



The Masks of Tragedy: Essays on Six Greek Dramas

Thomas G. Rosenmeyer

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"What matters about a play is not the extent to which it is like any other play, but the way in which it is different," writes Thomas G. Rosenmeyer. "This is, I suggest, how the ancient audiences received the performances.... My purpose, then, in writing these essays is twofold: ... to devote enough space to the discussion of each play to allow its special tone and texture to emerge without hindrance and at leisure ... and to include in one collection analyses of plays so different from one another that the accent will come to rest on the variety of the tragic experience rather than on any one narrowly defined norm."

Greek tragedy is a vehicle for many different ideas and many different intentions. From the wealth of material that has come down to us the author has chosen six plays for analysis. He reminds us that the plays were written to be seen and heard, and only secondarily to be studied. The listeners expected each play to have a specific objective, and to exhibit its own mood. These the author attempts to recover for us, by listening to what each play, in its own right, has to say. His principal concern is with the tragic diction and the tragic ideas, designed to release certain massive responses in the large theater-going group of ancient Athens. In exploring the characters and the situations of the plays he has chosen, the author transports his reader to the world of fifth-century B.C. Greece, and establishes the relevance of that world to our own experience.

The essays are not introductory in nature. No space is given, for instance, to basic information about the playwrights, the history of Greek drama, or the special features of the Attic stage. Yet the book addresses itself to classicists and nonclassicists alike. The outgrowth of a series of lectures to nonspecialists, its particular appeal is to students of literature and the history of Western thought. Parallels are drawn between the writings of the philosophers and the tragedies, and attention is paid to certain popular Greek beliefs that colored the tragic formulations. Ultimately, however, the approach is not historical but critical; it is the author's intention to demonstrate the beauty and the craftsmanship of the plays under discussion.

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