamemnon is an Attic tragedy—a work of the fifth century BCE in Athens—composed by Aeschylus (circa 525-circa 456 BCE). The play was first performed at the City Dionysia in 458 BCE. Agamemnon was the first part of the Oresteia, Aeschylus’s trilogy on the murder of Agamemnon and its grisly aftermath. It was followed by the tragedies Libation Bearers and Eumenides, which also survived, and by a satyr play titled Proteus, which was lost. The play culminates in Clytemnestra’s murder of her husband, Agamemnon, and explores the themes of The Relationship of Justice to Retribution and Suffering, The Inescapability of Fate, and The Interdependence of Hope and Fear. The play inspired numerous adaptations, performances, and translations, and it remains one of the most widely read and recognized ancient tragedies.This study guide refers to Richmond Lattimore’s translation of the play from the third edition of the University of Chicago Press series The Complete Greek Tragedies (2013).Plot SummaryIn a brief Prologue, a watchman explains that Clytemnestra stationed him on the roof of the palace to watch every night for the signal fires that will indicate the fall of Troy. He expresses concern for the house and the kingdom of Argos, which were entrusted to Clytemnestra when her husband, King Agamemnon, departed years before to lead the war against Troy. Suddenly, sighting the signal fires, the watchman rejoices and expresses his hope that Agamemnon will set the house in order when he finally returns.The elders of the chorus of Argive enter and sing the parodos, the chorus’s opening song. They provide, at length, context for Agamemnon’s absence. Agamemnon and his brother, Menelaus, raised an army to punish Paris, the Trojan prince, for carrying off Menelaus’s wife, Helen. Agamemnon was forced to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, to appease the goddess Artemis. The ruin of Troy represents the justice of the gods, with Zeus punishing Paris for abducting the wife of his host, Menelaus. The chorus is apprehensive about the current state of the house of Agamemnon and repeatedly expresses hope that everything will turn out for the best.Clytemnestra enters. In the first episode, she tells the chorus that Agamemnon was finally victorious over Troy, citing as her source the signal fires from the burning city. She imaginatively describes the progress of the signal fires blazing from Troy until they reach Argos. Clytemnestra’s exit is followed by the first stasimon, in which the chorus expresses joy at the fall of Troy. The singers thank Zeus for punishing the Trojans for their corruption, establishing Paris and Helen as exemplars of this decay. They lament, however, that so many Greeks had to die in the war.In the second episode, the herald enters to announce that Agamemnon is returning. He confirms that the Greeks were victorious at last as Clytemnestra rejoices. The herald also explains that most of the Greek ships were destroyed by a storm as they were leaving Troy. The herald exits, and the chorus sings the second stasimon, attacking Helen’s actions and saying that the gods always ensure that transgressors are brought to justice.The third episode is marked by Agamemnon’s arrival. He is accompanied by Cassandra, a princess and seeress of Troy whom he claimed as his prize from the captured city. Clytemnestra gives Agamemnon a lavish welcome and ushers him into the palace on crimson tapestries. He hesitates, expressing concern that stepping on the tapestries would constitute an act of hubris, but he is finally persuaded by Clytemnestra. In the third stasimon that follows the scene, the chorus senses that some disaster is imminent.During the fourth episode, Clytemnestra asks Cassandra to follow Agamemnon into the palace, but she refuses. Cassandra sings a cryptic song about the past atrocities of Agamemnon and his family and predicts that she is about to be murdered, together with Agamemnon. The chorus is sympathetic to her but does not understand the true significance of her words. Cassandra finally enters the palace, knowing that she is going to her death.The chorus sings another song, expressing its fear. Soon, Agamemnon is heard screaming from the palace as the chorus, in paired trimeters, debates how to respond.Clytemnestra reenters triumphant. She stands over the corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra and boasts that she killed them. In an exchange with the chorus, Clytemnestra justifies her actions. Aegisthus, Agamemnon’s cousin and Clytemnestra’s lover, then enters with his bodyguards. He explains how and why he aided her and forces the chorus to accept him and Clytemnestra as their new masters.