Shakespeare’s Greek Drama Secret

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With heartfelt Thanks to Costas Evangelides,
Basil Mandilaras, Byron Raizis, Robert Crist
of the University of Athens, Greece for giving me the chance,
and then encouraging me, to write a groundbreaking
dissertation which evolved in time into this book.

How I wish that all of you were still here
to see the fruit of so much labor**.**

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INTRODUCTION I

THE IDENTITY OF SHAKESPEARE

Something seems to be missing from the Shakespeare equation. A vital cause of Shakespeare's genius and achievement appears to go unaccounted for.

Misunderstanding with regard to the playwright's level of formal education ("untutored", "small Latine, lesse Greek"), has given rise to theories that the author of plays ascribed to Shakespeare was actually someone else. We indeed know very well who Shakespeare was, very well that he owned a fine formal education, and very well that the Stratford-upon-Avon William Shakespeare composed the dramas and poems attributed to him.

However, the immensity of his Achievement—38 plays, the vast majority of which are masterpieces—calls for more explanation than has hitherto come forth. In fact, the **Mystery of Shakespeare** can be solved by revealing *his* ***Greek Drama Secret.***

INTRODUCTION II

SHAKESPEARE'S GREAT SECRET

Orthodoxy and Mythology

Orthodoxy, virtually everyone in the Shakespearean field, admits no direct connection between Shakespeare and the Greek Drama of ancient Athens. According to the near-unanimous view, Shakespeare did not himself read and incorporate into his plays any of the materials of the Athenian dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes. Here is a frank example (1990) of this assumption:

> If he [Shakespeare] had any Greek, it was quite insufficient to read the great works of archaic and classical Greece, even had he wanted to do so—but there is no reason to think that he did. . . . Seneca was the closest Shakespeare ever got to Greek Tragedy.

A very recent (2008) – and welcome – call for a reassessment cites critical "blindness to Shakespeare's Hellenism".

Orthodoxy's Dogma is sheer mythology, and 'tis high time we recognize it as such.

The Vital Connection

Shakespeare possessed the Secret of Immortality. I mean a genuine secret, hidden from posterity and perhaps from all but a few of his contemporaries as well. He did something eminently sensible, did it with extreme intelligence, and did it

so well as to fool practically everybody.

His Secret: Shakespeare quietly and rigorously read, studied, and mastered classical Greek Tragedy and Comedy. Then he skillfully and subtly adapted thousands of elements of the 44 extant Athenian plays to enhance almost all of his own plays and poems, and to pervade and fundamentally determine many of them. Shakespearean Tragedy **is**, to quite an important degree, Greek Tragedy, with a Renaissance and Shakespearean face and form. A good deal of Shakespearean Comedy is derived from Euripides' brilliant parodying or satirical ironies, and also from Aristophanes' cleverly gross and grossly clever bawdry.

In short, Greek Drama was the decidedly dominant literary influence on Shakespeare. **William Shakespeare became "Shakespeare" because of it.**

An intensive comparison of Greek with Shakespearean Drama reveals the Vital Connection between literature's two overwhelmingly superior dramatic traditions. This we have done in the comprehensive, 1,200 manuscript pages of *Shakespeare and Greek Drama*. In the current *Shakespeare's Greek Drama Secret* are selected examples of the research findings: striking textual correspondences and illuminating historical evidence, re-interpreted comedies which have defied the critics' explanations but whose mysteries can be de-mystified with a little help from the incorrigibly ironic Euripides.

[See *Shakespeare's Double-Dealing Comedies: Deciphering the "Problem Plays"* by Myron Stagman, a work which does not refer to Greek Drama, a subject reserved for *Shakespeare's Greek Drama Secret*.]

This book, incidentally, offers a primer in both Greek and Shakespearean Drama. There are 44 surviving Greek and 38 Shakespearean plays, and you will have an introduction to almost all of them.

Another imperative, we must take a New Look at Shakespeare. The excellence and wonders of his poetic drama have been acknowledged. Thus far however, recognition of the multi-faceted nature of this Renaissance genius has been denied Shakespeare. **He was history's finest literary critic**. He was also **a talented scholar**, not in the pedantic sense of the term, but in the practical, useful definition of "scholar". All of our vast corpus of criticism on Greek Tragedy and Comedy accumulated over the centuries—which have sought to disclose the major and the fine points of that extraordinarily sophisticated and profound literature—have not penetrated near as deeply into the subject as did that one man Shakespeare sitting in his study with the Greek texts and Latin translations in front of him.

Unpretentious learning and keen analytical powers, these vital assets underlie *Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth,* and the rest.

PART ONE:

GREEK DRAMA

INTRODUCTION TO GREEK DRAMA

Greek Tragedy and Comedy were essential to the Athenian Achievement during the golden Classical Age of ancient Greece. Without Greek Drama one cannot conceive of that age as being Classical. Without Classical Greece and the Athenian dramatic achievement of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, there would have been no Renaissance and no Shakespeare.

We present a brief introduction to the works of the four famous playwrights of 5th century BC Athens. Included are biographical and historical sketches, a fairly extensive description of one unusually important drama from each tragedian (a trilogy in the case of Aeschylus), and solid summaries of all extant Greek tragedies and comedies.

Even from this introductory material, you may glimpse the brilliance of their efforts, what they meant to the history of Drama—and Western Civilization—and why modern Shakespeareans' presumption that Shakespeare never read Greek Drama (not even one play in translation many would aver) seems presumptuous if not fantastic on its face.

AESCHYLUS

(C. 525-456 BC)

Formal competition between tragic poets took place in Athens at the annual festival of the Great Dionysia from about 530 BC. Thespis (hence the English word 'thespian') was awarded the prize.

The true creator, however, of Greek Tragedy would fight bravely in the wars against Persia, then become one of the finest playwrights in literary history—Aeschylus. His plays featured dialogue, reducing the role of the chorus while adding a second and, later, a third actor. With Aeschylus, drama became not only fully developed but indeed superlative. Of the perhaps eighty works composed by him, only seven have survived. To posterity's good fortune, the *Oresteia* trilogy and *Prometheus Bound* are among them.

In the Dionysian festival, a committee chose three tragedians to compete. Each produced a tetralogy, three tragedies followed by a satyr-play comedy. The tragic trilogy, or all four plays, might have a unifying theme, although it was always permissible to do otherwise. Aeschylus commonly developed a unifying theme, the *Oresteia* being the only Greek trilogy left to us.

The dramas of Aeschylus should be understood against the historical background within which he was writing. The Persian empire, Greek despots, revolutions and the startling phenomenon of emergent **democracy** in Greece, the beginnings of the Athenian empire—these were forces and exciting events all directly experienced by Aeschylus.

He was born in Eleusis some twelve miles from Athens.

For the first fifteen years of his life he was a subject of the tyrant Hippias whose army was defeated by Sparta. Hippias fled, and eventually found his way to the court of Darius. Twenty years later, the deposed tyrant accompanied the Persian invasion of Greece.

One of the most pivotal battles in history occurred on the plain of Marathon in 490 BC. It was an Athenian victory; for the first time Greeks had beaten an imperial army. Aeschylus fought at Marathon.

Ten years later, the Persians mounted another invasion, this time by sea. Emperor Xerxes personally led the vast Armada. A Persian land force seriously threatened Athens. The Athenian leader Themistocles, at the height of crisis, ordered an evacuation of the city, the populace taking refuge on their ships and on the island of Salamis. The Persians sacked Athens, then marshaled the Armada to overwhelm the heavily outnumbered Athenian ships.

Persian size and numbers took on Athenian speed, tactical acumen, and morale. The Athenians won a spectacular, decisive victory at Salamis in the year 480 BC, after which allied Greek forces beat the Persian army on land the following year at Plataea. From then on, the Greek city-states would be free from the Asian power, and Athenian democracy would rapidly develop. Athens would become the leading Greek state and extend her influence into empire. Aeschylus fought at Salamis.

[Unsung heroes, not only of the Battle of Salamis but of Athens' decades-long military strength, included its teams of highly skilled rowers.]

With the advent of democracy, the rights and civic responsibility of the male citizen expanded dramatically. The People controlled and operated the government, legislated and judged by majority vote. Discussion of public issues occupied much of their time since they were personally responsible for

the welfare of their country. Greek Drama often provided social-political comment, and an Aeschylean play has symbolic significance in this regard.

Aeschylus was an idealist, and his art carries moral force. His themes and diction are august, exploring with "brooding grandeur" concepts of Justice, Freedom, Democracy and Tyranny, Peace and War, Unity and Division, and Ethics as a universal historic principle. **Democracy** was indeed "the inspiration of his art". He was deeply concerned with moral causation, insistent about the relationship between sin and retribution, between virtue and happiness. Aeschylus has been called "the most Hebraic of the Hellenes".

This first great playwright concerned himself also with the inferior status of women in Athenian society. His play, *The Suppliant Maidens,* conveys the unethical and potentially dangerous nature of the problem. Queen Clytemnestra of the *Oresteia* may have been intended to express a similar message. Be that as it may, Clytemnestra is one of the finest female characterizations in literature.

Aeschylus' use of metaphoric language was superb and highly sophisticated. Not until Shakespeare would another dramatist so weave and interweave a plethora of metaphoric imagery to underlie the surface story and stress its themes.

Moreover, Aeschylus complemented the majesty of his conceptions with extraordinary stage effects. His plays could be picturesque with horse-drawn chariots, a multitude of attendants, much visual symbolism, splendid costumes, a second chorus, innovative choral dances. The masks and attire of the chorus of Furies in the *Eumenides* genuinely terrified people in the audience. Aeschylus acted in his own plays.

At the time of his death in 456 BC, Athenian democracy was functioning smoothly; Athens was the paramount city-state in Greece; and the city's drama and art were unparalleled. Aeschylean idealism and optimism for the

world's future seemed well justified. The tomb of Aeschylus became a place of pilgrimage.

The *Oresteia* trilogy (*Agamemnon, Choephori, Eumenides*)

This is one of the most monumental works in the history of literature. In the "Tragedy" section of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* Robert E. Sewall has written,

> Even in the 20th century, the *Oresteia* has been acclaimed as the greatest spiritual work of man.

*The **Agamemnon.*** King Agamemnon, proud and ambitious commander-in-chief of the Greek forces at Troy, returns in triumph to Argos after ten years. He brings with him the clairvoyant Trojan princess Cassandra, his concubine.

Awaiting him is the Queen, Clytemnestra, sister to Helen of Troy. During his absence she has taken a lover, Agamemnon's cousin Aegisthus. She has ruled Argos for these ten years.

Aside from references in the text, mere mention of the names Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Aegisthus yields important information to a Greek audience, conjuring up the Curse on the House of Atreus. Aegisthus' father Thyestes seduced the wife of his brother Atreus, father of Agamemnon and Menelaus. Atreus avenged himself by killing the seductor's sons (only Aegisthus remained alive) and serving them to Thyestes as part of a banquet. Aegisthus is determined to kill his uncle's son, Agamemnon.

Before attacking 'I'roy, the 'thousand ships' of Greece gathered at Aulis harbor. No winds would blow, and the seer Calchas pronounced that Agamemnon's eldest daughter, lphigenia, must be sacrificed to loose the ships. The King sent for his daughter, pretending that she was to marry the hero Achilles. Iphigenia arrived in Aulis, was ritually slain, and

Agamemnon went on to Troy and military glory.

Queen Clytemnestra is intelligent, forceful, brave and daring. A tigress. She hates her husband for that terrible deed, resolves to kill him, and plans to use her wiles to mete out justice personally.

Agamemnon arrives in a chariot with Cassandra and entourage. Clytemnestra entices him to tread upon a purple carpet of silk leading from the chariot to the palace. This symbolizes his *hubris,* overweening pride which may bestir divine anger. During the ritual bath customarily given a returning warrior by his wife, Clytemnestra enforces her symbolic victory with cold steel.

The first part of the *Oresteia* ends with the Queen standing calmly over the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra, Aegisthus speaking of his revenge and threatening the Chorus of Elders, then Clytemnestra stopping him from violent action. She proclaims the hope that there will be no more bloodshed, and that they may rule in peace.

Highlights of this majestic tragedy at the dawn of the genre include the Watchman's eerie soliloquy to open the play, the old Watchman loyal to King Agamemnon but fearing the Queen; Clytemnestra's very presence which inspires awe, and her luring of Agamemnon onto the purple carpet of *hubris,* whose color also signifies the blood of Iphigenia; the allegory of the lion-cub; the Chorus' biblical addresses on Virtue and Reward, Sin and Retribution; Cassandra's premonition of death and her vision of the giant robe in which Clytemnestra ensnares the King and requites him; the confrontation between Chorus and Queen as she emerges from the murder-room; and Aegisthus' triumphant speech which describes the Thyestean banquet of his father and brothers.

The ***Choephori (Libation-Bearers).*** The second part of the

trilogy begins with Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, standing by the simple “unhallowed” tomb of Agamemnon. Commanded by the god Apollo, the young prince—exiled as a child by his mother—has returned to avenge his father.

His sister Electra enters with attendants to pour ritual libations at the tomb. Electra reveres her father's memory, detests her mother and the paramour Aegisthus who have virtually enslaved her, and lives only for her brother Orestes one day to return and wreak vengeance.

Much of the play after the brother-sister recognition scene involves Orestes' working himself up—overcoming his abhorrence—to kill his mother (and Aegisthus, whom he does not hesitate to kill). Electra and the Chorus of Serving-Women give him forcible support, indeed pressure him. They pray to the spirit of Agamemnon for Orestes to gain will and capacity for revenge. (*Awakening the Ghost of Agamemnon to take possession of Orestes represents Orestes' passions subduing his natural reluctance to murder his own mother*.)

Orestes emphasizes the reasons he has for going through with it. His desired determination momentarily fails when he thinks of the Furies and their blood retribution for kindred blood spilled. At the end of this *tour de force* Invocation-scene, Orestes finally resolves. With the help of his close friend and cousin Pylades, he commits matricide. Aegisthus also falls.

Thus, Clytemnestra acted as Fury to Agamemnon because of Iphigenia's blood, and because of the Curse on the House of Atreus. Orestes acted as Fury to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus because of Agamemnon's blood, and because of the Curse.

In the last verses of the *Choephori*, when the Chorus congratulates the matricide on revenge well taken, Orestes looks around to see what the Chorus cannot see—the black

hags of Nemesis, the Furies. Now, because of Clytemnestra's blood, it is Orestes' turn.

*The **Eumenides***. The final play of the trilogy commences at Apollo's temple in Delphi. Orestes has fled there, pursued by **the Furies** (*who symbolize, besides punishment for crime, Orestes' own pangs of conscience*).

A horrified priestess glimpses a bloody Orestes clinging to the altar for protection, surrounded by sleeping Furies. The Ghost of Clytemnestra enters to rouse them to vengeance. Apollo arrives to chastise the Furies and declare Orestes' absolution for the matricide. Apollo delivers here one of the most vividly terrifying speeches you have ever read. Only the allegorical story in the *Agamemnon* of a domesticated lion cub—symbolizing Helen of Troy—growing up to kill everyone in the family, will chill your blood more arctically.

Orestes flees to Athens on Apollo's orders, the merciless Furies giving chase. Their chant-and-dance of Death highlights the drama.

Orestes, Apollo, and the Furies become participants in a trial at the Areopagus court in Athens, Orestes charged with matricide. The goddess Athena presides over a mortal jury of twelve Athenian citizens. Majority vote spells guilt or innocence. The Furies (or Erinyes) act as the prosecution; Apollo defends.

Argumentation concluded, the jury divides six and six. Athena casts the deciding ballot—for acquittal.

The Furies in their anger threaten to lay waste the land. Athena offers them home and homage in Athens, respect for the principle of punishment for crime—but under law—and names them Eumenides, the Benevolent Ones. The Furies accept the compromise, and the trilogy ends in reconciliation and celebration among both gods and men.

What has Aeschylus actually shown in the *Oresteia*, in

addition to the compelling story of murder and revenge, conscience and torment, gods and goblins? **The Father of Tragedy has rendered a symbolic account of the evolution of human justice and jurisprudence**. He has told of the primitive system of family vendetta to redress grievance, the endless process of blood begetting blood, of the hunter becoming the hunted.

To tell the tale which represented a genuinely harsh reality, Aeschylus created an atmosphere of fear tantamount to nightmare. Imagery of darkness and of blood pervade the trilogy. The moral scheme he describes was one of sin leading to retribution, on and on. In the case of King Agamemnon, pride and ambition—*hubris*—come before a fall.

This primitive system of blood vendetta has given way in **democratic Athens to one of impartial governmental law, jury trial, and adversary proceedings aiming at justice with compassion.** The bloodletting stops with one alleged crime and, were the accused adjudged guilty, one punishment.

Symbolism extends to the political sphere. Democracy, special to Athens, is the home of equity and peace. To Despotism and Anarchy belong arbitrary bloodshed and violent factional or kinship strife.

Reconciliation, harmony, and festivity among divinities, among mortals, and between gods and men—as seen in the finale—speak of peace and a bright future in Athens and among the city-states of Greece. **Athens stands as an example of democracy and jurisprudence, peace and justice—for all the world to emulate.**

Aeschylus thus furnishes divine ordinance and sanction for the evolution of Justice. A moral purpose—divine Justice or benevolent Fate—operates in history.

The now famous Aeschylean proverb of Redemption, which assumes a variety of forms in the *Oresteia*, describes the often painful human condition together with an optimistic

assurance for the future of our race:

Man learns Wisdom from Suffering

Prometheus Bound

This famous play inspired Goethe's and Shelley's idealism, each writing a poem about Aeschylus' titanic symbol of Freedom, Justice, Compassion, and courageous defiance of Tyranny. Aeschylus created an ethical archetype for all time.

Dramatis Personae

Prometheus.

The magnificent Titan, his name means “forethinker”, as he has the gift of prophecy and sage counsel. He sided with Zeus and the Olympian Gods in their battle against the old order of Titans, the Gods winning out, thanks largely to Prometheus' guidance.

Zeus wanted to destroy the lowly human race, but Prometheus' compassion rescued human beings. He stole fire and gave it to the despised denizens of earth, allowing them to gain intelligence and all the arts. Zeus, a tyrant whose agents are Kratos (Power) and Bia (Violence), has Prometheus chained to a cliff in the middle of a deep gorge in furthest, desolate Scythia.

The antagonism between Prometheus and the Tyrant clearly reflects Greek history, and the author's political principles. From what we can glean of the missing parts of the *Prometheia* trilogy, Aeschylus again dramatizes the adage, “Man learns wisdom from suffering.”

Hephaestus.

The divine smith has been given the task of chaining Prometheus to the mountainside. His is a sympathetic figure surrounded by Force and Violence. The fact that the hero stole fire from Hephaestus' forge makes the smith a laudable

persona indeed.

Chorus of Oceanides.

The ocean nymphs possess wisdom and feeling, sympathizing with Prometheus while advising him to be practical and capitulate to authority. Yet they too, nobly, become uncompromising and self-sacrificing when Zeus' despotism in the form of Hermes alienates them. (What a fine chorus this is.)

Oceanus.

Another compassionate though pragmatic figure, the personification of the great ocean, visits Prometheus to offer assistance. The rather simple fellow provides a faint touch of humor in a tragedy otherwise deadly serious.

Io.

The cow-maiden has been compelled to suffer unimaginably, involving the same source that tortures Prometheus. Zeus, the king of the gods, lusted after her. Queen Hera, out of jealousy, afflicted the innocent girl with physical aspects of a cow. As such, a gadfly follows and stings her incessantly. Homeless, she wanders the earth in this terrible way. As Prometheus symbolizes mankind suffering under unjust government, so Io betokens both this and woman's particular oppression by male-dominated social forces.

Io visits Prometheus, and asks the prophet when her suffering will end. Despite their own sorrows, each genuinely commiserates with the other.

Hermes.

The messenger of Zeus, he is harsh and threatening. Aeschylus brushstrokes this willing lackey of despotic

coercion into real life.

Each of Prometheus' encounters adds its own enhancing elements to the theme of brutality versus compassion, and to the basic plot of one great ethical hero standing up against overwhelming tyrannical force.

Observe the crucial fact that Fate stands above the Gods and the oracle Prometheus knows that Zeus will be overthrown and by whom. He must endure sufferings, for a thousand years if necessary, and not reveal the secret.

Prometheus and Io's fates are intertwined. He tells the maiden that she must bear her painful existence for a dozen generations. Then a descendant of Io will give birth to a son by Zeus himself. This will change everything.

Hermes comes to frighten the secret out of Prometheus, but must leave empty-handed after a sharp exchange. His threats are not empty, however, and the play closes with earthquake and thunder, in the midst of which Prometheus and the Daughters of Oceanus sink into an abyss. The hero will be restored eventually to the surface of the earth—to be repeatedly attacked by a ravenous eagle which will tear at his liver, an endless torture.

Postscript: From scattered evidence, we know of a *Prometheus Unbound (Lyomenos)* by Aeschylus to follow *Prometheus Bound.* We know too that Io's descendant, the son of Zeus spoken of in the prophecy, will come to that barren cliff. It is **Hercules**. As the bird of prey swoops again to attack Prometheus, Hercules fits an arrow to his bow, prays to Apollo to guide the shaft, looses it and kills the predator. Hercules then wrenches away the chains, and sets Prometheus free.

The Persians

We see another example of Aeschylus' innovative talent in

this play about the Greek victory in the Battle of Salamis. Many authors, even a creative one, would have dramatized a patriotic theme by focusing on Greek preparations and the Greek military as it faced and overcame heavy odds.

Aeschylus did something quite different, locating the action in the Court of Persia and having the Persians comment on their decimation. A messenger informs Queen Atossa (widow of Emperor Darius, mother of Emperor Xerxes) of the proceedings at Salamis. Xerxes, enthroned on a hill overlooking the sea, witnesses Athenian naval stratagems and the crushing defeat. Xerxes also sits, symbolically, on a hill of excessive pride (*hubris*), which accounts fundamentally for the Persian disaster.

Aeschylus, who himself fought in that battle, never disparages the Persians or directly vaunts the Athenians. He disparages *hubris* and inferentially honors a people willing to risk everything to defend their homeland. He praises wisdom and caution in foreign affairs by revering the great conqueror Darius, raising by incantation the Ghost of Darius from its tomb to warn against a repeated invasion of Greece.

This quality of sparing individuals characterizes the seven plays left to us from Aeschylus. He criticizes systems (despotism, vendetta, war, subjection of women). He criticizes human traits (hubris, cruelty, naked force, blind obedience to authority). But the author always understands and sympathizes with individual people, singling out the causes which impel them in certain directions.

One thing Aeschylus cannot abide, and that is Tyranny. He is a Democrat through and through, and tyrants are to be defied and fought. With pen and sword, the life of Aeschylus exemplifies this philosophy.