LITERATURE

Greek literature in the Golden Age was essentially a flowering from the roots that grew centuries earlier; however, the language was perhaps already as expressive and beautiful in Homer's time as it was in the later centuries. As William Harlan Hale observes:

> *The Greeks particularly loved the spoken word, and the quality of their literature stems from it. Their language, with its high proportion of vowel to consonant sounds, lent itself admirably to fluid speech and rich verbal music. Swift movement combined with somber grandeur are the chief characteristics of their arch-poet, Homer. His way with words and images remained the model for subsequent centuries, and his flowing hexameter line was used for subject matter as diverse as Hesiod's homely poems of rural life and the fervent hymns sung at religious festivals as preludes to recitals of passages from the Homeric epics.*[1]

Strangely, no later epic poet challenged Homer seriously, though fragments of narrative poetry remain. Possibly they were intended as imitations of Homer, but more probably they were briefer stories based on the same themes--the Trojan War or the Theban events later dealt with by the dramatists. Most of these earlier pieces have been lost; we know of them mainly through allusions in later works. Nevertheless, Homer's epics were continually recited, quoted, and used as "authority" for many purposes, including history. When Vergil (first century B.C.) undertook to provide a Latin epic for the greater glory of Rome, he constantly reflected his debt to his master, Homer.

The substance, or subject matter, of prose and poetry was drawn from the same body of myth and legend that had been known to the Greeks long before they had a written alphabetic language in which to record it. The Greek dramatists, both tragic and comic, relied largely on this same narrative stock, as did lyric and choral poets, prose writers, historians, and philosophers. The surprising richness of this heritage has never been exhausted, not even in our own age. Translators still devote much loving effort to the task of keeping Greek poetry alive, exploring its imagery, savoring its wisdom, beauty, and humanity.

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[1]William Harlan Hale, *Horizon Book of Ancient Greece* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Company, 1965), p. 129.

Short poetic works, including the personal lyric in the style of Sappho and her contemporaries (late seventh century B.C.), remained popular everywhere in the Greek world. The choral poets also flourished. Chief among them was Pindar, a Boeotian aristocrat (c. 518 B.C.-443 B.C.), whose output over half a century included victory odes (*epinikia*) for winners at athletic festivals, paeans to the gods, various kinds of choral songs for banquets (*scolia*), and choral dirges. He was the poet for all occasions. Only the four volumes of victory odes survive intact, but they have furnished models for many later poets attempting to emulate him. Pindar was a contemporary of Aeschylus and provides another link between the tradition of choral odes begun by the seventh century poets such as Alcman and Stesichorus and the early drama that relied mainly on the chorus for its structure.

Two of Pindar's contemporaries, Simonides (556-468 B.C.) and his nephew, Bacchylides (b. c. 510 B.C.), whose works were recovered as late as 1897 in an Egyptian manuscript, also contributed to the choral ode, especially as a vehicle for narratives on mythological themes. According to T. A. Sinclair:

> *More even than Pindar, Bacchylides is influenced by Stesichorus, who established the myth in choral poetry. He enjoys telling the myths, and is not at pains to defend or purify them. He is generally fuller in his narrative than Pindar but, as is usual in lyric, not every episode in a story is necessarily included and a certain knowledge is taken for granted.*[2]

Doubtless these were only a few among many who wrote poetry for patrons --and were paid well for their work. The custom of writing poetry for special occasions, financed by the wealthy, probably influenced the drama as well, for we have ample evidence that the dramatic festivals in honor of Dionysus were provided with scripts in this way.

When we speak of poets, we are also discussing musicians, for virtually all the poetry from Homer's epics on was accompanied by the lyre or one of the several other varieties of instruments. (See the section on MUSIC following.) The lyricists of Lesbos, writing in the Aeolian dialect, preferred monody--compositions for the single voice--while the choral tradition, as we have seen, could employ more instruments with greater range.

Nothing thus far mentioned, however, approaches in quality the magnificent drama of the fifth century. Greek drama had its origins in ritual, most directly in the rites honoring Dionysus, the god of pleasure, wine, and fertility. The Greek word *tragodia* means "goat song," and goats are associated with the cult of Dionysus both in the animal sacrifice and in

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[2]T. A. Sinclair, *A History of Classical Greek Literature: From Homer to Aristotle* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, Inc., 1973), p. 148.

the nature of the minor divinities connected with him (satyrs who are often represented as half goat and half human). Dionysus himself is represented sometimes as a goat. And it is at the festival of Dionysus that tragedy emerges in Athens in 534 B.C., with its basic elements those of older ritual--dramatic movement or dance, poetic language in special patterns, and music or chant. It is still primarily a choral performance, but the first step toward real drama has been taken: a person has stepped out from the choral performers, assumed the identity of a character, and exchanged words with the chorus. The first actor (*hypokrites*, "answerer") has been born. (The introduction of the second actor is attributed to Aeschylus, the third to Sophocles.)

What preceded this birth in the evolution of the drama is not always clear or certain. The transformation from the frenzied songs and dances of early Dionysian worshippers around a sacrificial altar to the more formal choral utterances and movements of sixth-century Greece must have included several intermediary steps including the introduction of mythic and legendary narrative material unrelated to Dionysus.

Throughout these changes, however, the chorus remained fundamental to the ritual and gave the early tragedy its basic form. In the conventional structure of the drama, the *prologos* was the dialogue or speech giving exposition before the chorus entered. It was followed by the entrance of the chorus (*parados*), whose long choral odes (*stasima*) alternated with acted scenes (*epeisodia*). The play's end was marked by the *exodus*, the exit of the chorus. As the early drama developed, the function of the chorus became more varied. Sometimes it acted as a central figure or as a group affected by the action of the principal actors; at other times it was the ideal spectator. It recalled past events, commented on present happenings, and prophesied future consequences. It introduced new arrivals, set new scenes, and indicated the passage of time. However, as the drama evolved, the choric elements declined and the acted scenes became more important.

The performing area of the theatre also reflected the religious origin of the drama. In the center of the circle (orchestra) in which the dancing and acting took place was an altar, toward which the dancers oriented their movements. Behind the circle was a long structure (skene) where the costumes and properties were stored (probably originally a tent, then a wooden building and, finally, a stone structure whose front was faced with pillars). The building also came to contain on its roof a crane that lowered a god (known as the *deus ex machina*, "the god from the machine") to extricate mortals from unsolvable difficulties. In front of the circle, the seats for the spectators, carved out of hills or cliffs, spread out fan-like, accommodating as many as 15,000 in the theatre of Dionysius on the slope of the Acropolis and 20,000 in the theatre at Epidaurus.

Just as the religious origin of the drama shaped the physical structure of the treatre and the form of tragedy, so it also determined the spirit of tragedy. The purpose of tragedy was to explore the relationship of people to their gods, to reveal the essence of humanity when placed in

conflict with the greater power of the gods. Edith Hamilton expressed it in these terms: "The dignity and the significance of human life-- of these, and these alone, tragedy will never let go. . . . Tragedy's peculiar province is to show man's misery at its blackest and man's grandeur at its greatest."[3]

We spoke earlier of tragedy's emergence in Athens in 534 B.C. The reason we are able to speak of this date with such assurance (amid so many uncertainties) is that this is the year recorded for the first dramatic competition in Athens. Pisistratus had established more than sixty state festival holidays each year, reserving three or four of them for drama. New tragedies were produced at the March festival of Dionysus, while new comedies (beginning in 488 B.C.) were presented during the January festival. Three dramatists were selected to participate in the contest, each entering three plays (known as a trilogy if there was one connected story) and a satyr play for presentation to the community and to a panel of judges. Wealthier citizens were expected to underwrite the plays, pay the actors, and provide the prizes. Only male citizens participated in the drama, rotating roles so that both young and old could be trained in music and acting. Because the theatres were so large, actors often wore elevated shoes and masks depicting their characters.

While Thespis is recorded as the first prize winner of the festival in 534 B.C.--and traditionally credited with the introduction of the first actor (hence the term *thespians* for actors)--none of his plays survive. In fact, of the hundreds of tragedies produced during the Golden Age, fewer than thirty-five complete plays remain. But these are the works of Greece's great tragic poets--Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides--whose genius is not only revealed in the plays themselves but is attested to by the number of prizes they won in the dramatic competitions: fifteen for Aeschylus, twenty for Sophocles, and five for Euripides.

The first great writer of tragedy, Aeschylus (c. 524-456 B.C.), clearly manifests the religious and moral character of Greek drama in the early fifth century. By this time, what had been primarily religious pageantry became dramatic performance, focusing on theme and character. Aeschylus dealt with many of the questions that absorbed Athenians during the age of Pericles: What are people's responsibilities to their gods, to their families, to themselves? When individuals act wrongly, how should they be judged and punished? In the seven complete plays of Aeschylus (there are fragments from seventy more), we can see how theme begins to occupy the author and can trace the movement from a generally static, choral/lyric play to a play in which individual characters interact to produce dramatic intensity.

In *The Suppliants*, presumed to be his first play, Aeschylus limits his

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[3]Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way* (New York: New American Library, Mentor Books, 1942), pp. 130 and 135.

simple plot to one situation. Using the chorus to narrate events, he tells the story of the fifty daughters of Danaus who flee to Argos to avoid marriage to the fifty sons of Aegyptus and are finally saved by King Pelasgus and the people of Argos. In *The Persians* the scene is a larger one, but the chorus is still dominant for a major portion of the play. There is a stronger emotional quality, however, as Aeschylus develops the growing fear of the people as Xerxes' army approaches. Furthermore, he uses a messenger to relate the story of the Salamis victory, and a ghost, that of Darius, to make prophecies about future victories--devices that would be used by later playwrights. *The Seven Against Thebes*, which followed, tells the story of the struggle between the two sons of Oedipus for leadership of Thebes. In Eteocles, one of the sons, Aeschylus develops a genuinely reflective, tragic hero who must confront his brother, Polyneices, and the others making up the seven who attack Thebes.

Aeschylus' next play, *Prometheus Bound,* perhaps best reveals the inscrutable will of the gods. According to the legend, Prometheus has given fire to human beings, against the will of an all-powerful Zeus. His punishment is to be chained to a rock while a vulture devours his liver. The "characters" in the play are abstractions: they personify the ideology implied, that human beings must always defy unyielding force, no matter how they suffer in consequence. And although all the characters but one are gods, Aeschylus confronts one of the questions asked in all ages: Why must humanity suffer?

Aeschylus won first prize for his *Orestaia*, written just two years before his death and the only surviving trilogy (three plays on a single theme performed on the same day). Comprising *Agamemnon, The Choephori* (*The Libation Bearers*), and *The Eumenides*, it is a majestic culmination of his poetic gifts, especially of his ability to create brilliant imagery that enriches and ennobles a violent tale of personal vengeance. Its theme--justice--is structurally sound in all three plays: present action is always grounded in past events. In the first play Agamemnon returns from the Trojan War to his kingdom of Mycenae, where his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus (also his cousin), have ruled during his ten-year absence. Clytemnestra has longed for his homecoming so that she may revenge herself for the loss of their daughter Iphigenia, sacrificed by Agamemnon to obtain fair winds for the voyage to Troy. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus (who hates Agamemnon because of a family feud involving both their fathers) murder Agamemnon. Both are equally guilty, but it is Clytemnestra's righteous anger that dominates the action. They also slay the Trojan princess Cassandra, Agamemnon's prize and mistress, after she prophesies their future fall at the hands of Orestes, the son who had been banished to a neighboring state. The play ends with Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in control of the state while the people (chorus), defiant and angry, warn of the fate that awaits them.

The second play opens with Orestes' arrival at the grave of his father, where he watches his sister, Electra, and the women (chorus) mourn the dead Agamemnon. Electra's prayer for an avenger is answered when Orestes appears and tells how he was sent by Apollo to "shed blood."

Together he and Electra and the chorus lament and invoke the spirit of Agamemnon to aid Orestes in killing his mother and her paramour. They make a plan, which works; Orestes first slays Aegisthus, then Clytemnestra. Although he justifies his crime to the people, he is soon set upon by the Furies (*Erinys*, ancient goddesses who look like Gorgon), angered because he has slain his mother. In agony, he flees to Apollo to be cleansed of his guilt.

The last play begins at Delphi, where Apollo advises Orestes to seek Athena's help. The Furies are worked into a frenzy by the ghost of Clytemnestra, and Apollo chases them from his shrine; but they follow Orestes to Athens, where the second scene, the trial of Orestes, takes place. When the jury of citizens (chorus) casts equal votes for and against Orestes, Athena casts the deciding vote to acquit him of blood guilt. She placates the Furies by granting them a home and giving them a new role as useful, friendly spirits who will guard Athens and henceforth be called Eumenides. Thus the drama is resolved, with the old goddesses treated with honor and the bloody cycle ended. As in all of Aeschylus' plays, the power of fate permeates the first two plays; however, the generous and compromising solution in the last play reflects the judicious nature of Periclean Athens, for the old and new gods are reconciled and Athens gains glory by displaying the civilized behavior of a godly government under law.

In the years between the death of Aeschylus and the rise of Euripides, Greek drama was dominated by Sophocles (495-406 B.C.). Although he wrote over 123 plays, only seven of them have survived: *Ajax, Antigone, The Women of Trachis, Oedipus the King, Electra, Philocletes, and Oedipus at Colonus*. Like Aeschylus, Sophocles adhered closely to the traditions implicit in the narratives he used, but he shaped his material to reflect his own interpretation of essential humanity. Granted, the same divine powers, the same fates that governed the world of Aeschylus existed for Sophocles, but they did not dominate his stage. At the center of his work were not gods but human beings. While the idea of destiny was as integral a part of his plays as it was of all Greek tragedy, Sophocles studied people's sufferings in connection with their own moral and ethical choices. He concentrated on the problems of men and women as they were striving for happy and useful lives in spite of the odds of fate. His characters were truly human--often flawed by unreason or excess--but capable of arousing our sympathy by the nobility of their suffering and pain.

Sophocles was different from Aeschylus in his dramatic emphasis and superior to him in his dramatic skill. Sophocles has been called the perfect artist, the master of plot construction, and the poet best able to combine character and event into a harmonious whole. He introduced the third actor, thus increasing the possibilities of interaction and the multiplicity of meanings. He reduced the role of the chorus and also varied their function, sometimes, for instance, making them participate in the drama (in *Ajax* they are the great warrior's men who will be left defenseless unless Ajax endures his disgrace and lives). He heightened dramatic suspense and achieved tragic irony by foreshadowing events

that were understood by the audience but unrealized by the actors. He revealed character by contrast, both of temperament and complexity; he compressed dialogue; and he quickened action. With the genius of his intellect, Sophocles shaped the tales of Homer's age into masterful human dramas of great poetic beauty.

It is no wonder then that Sophocles' plays were held up for emulation and that the philosopher-critic Aristotle considered *Oedipus the King* to be the very model of Greek tragedy. *Oedipus* is the story of a man faced with oracular predictions that doomed him from before his birth. The play opens with the attempts of Oedipus to save the city of Thebes from a plague by finding out who killed Laius, the former king, unaware that he himself is the guilty one. As the drama unfolds, Oedipus is gradually shown how fate has made him its victim and how his own choices unwittingly contributed to his disaster. Despite his abandonment at birth by his real mother and his flight from his foster parents, he moves inexorably toward those moments when, unaware of their true identities, he kills his father (Laius) and later marries his mother (Jocasta), as the oracles had prophesied. The last to realize that he is the one he seeks, guilty of both patricide and incest, Oedipus blinds himself; and we feel a surge of sympathy for this man who, acting out of passionate intensity and pride (hubris), stands powerless before forces greater than himself.

According to Aristotle, the effect of this play on the audience is "catharsis," a purgation of our feelings of pity and fear, a subtle but profound change in our understanding of humanity which helps us to perceive nobility and suffering. Edith Hamilton refers to it as "the strange power [of] tragedy . . . to present suffering and death in such a way as to exalt and not depress."[4] Though we may not consider this the only purpose of tragedy, it is representative of the great achievements of these playwrights, and no other drama in any period has surpassed the Greeks in this kind of tragedy.

Sophocles wrote two other tragedies dealing with incidents in the tragic history of the house of Laius--*Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*--but they, together with *Oedipus the King*, do not form a trilogy; actually *Antigone* was the first of the three to be written. In *Antigone* we follow the two daughters and the two sons of Oedipus after he has exiled himself from Thebes. After combat that results in the death of the two brothers (Eteocles, the loyal patriot, and Polyneices, the rebel), Creon, the king, orders the burial of the loyal one but denies it to the rebel. Antigone, defying the decree of Creon, gives Polyneices a burial, and for her crime is buried alive. Later Creon has a change of heart, but it is too late. Discovering that Antigone has killed herself, Haemon (Creon's son) also commits suicide, and Eurydice (Creon's wife), hearing of her son's death, takes her own life. The play contrasts the cold logicality of the king to Antigone's warm, human instincts and tradition; and the eternal question of the relation between the laws of humankind and the laws of god

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

make this a relevant play even today.

In *Oedipus at Colonus* we see the melancholy end of a king, highly revered, who finally reaches the place where the oracle had prophesied that he should die. This play was produced in 401 B.C., five years after the death of Sophocles. He had lived during the glory of Athens' greatest days and had died just two years before his city's surrender to Sparta.

Of the three great Greek tragic poets, Euripides (481-407 B.C.) is probably the one who speaks most clearly to the modern reader. "Out of the pages written more than twenty-three hundred years ago sound the two notes which we feel are the dominants in our world today, sympathy with suffering and the conviction of the worth of everyone alive."[5]

Writing at the end of the fifth century, when a general disillusionment is apparent in the Greek world, Euripides subordinates the tradition of divine forces as fundamental to the struggle of earthly beings and makes human behavior the central dramatic problem. The characters and stories of heroic times are frequently reduced to the level of ordinary life, but their humanity transcends the ordinary and illumines the ideals of reason and humane enlightenment. Skeptical of political institutions, decrying the savagery of war, always critical, Euripides in being the "destroyer of illusions" became the innovator of a realism which made his royal characters seem "despite their grandiloquent associations, contemporaries of his audience, and their problems directly relevant to the lives of his audiences."[6]

In *Medea* (431 B.C.) we see the consequences of injustice and of unreasoning passion, but they are consequences rooted in human motives and made real by human emotions. Medea, a foreign princess, gave up everything for Jason, saved his life, bore his children, and now is to be deserted by him as he arranges to marry a Greek princess. In avenging anger, she destroys all that is dear to him: his betrothed, her father, and, finally, their own sons. Thus Jason is a tarnished hero who brings about his own ruin by ignoring the feelings of a woman who was considered to be his wife. Medea is a sorceress, and her powers for evil action surpass Jason's capacity for heroism. Though we see Medea's suffering, she is never quite human; by destroying her sons, she violates human nature. Jason's foolish choice does not show him as heroic; he is merely pitiful at the end, a victim of Medea's overpowering malignancy.

At the end of the play, as Jason and an angry crowd are about to break down the door protecting Medea, a chariot drawn through the air by dragons rescues Medea to take her to safety with King Aegeus of

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[5]*Ibid.*, p. 151.

[6]Moses Hadas, *A History of Greek Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), p. 91.

Athens. This use of *deus ex machina* was popular with Euripides, occuring in over half of his extant plays. It is theorized by some to be Euripides' way of avoiding the logical or non-traditional outcome of a conflict (Medea's being killed, for instance) and providing the audience with two endings--the traditional or happier one they see and the realistic one they can imagine.[7]

The year that produced *Medea*--431 B.C.--also saw the beginning of the war between Athens and Sparta, and many of Euripides' succeeding plays, while dealing with the Trojan War, really reflected the poet's reactions to the Peloponnesian War. While *Andromache* is anti-Spartan in theme, *Hecuba* and particularly the *Trojan Women* are indictments of war itself, of the pain, suffering, and misery it brings to all humanity.

In 413 B.C. Euripides turned to the house of Atreus for his subject and created from the story of Electra a drama very different from that of Aeschylus (*The Choephori*) and of Sophocles (*Electra*). Though all three use the same primary material, Euripides shapes his to create a more realistic drama, based on human motivations and expressed in more colloquial language. Characters give voice to the implications of other's past actions as well as to the consequences of their own deeds. Euripides used the chorus to a lesser degree than either Aeschylus or Sophocles and adds a number of characters. One of these is a peasant husband for Electra, whose introduction intensifies her demeaning position. No longer the gentle, dutiful daughter of Aeschylus nor the single-minded avenging heroine of Sophocles, Electra becomes in the hands of Euripides a despairing, frustrated, bitter woman, capable of hate and love, vindictiveness and tenderness, guilt and self-sacrifice.

Euripides wrote at least eighty-eight plays, of which nineteen survive. In addition to his tragedies, we also possess a satyr play[8] by him. The only satyr play extant, *Cyclops* is based upon the escape of Odysseus from the Cyclops' cave.

Although Euripides received fewer prizes than either Aeschylus or Sophocles during his lifetime and was frequently the subject of ridicule, his popularity grew after his death, and he remains for many the most readable and the most relevant of the tragic dramatists.

Most of our beliefs about what constitutes tragedy derive from the works of these three dramatists, writing almost 2,500 years ago. However, our understanding of the aims and design of tragedy come to us almost a century later with the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) (see PHILOSOPHY section), who became the first literary critic by form-

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[8] A satyr play was neither a comedy nor a tragedy but a relatively short, amusing performance with a chorus of satyrs. One of the characters had to be in the comic and not the tragic tradition.

ulating a clearly organized and comprehensive theory of tragedy. In his *Poetics* he defined what he considered the best kind of tragedy--that in which a heightened and harmonious imitation of nature is presented--and discussed the six elements necessary to tragedy: plot, character, thought, diction, spectacle, and melody. Of these, he held that plot was most important, "the life and soul of tragedy," and that a play should not be merely a number of episodes but a unified series of incidents arousing pity and fear in the hearts of the spectators. Since he viewed art as a shaper of human nature, he believed that the characters must not only be appropriate, plausible, and consistent, but that they should also be essentially good, if imperfect, persons of consequence. While Aristotle referred his readers to his *Art of Rhetoric* for a discussion of thought, he indicated its connection to language and stated that whatever characters said, or did, must be along the same lines as their mental "procedures." While Aristotle required clear and appropriate diction for perfection of style, he judged mastery of metaphor the mark of a great poet. Aristotle's ideas on spectacle and melody were certainly important in his time, but they have not influenced the theatre as considerably as his ideas on the other elements of drama.

Comedy, like tragedy, is believed to have had its origins in ritual, in the fertility rites associated with the god Dionysus. Comedy also employed a chorus and told its story in verse dialogue. Unlike tragedy, however, its tone was bawdy and uproarious, and its subjects were drawn from contemporary life.

The only playwright to leave a substantial number of comedies was Aristophanes (c. 450-c. 385 B.C.), a gifted poet and actor whose satire reveals the Greek society during the Peloponnesian War. According to Moses Hadas,"his gross obscenity, his exquisite lyricism, and his serious concern for old-fashioned decency and morality" were his major characteristics.[9] He was always conservative, at times lampooning his society viciously, often making individuals his targets, with the serious intention of revealing moral values through satire.

The eleven extant plays of Aristophanes, who is credited with forty or fifty, give us a commentary on life in Athens during the forty years in which he produced plays. The dramatic pattern of all these plays is the same. It always begins with the presentation of a fantastic scheme devised by the leading character in order to solve some difficulty. The chorus then discusses the problem, and there follows a debate between those who favor the solution and those who are opposed. After the opposition has been defeated in the debate, the chorus steps forward for a special number, sometimes irrelevant to the action; then several episodes are presented by the actors, showing the realization of the fantastic scheme. In the final appearance of the chorus, the play ends, sometimes with wild scenes of revelry.

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[9]Moses Hadas, *Greek Drama* (New York: Bantam Books, Inc.), Introduction, p. 11.

Among Aristophanes' most popular plays are the *Wasps*, the *Clouds*, the *Birds*, and the *Frogs*. The *Wasps* satirizes the Athenians' passion for lawsuits with such ridiculous suits as one against a house dog for stealing cheese. The *Clouds* attacks the social decay and educational systems of the Sophists and includes in its attack Socrates (though he was not a Sophist), who sits in a basket that rests overhead in the clouds proclaiming that "the ground is not the place for lofty speculations." The *Birds* shows Athens in contrast to a utopian city of the birds, "Cloud-Cuckoo-borough," built at the behest of an enterprising Athenian to cut off the gods from the city below. The *Frogs* ridicules Euripides by having the god Dionysus sent on a journey to Hades to bring back a worthy playwright. Although Euripides was the popular dramatist of the day, Dionysus comes back with Aeschylus.

Several of Aristophanes' other plays concern war. The *Acharnians* was an attack on the war party politicians in Athens. The hero in *Peace* flies to heaven on a huge beetle to seek an end to war, and in order to stop the gods from pounding the Greek states to mortar, he frees the goddess Peace, who has been imprisoned in a well. In *Lysistrata*, the heroine organizes a sex strike to dissuade the pompous warriors of Athens and Sparta from battle. Women also become the focal point in two other plays by Aristophanes--*Thesmophoriazusae*, which satirizes Euripides and women at a female festival; and the *Ecclesiazusae*, which depicts women in parliament--a wildly improbable situation to the Athenians--who succeed in decreeing a new constitution.

Whether talking about women or war or writers, Aristophanes' plays are rollicking, bawdy, exhuberant, lyrical, and witty, and some of his outrageous situations are still relevant, for they show us how we accept folly and condone immorality.

The term *Old Comedy* has been applied to Aristophanic plays to distinguish them from the *New Comedy* of the next century. The only major author of New Comedy was Meander (342-291 B.C.), from whom one complete play, *The Dyskolos* (sometimes translated as *The Curmudgeon* or *The Grouch*), only recently rediscovered, and several fragments in various manuscripts have survived. He was a major link to the Latin playwrights, Plautus (c. 254-184 B.C.) and Terence (c. 195-159 B.C.), who wrote about twenty-five adaptations of Menander's plays and other examples of the Greek New Comedy. In these plays, ordinary people are seen in domestic situations, working out romantic or intriguing problems. The apparatus of gods and heroes had become hackneyed, even in Euripides' plays, and were abandoned almost completely in Roman adaptations, except as literary conventions.

Among the other varieties of Greek literature in this period, the most important as a reflection of the age are the philosophical writings, especially the works of Plato and Aristotle (see PHILOSOPHY section) and the histories of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, among others, and the late writers of prose romances, such as Longus (fourth or perhaps third century--few facts are available), to whom is attributed a pastoral tale called *Daphnis and Chloe*.

Plato (c. 428-347 B.C.) is discussed in terms of his philosophical ideas, enormously influential in all later ages, in the section on philosophy, but for the present purpose, his contribution to literature was the prose dialogue form. Socrates, Plato's teacher, who was executed in 399 B.C. for "corrupting youth," is the hero of Plato's dialogues, exploring philosophical questions, political questions, dissecting almost every problem of ethics and morality that was of concern to a sophisticated society at the twilight of its greatness. These works were eventually the curriculum, so to speak, for the school of philosophy called the Academy, which Plato founded at Athens in about 386 B.C. and which continued as a center of philosophical study until A.D. 529, when all such schools were closed by the emperor Justinian.

One of Plato's major purposes was to educate politicians, to create "philosopher-rulers" with wisdom and judgment, a sense of the goodness of humanity. He did not succeed in his own time, but much of his thought has saturated higher education, exerting inestimable effects on Western culture. His pupil Aristotle (whose *Poetics* has been discussed in this chapter) studied at the Academy from the age of seventeen until Plato's death in 347 B.C. He actually became a tutor to the young Alexander for a time, and it is at least probable that the spread of Hellenic idealism during Alexander's brief reign was due largely to Aristotle's training in philosophy. Aristotle returned to Athens in 336 B.C. and, like his master, founded the Lyceum, where he taught, did scientific research, and wrote on a wide range of subjects.

Since the Greeks treated history as literature, any discussion of the writers of this period must include the first Greek historian, Herodotus (c. 484-428 B.C.), who was a supreme prose stylist and master of narrative. His purpose as a historian was to reveal how people make history, to deal with heroic deeds as examples of conduct, and to prescribe moral precepts. He tells much of the history of the centuries prior to his own time--and his work is the only source for a great deal of what we must accept as authentic history--as well as gives us an invaluable contemporary account of the Persian wars (480-490 B.C.). Later research has not succeeded in discrediting Herodotus' accounts, even those which he admits are miraculous or improbable, and modern archeologists continue to discover substantiation for what he said.

Thucydides (c. 471-400 B.C.), an Athenian commander early in the Peloponnesian War, has left the only reliable and judicious contemporary account of that period. When the naval forces he commanded were defeated at Amphipolis (424 B.C.), the Athenians banished him for twenty years, thus providing him with the opportunity to observe the war and write about it as it happened. Thucydides' account covers the period from 431 B.C. down to 411 B.C. He tells not merely of the civil war in Greece, but also provides insight into all wars, their causes and disasters, their leaders and their ubiquitous traitors. The great men on both sides are characterized fairly and completely, and his generalizations on war and the men who pursue war professionally are still valid. The magnificent "Funeral Oration of Pericles" comes to us in the words of Thucydides, bringing to life the spirit of Athens and the dignity of its most

influential citizen.

The last great historian in this period was Xenophon (c. 430-354 B.C.) a student and admirer of Socrates, who actively participated in the expedition of Greek mercenaries in the army of the Persian pretender, Cyrus. *The Anabasis*, his account of the march into Persia and the march back into Greece (under Xenophon's leadership), is a great adventure story, told with enthusiasm and vigor. Xenophon was an aristocratic Athenian, but he had strong admiration for Sparta. He engaged in the Persian expedition in the service of Cyrus, who was attempting to seize the throne from his brother, King Artaxerxes. Xenophon's book is more than a history; it is an analysis of the everyday lives of ordinary men and soldiers, a practical view of government and morality and how it worked. In later life, Xenophon contributed a defense of Socrates (in the *Memorabilia*), which is the only major contemporary source of information about the great philosopher that goes beyond Plato's dialogues, and continued Thucydides' work in the *Hellenica*, among other writings.

Greek literature did not come to an end in the third century B.C. However, the richness of the Golden Age has tended to eclipse later Greek writing, referred to as either Hellenistic or Alexandrian. With the expansion of Greek civilization into the western Mediterranean and the shift of the center of culture to Alexandria in Egypt, a considerable change occurred in the aims and substance of Greek literature. While this new, larger world meant a greater audience for works in Greek based on Greek models, they were written by men who had a Greek education but were, for the most part, not oriented toward Greece. Hellenistic and/or Alexandrian writers produced learned works, but they usually wrote for a select audience interested in specialized scholarship and technical brilliance of style. The small, homogeneous world of fifth and fourth century Athens that had produced such masterpieces had disappeared, and never again would Greek literature possess the spirit of the Golden Age, a spirit perhaps best expressed in the words of the famous Greek scholar Edith Hamilton in *The Greek Way:*

> *For a hundred years Athens was a city where the great spiritual forces that war in men's minds flowed along together in peace; law and freedom, truth and religion, beauty and goodness, the objective and the subjective--there was a truce to their eternal warfare, and the result was the balance and clarity, the harmony and completeness, the word Greek has come to stand for.* [10]

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[10] Hamilton, p. 190.

FOR FURTHER READING

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