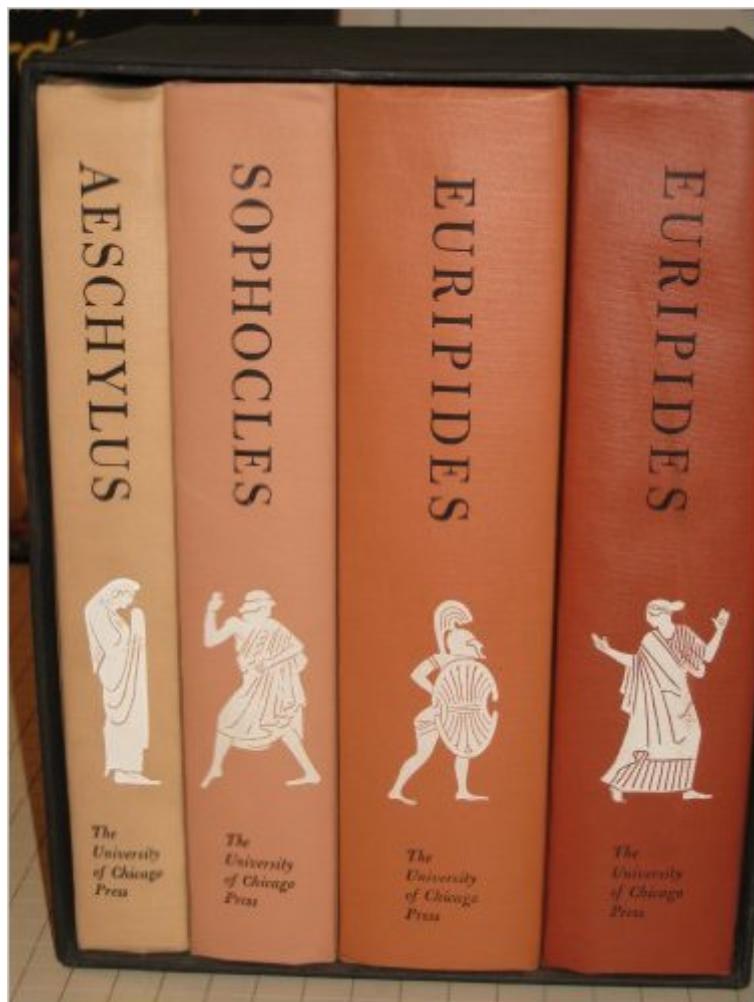


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The Complete Greek Tragedies (4 Volume Set)



Synopsis

V.1 Aeschylus, v.2 Sophocles, V. 3-4 Euripides

Book Information

Hardcover: 616 pages

Publisher: University of Chicago Press; 1St Edition edition (1959)

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Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars See all reviews (11 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Physically, this is a nice book. It's volume one of a four volume collection, The Complete Greek Tragedies (volume two is Sophocles and volumes three and four are Euripides), and all four volumes are lovely hardcovers, printed on nice paper, with handsome Greekish designs on the front and interspersed throughout. Maybe not so attractive as to go on your mantel, but their prominence in your library will not be an embarrassment. The contents are lovely to match. The translations (by Lattimore, Grene and Bernadete) are readable and flowing. The book has almost no footnotes (only Grene's translations of "Seven Against Thebes" and "Prometheus Bound" have any at all, and there they are sparse), but each play (or collection of plays, in the case of the Oresteia) is introduced by a brief explanatory essay. If you know nothing about the Greeks or Greek tragedy, these essays will not be enough to get you through (and you should check out Rose's Handbook of Greek Literature), but if you have a little background information already, the essays are helpful (especially the introductory essay to the Oresteia, which is the most fulsome). Now, about the plays themselves. Of course, you have to read them. This is, effectively, the beginning of Western drama, and the combination of familiar and alien elements is fascinating. In some ways, Aeschylus's plays are like modern musicals, or like opera, with very few characters, a big role played by a chorus, and lots of long songs. Action happens all off-stage and is described by the characters. In addition to being important as part of the history of drama, the plays are important primary sources of Greek mythology. In particular, the Oresteia is simply the most complete telling of the murder of

Agammemnon and his children's revenge.

One of Twain's better quotes is that a classic is a book that everybody wants to have read but no one wants to read. This is true of Aeschylus, but not in the sense that Twain intended. These plays are hard to read -- they often have lines that don't particularly make sense -- and they are essentially slow-motion monologues spouted to the audience. That said, the stories these plays tell, despite getting pooh-poohed a bit in the translators' introductions, are amazing, and even though I was relieved to put the book down, I find myself continually thinking about the characters and their lives long afterwards. First, the down sides: when I was taking Greek in college, we would sometimes run across passages that weren't quite meaningful. The sense of them was on the tip of our tongues in Greek, but any kind of English translation was misleading, being either nonsense or implying more than the Greek said. In those situations, we would naturally see what professional translators had done and some of them were pretty wild, taking a shot in the dark and essentially inventing a lucid English passage that had little to do with the Greek. These translations don't take that approach. They're more honest and seem content to approximate the Greek, even if it leaves the English reader grasping at threads. In some cases, a footnote might have helped with an allusion, but I suspect a number of these passages just don't have a meaning that can be fully recovered by moderns. And I certainly don't blame the translator: our collective sense, shared by undergrad and professor alike, was that Lattimore was the man when it came to translating Greek, so I figure this collection is about as good as it gets.

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