

10-1-1945

Survey Courses in the Arts and Humanities and World Literature

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Recommended Citation

Snowden, Frank M., "Survey Courses in the Arts and Humanities and World Literature" (1945). *Faculty Reprints*. Paper 195.
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GREEK TRAGEDY IN FRANCE AND AMERICA

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IN HIS NOTE "Antigone and French Resistance,"¹ Professor Berry calls attention to the role that Anouilh's *Antigone* played in the French underground resistance during the Nazi occupation of France. In this connection, it is interesting to note that another adaptation of a well-known Greek tragic theme has also served a similar purpose. *Les Mouches* by Jean-Paul Sartre is a reinterpretation of the Atreus story. In this recent version, Orestes resolves to carry out the murder "not because of any doom on the house of Atreus, not because he must bring about what is already fated, but for the opposite reason, because he must free the house of Atreus and the people of Argos, because the act will be for him as well as others an emancipation, a justification by works."²

The significance of this recent play in the resistance movement is effectively stated by Mr. Bentley as follows: "*The Flies*, like Goethe's *Egmont* and Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, is a political drama of resistance to tyranny, of belief in freedom. One can imagine what force some of the lines must have had in occupied France: the arguments for action, for tyrannicide, the recurrence of the word 'liberté,' the fascistic ugliness of all the symbols of authority, the libertarian audacity of Orestes."³

Classicists should not overlook the fact that both in France and America thinkers are turning to the ancient Greeks for guidance in understanding today's problems. In a recent editorial "Untragic America" the editors of *LIFE* outline what, in their judgment, America and American drama have to learn from Greek Tragedy.⁴ This current interest in the Greeks is another challenge to classicists to introduce and to develop courses particularly in translation for the many Americans who may have the desire but not the linguistic ability to understand the Greeks.

NOTES

¹ Edmund G. Berry, "Antigone and French Resistance," *THE CLASSICAL JOURNAL*, 42 (1946), 17-18.

² Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker*, New York, Reynal and Hitchcock (1946), 242.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *LIFE*, 21 (1946), no. 23, p. 32. The editorial, however, falls into the common error of considering the idea of progress as something foreign to antiquity: "This habit is an optimistic faith in progress. Professor J. B. Bury, who wrote a history of *The Idea of Progress*, defines it to mean 'that civilization has moved, is moving and will move in a desirable direction.' This idea is only about as old as modern science, stemming from Bacon and Descartes." This statement, of course, overlooks the fact that the very tragedians mentioned in the editorial were all concerned with the idea of progress—Aeschylus in the *Prometheus Bound* (436-506); Sophocles in the *Antigone* (332-364); Euripides in the *Suppliants* (195-218).