

# The Oresteia

IN 458 B.C. at Athens the playwright Aeschylus won first prize with his three plays of the *Oresteia*, which immediately became recognised as his masterpiece. Recently the BBC commissioned a new translation from Philip Vellacott, and Raymond Raikes produced the trilogy for the BBC World Theatre. The first play in the series, the *Agamemnon*, will be heard next week from 3YC and 4YC on Monday, September 23, and from 1YC and 2YC on Sunday, September 29. The other two plays will be presented in the following weeks.

These three plays were written for an audience who knew the outline of the plot and who also knew something of the past history of the Royal House of Atreus: that Atreus and Thyestes, sons of Pelops, became enemies; that Thyestes seduced Atreus's wife, and that Atreus in revenge killed the young sons of Thyestes and served them to him at a grisly banquet. For this crime Thyestes cursed the house of Atreus, and this curse descended to the next generation, to Agamemnon and Menelaus. When Helen, Menelaus's wife, deserted him and went to Troy with Paris, Agamemnon joined his brother at the head of a great expedition to sack Troy and recapture Helen. At Aulis the fleet was delayed by contrary winds which a seer, Calchas, prophesied would change only when Agamemnon had sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia to the goddess Artemis. By a trick, Agamemnon persuaded his wife Clytemnestra to send her daughter to Aulis, where she was sacrificed, and the fleet sailed. Clytemnestra was left alone to plan revenge.

The trilogy opens with Troy defeated and the Greeks returning. Clytemnestra has taken as her lover Aegisthus, the sole surviving son of Thyestes, and together they murder Agamemnon.

Part two tells of another vengeance. Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, returns to Argos and, at Apollo's bidding, murders his mother and Aegisthus. The play takes its title, *The Choephoroi* (The Liberation Bearers), from the women who accompany Orestes's sister Electra to Agamemnon's

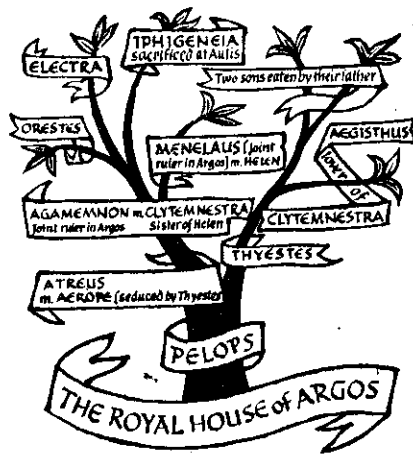
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have been done quite invisibly)—by refusing to pay £10 more than the original price for a new statue, the council is denying the sculptor his advertising, his shop window. There is no other way for a sculptor to sell his goods, to become more widely known, than by getting commissions such as these, which enable him to show his work in public. Why should this right be denied to any man, whether he sells venetian blinds or statuary?

Looked at in this way, it's surely plain that the only thing the council can do to redeem its good name is to go ahead and re-commission that statue. It's a lovely thing, as you can see from the illustration: it would do credit to the fine new library in the fine, not-so-old borough of Takapuna.

**Footnote:** It has since been announced by the Takapuna Borough Council that Alan Ingham's sculpture will not be copied and that the model is being returned to him. A local businessman has put down £25, with which he hopes to open a fund for commissioning another work by the same sculptor for that vacant space on the Takapuna Library wall.

—Sarah Campion



BBC illustration

tomb, where they meet the returning exile, who is to kill his mother and be driven mad by the Furies.

"I believe," said Raymond Raikes, "that the first audience would not have known what to expect of Part Three, any more than we do today. It is called *The Eumenides*—a name for the Furies—but it cannot say much more of the madness of Orestes which has formed such a dramatic climax to the second part. Again, that first audience would have begun to wonder, with Aeschylus, where this insensate spate of murders would end, the chain of crimes cease, and the justice of gods and men be satisfied. Aeschylus has asked question after question in the first two plays, but he has found only a harsh, relentless Divine law. The listener should hear the trilogy to the end, if only to discover whether this poet, playwright and philosopher can ever find answers to the problems he has raised. The fact that Aeschylus succeeded in doing this . . . to our satisfaction today, helps to explain why this trilogy was acclaimed by Swinburne as 'the greatest spiritual work of man.'"

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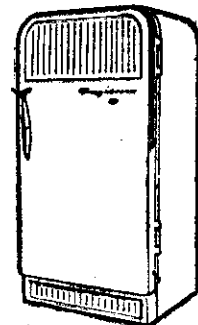
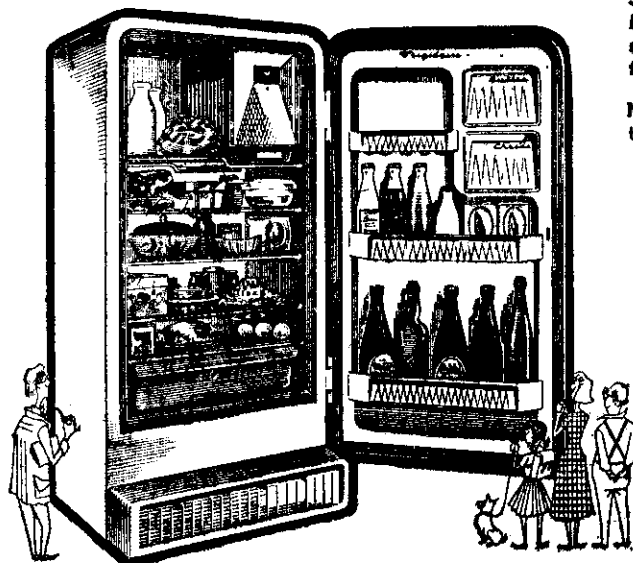
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