HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Aeschylus (525 B.C.-456 B.C.)

In seven extant dramas, produced in the first half of the fifth century B.C., the playwright Aeschylus takes us from the mythical imagination of the epic tradition into mimetic action aimed to engage the newly self-directing democracy of Athenian citizens.

Aeschylus is the first classical dramatist we know, a writer of great vision and depth of human understanding, who took the choral-actor ingredients of the sixth century drama, and powerfully raised the expressive power of drama, as well as enriching the on-stage relationship between the chorus and the main, and eventually a second, actor. Though we have only seven remaining plays, out of some ninety Aeschylus wrote, those works span a twenty-five year period during which Greek drama was evolving at a meteoric rate, and give us a perspective onto the whole genre. The oldest remaining play of Aeschylus, *The Persians* (472 B.C.), concerns the defeat of Xerxes in the Persian Wars, and (remarkably) puts itself empathetically inside the minds of the pitifully defeated Persian widows. The remaining Aeschylean plays are *The Oresteia* (458 B.C.), the only intact Greek trilogy, a three-play unit involving a climactic engagement with a single mythical theme, *Prometheus Bound*, *The Seven Against Thebes*, and *The Suppliant Maidens*.

The Theme of the Oresteia. The three plays of the *Oresteia* (that is, the tale of Orestes, son of Agamemnon) are based on themes from Greek mythology, and like most Greek tragedies form what later Greeks called 'slices from Homer's banquet.' In the first of these plays the Greek leader of the War against Troy returns home, his concubine with him, to find a furious wife (and her lover) and to be slain by her outraged son Orestes. In the second play, which would be watched on the second day of the display of Aeschylus' work in the annual competition, we see Orestes paying the price for his unholy mother-murder, and the Erinyes, hag-like spirits of divine revenge, assaulting Orestes and driving him crazy. In the final play the Gods, led by Athena, hold a trial of Orestes at the law court on the slopes of the Acroolis, and in a very close decision exonerate the murderer. This powerful, supra realistic, immensely metaphorical and verbally structured drama—one might almost say 'opera'—deals with issues of revenge, justice. honor and law.

Seven plays remain for us from the more than one hundred Aeschylus composed. Dependent as we are on historical chance—fires, wars, neglect, indifference to ancient manuscripts—we realize that the image we create, of the work of a given Ancient Greek writer, are at best the fragmentary pieces of a whole. In the case of Aeschylus, whose vision is at all times soaring and metaphorical, this reconstruction process can be especially difficult.

Besides the *Oresteia*, which in the widest sense is concerned with the establishment of the rule of law in Athens, the following four plays continue to turn around the issue of the polis, its relation to 'the divine order' of the gods, and the drama of inter clan warfare. (In other words the nature and establishment of society is of constant interest here):

Prometheus Bound (480's B.C.) This early play of Aeschylus—though the date and even authorship have been challenged—pits the Titan Prometheus against the iron will of the Father of the Gods, Zeus. Prometheus is chained to a rock in the Caucasus, for having stolen fire and passed it on to mankind. We seem to see, here, the first play in a trilogy which will lead to eventual reconciliation between god and man.

The Persians (472 B.C.) stages a prolonged lament, by the Persian court and a chorus of Persian women who are in despair over their loss to the Greeks in the naval Battle of Salamis. Remarkable for us, today, is the sympathy of Aeschylus for the woes of his 'enemy.'

The Seven Against Thebes (467 B.C.) depicts the conflict between the two sons of King Theseus, each of whom is supposed to rule the city in alternating years. Unfortunately, as happens, the one brother refuses to cede the power at the end of his reign, and has to fight it out with his brother, in a dramatic hand to hand combat which kills them both

The Suppliant Maidens (463 B.C.) is just that, the fluttering imprecation, of a band of women suppliants, fleeing from rape and victimization through forced marriage, and begging Pelasgus, the ruler of Athens, for shelter. Pelasgus is sympathetic, but feels he must consult his people on the matter, which he does. Their agreement to shelter the women is thus made part of an innovative democratic decision process in Athens.