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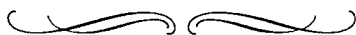
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# WAGNER AND AESCHYLUS

*The Ring and the Oresteia*



MICHAEL EWANS

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

# Contents



PREFACE	page 9
NOTE ON REFERENCES	12
1 WAGNER AND AESCHYLUS	15
2 THE ORESTEIA AND THE CREATION OF THE RING	38
3 <i>DAS RHEINGOLD</i>	
Gods and heroes	77
Agamemnon at Aulis	81
Alberich and the Rhinegold	86
Wotan and Freia	93
Alberich and his ring	99
Alberich's curse and Erda's warning	103
Valhalla	109
4 <i>DIE WALKÜRE</i>	
<i>Die Walküre</i> and Agamemnon	113
Sigmund and Sieglinde	118
Fricka	128
Wotan bequeathes the world to Hagen	131
Brünnhilde's rebellion	138
The Cassandra scene in <i>Agamemnon</i>	141
Wotan renounces Brünnhilde	147
5 <i>SIEGFRIED</i>	
Siegfried and Orestes	157

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-25073-3 - Wagner and Aeschylus: The Ring and the Oresteia

Michael Ewans

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

8	CONTENTS	
	The Young Siegfried	page 167
	Mime and 'learning fear'	172
	Alberich and the Wanderer	178
	Siegfried and the creatures of the forest	182
	The Wanderer renounces the world	188
	Siegfried and Brünnhilde	196
6	GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG	
	<i>Götterdämmerung</i> and <i>Eumenides</i>	203
	The end of prophecy	213
	The light and the darkness	218
	Brünnhilde's revenge	226
	Human society; honour and treachery	233
	Siegfried's death	239
	The twilight of the gods	245
	APPENDIX <i>Wagner and Prometheus Bound</i>	256
	SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	261
	INDEX	267

Cambridge University Press

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Michael Ewans

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Preface



Nietzsche once declared that ‘no ancient work ever had as powerful an influence, as that of the *Oresteia* on Richard Wagner’. Wagner expressed his deep love of Greek tragedy in general, and the dramas of Aeschylus in particular, on many occasions. But Nietzsche later came to recant the enthusiastic admiration which had led him to portray Wagner, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, as the true heir of the Greek tragedians. And for most subsequent classical scholars Wagner’s name is almost synonymous with Romantic extravagance. Few have felt that there is any real affinity between Wagner’s stage works and those of the earliest and most ascetic of the surviving Greek tragic poets. (The exceptions, however, are distinguished: Wolfgang Schadewaldt and Hugh Lloyd-Jones.) Nor has the subject been adequately explored by Wagner’s admirers, despite the enormous quantity of comment which his life and work have evoked.

It has, of course, long been accepted that Wagner’s ideal of a festal community theatre for the enactment of dramas based on myth was formed under the example of classical Greek tragedy. Furthermore, Wagner instructed Gottfried Semper to design the auditorium of the projected Wagner theatre for Munich (the plans for which were later used in the construction of the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth) after the pattern of the amphitheatres in ancient Greek and Roman theatres. Greek influence on Wagner is also clearly visible in his major theoretical writings, especially in *Art and Revolution* (1849) and *Opera and Drama* (1850–1). But it can be traced, far more importantly, in his subsequent

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Michael Ewans

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

stage works. In this book, I shall argue that the example of Aeschylus' great trilogy is present in the procedures of the *Ring* at several major levels, from the overall concept of a cycle of three closely interrelated dramas—designed for consecutive performance and solely for festival occasions—right through to profound aspects of subject-matter and form.

To interpret the *Ring* in relation to the *Oresteia* is not merely to shed fresh light on Wagner's dramaturgy. Wagner's cycle is itself a special 'reading' of Aeschylus. His areas of qualified assent and overt or tacit dissent from Aeschylus suggest a re-appraisal not only of Wagner's own artistic aims, dramatic strategy, and vision of life, but of Aeschylus' as well. Indeed, the relationship between Wagner and Aeschylus raises such a wide range of issues that any treatment must inevitably be selective. I am very conscious that my own viewpoint is a subjective one, and that I have been able to discuss only those aspects which I myself feel to be the most important.

I have not hesitated to dwell at times on fairly basic details of the plot and the patterns of action of the two trilogies. Drama is a direct medium, and careful attention to what actually happens in the theatre, as each work unfolds, seems to me to be very important. And so, after the two introductory chapters, this book treats the issues raised by the *Ring* and the *Oresteia* in the order in which they are brought before us in performance.

Aeschylus like Wagner directed the production of his work himself, and he composed the music for the lyric sections of his dramas as well as supervising the design of the costumes and acting the leading parts. From what little we know about the music of the early fifth century, the lyrics of Aeschylean tragedy would seem to have been written in a clear and straightforward style, to be sung in unison to a plain accompaniment from one single woodwind player. There is therefore an immense difference between the *Oresteia* and the *Ring* whose entire action is surrounded by one of the most sumptuous orchestral scores ever to have been written for the theatre. But Wagner insisted in all his theoretical writings (from *Opera and Drama* to his 1878 essay 'On the Application of Music to Drama') that in his theatre works, by contrast with traditional operatic practice, the music



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Michael Ewans

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE

11

would be devoted exclusively to illuminating the action; and in order to proclaim this ideal clearly he even described the *Ring* in its subtitle as a 'stage festival play', and termed *Tristan und Isolde* a '*Handlung*', literally translating the Greek word *drāma* (action). Although his musical techniques for realizing it developed considerably as the *Ring* scores were composed, Wagner never deviated from this fundamental aim. I have, therefore, felt it proper, given that my subject is the influence on Wagner of a playwright, to confine my commentary on the music of the *Ring* to the manner in which the composer's musical inventions shed light upon the situations enacted on his stage. I have paid particular attention to the development and transformation of certain recurrent themes and motifs, since this is one of the principal musical means which Wagner uses to articulate the dramatic structure of the cycle.

I have tried to write in such a way that any intelligent reader can follow my argument. Specialists will, therefore, encounter explanations of some matters with which they are already familiar. I have also been obliged on occasion to be dogmatic about important details which are still hotly debated in academic circles. I trust that musicologists, classical scholars, and Germanists will tolerate both these features of the book. No other approach would have allowed me to treat adequately, and intelligibly, the issues which are central to this study.

This book could not have been finished without the study leave which was granted to me in 1979 by the Council of the University of Newcastle; my first thanks must go to them for this period of sustained work, during which I was able to complete the research and analysis for the book and write much of the first draft. I also owe thanks to the Department of Drama at the University of Bristol, both for the grant of a Visiting Lectureship and for their congenial hospitality. But I am of course most indebted of all to those who have read and criticized the drafts, and who gave me encouragement and expert advice: in particular to Dr Richard Buxton, to my wife, Dr Jenifer Ewans, and to my editor at Faber and Faber, Patrick Carnegy.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Note on References



I have used Denys Page's Oxford Classical Text of Aeschylus (1972). All references to Aeschylus are given by the standard line-numbering, which is used by Page and by most translators. The translations in this book, both from the *Oresteia* and from the *Ring*, are my own.

The best complete translation of the *Oresteia* is that by Richmond Lattimore (*Aeschylus I*, Chicago U.P. 1953), which conveys the feel of the Greek better than any other modern version, and is also remarkably accurate. Its only drawback is that at several points it translates a text which is no longer tenable. Another good version is Robert Fagles's (Penguin, 1977), which is often more imaginative, but also unnecessarily free. Unhelpfully, it does not employ the standard line-numbering. Hugh Lloyd-Jones's annotated translations, with the three plays in separate volumes (Duckworth, 1979), are more prosaic but also far more accurate.

The musical text of Wagner is that of the study scores published by Edition Eulenberg. Since most vocal scores of the *Ring* lack rehearsal figures, and my argument frequently refers to the texture of the orchestration, I have made reference to Wagner's dramas either by act and scene number or, where a more precise indication is necessary, by the page numbering of the Eulenberg study scores.

There are two good modern English versions of the *Ring*: William Mann's translation, published by the Friends of Covent Garden (in the 1973 reprint), and Andrew Porter's singing version (Faber and Faber, 1977).

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Michael Ewans

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## NOTE ON REFERENCES

13

References to Wagner's prose writings are cited for convenience by the volume and page number of the standard English translation by W. Ashton Ellis (abbreviated as AE). I have, however, provided new English translations for this book, as Ellis's English style is now considerably dated. Wagner's letters are cited by the date of writing, preceded by the initial of the addressee's surname: R (Röckel), L (Liszt), U (Uhlig) and N (Nietzsche). Cosima Wagner's *Diaries* are cited by the letter D followed by the date of the entry. References to all other books are made by the page numbers of the edition or translation which is cited in the bibliography.