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INTRODUCTION.

THE STORY.

ATREUS son of Pelops son of Tantalus, reigning in Argos, banished his brother Thyestes, who had corrupted his wife Aerope and disputed his rule. When Thyestes returned in the guise of a suppliant, his life was spared by Atreus but only that he might suffer a more horrible injury. Pretending to celebrate his home-coming by a special feast, Atreus slew and served up to him his two young children. The father, misled for the moment, with a cry of agony kicked over the table and uttered a curse 'that so might perish all the race of Pleisthenes.' He was afterwards banished a second time together with his third son Aegisthus, then a mere infant[1].

Of Atreus we hear no more, but he was succeeded on the throne by Agamemnon and Menelaus, who ruled conjointly in Argos. The two brothers married two sisters, Clytaemnestra and Helen the daughters of Tyndareus and Leda. In the course of their reign they were visited by Paris or Alexander, son of King Priam, of the famous and opulent town of Troy, whom they hospitably entertained. He repaid their kindness by seducing Helen, the wife of Menelaus, and carrying her off with a quantity of treasure on board his ship to Troy, leaving the husband disconsolate and speechless[2].

Agamemnon, against the wish of his oldest advisers, espoused his brother's quarrel, and assembled a vast fleet of a thousand vessels to avenge the rape and recover Helen. The male population of Argos, except those too old for military service and those too young, embarked on the enterprise. The government was left in the hands of Clytaemnestra assisted by a body of elders who remained behind[3]. At the moment of setting out

[1] vv. 1583—1606. [2] vv. 42—44, 409—28, 537—9, etc.
[3] vv. 72—82, 270—2, 790—5, etc.

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the attitude of Heaven was declared by a significant omen. Two eagles differently marked were observed preying together on a pregnant hare. From this omen the prophet Calchas drew a twofold conclusion partly favourable, partly the reverse. Recognising in the two birds the two kings different in nature but now unanimous for war, he foretold from their action that Troy should one day fall and her gathered riches be despoiled. But as the fate of the hare and her unborn young must of necessity be displeasing to Artemis, the protectress of such creatures, he saw reason to dread the displeasure of the goddess against the army when assembled at her own port of Aulis[1], which had been assigned as the point of departure for the fleet. Then, taking leave of the sign, in language vague but ominous, he deprecated the occurrence of a storm which must lead to a monstrous sacrifice, breeding enmity between a husband and a wife, and entailing vengeance for a child[2].

As the prophet had feared, so it fell out. The fleet was detained by foul weather at Aulis; the ships began to go to pieces; provisions were running short; and every resource suggested by the diviners proved vain. Agamemnon himself was impatient under these trials and would perhaps have seized the excuse for abandoning his design, leaving it to Heaven to punish the seducer of his brother's wife. Before taking this step, however, he was informed of a remedy which would prove efficacious. This was nothing less than the sacrifice of his own daughter Iphigeneia to Artemis. The cruel alternative now lay before him, either of killing his child, or of refusing a personal sacrifice on behalf of the allies whom he had summoned to take part in a personal quarrel. After weighing the motives on either side, his calculating head got the better of his heart. In a moment of moral obliquity he consented to the sacrifice, and the fleet sailed. Ten years of labour and privation awaited him at Troy. The allies, for whose sake he had resigned so much, proved half-hearted in the end. By the loss of life abroad, he forfeited the sympathy of all but a scanty remnant of those who had been left behind. He made of his wife a concealed but implacable enemy; and he gave his bitterest foe the chance

[1] See Pausan. IX. 19, 6—8. [2] vv. 113—63.

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to cut him off in the very hour of his triumph over his great rival of the East[1].

For there was one person who had not sailed with the sailing of the fleet. Aegisthus[2], son of Thyestes, had grown up in exile, nursing projects of revenge, and not forgetful of his unhappy father's claim to the crown. In the absence of the kings and their force, he found means of access to Clytaemnestra, herself burning to revenge the death of her daughter Iphigeneia. He obtained her love, and (more fortunate than his father) might enjoy it in peace, together with the reality, if not the semblance, of power in Argos. The adultery was not openly avowed; but enough was known for those who remained faithful to the absent king to shake their heads and hold their peace. Orestes, the lawful heir to the throne, was sent away to be brought up by Strophius of Phocis, a friend of the family[3].

This state of things could only last so long as Agamemnon was abroad; and accordingly the guilty pair took measures to provide against the day of his return. It had been arranged between the king and his consort that the fall of Troy should be communicated by a series of beacons extending from mount Ida in the Troad to mount Arachnaeus in the neighbourhood of Argos; and a watchman had been stationed to look out for the signal for a year before the city fell. This appointment, no doubt innocently devised to communicate the important event as soon as possible, resulted in giving the conspirators ample warning of the king's approach. Aegisthus had got together a body of troops, either companions of his exile or drawn from the disaffected generation which had by this time grown up at Argos. He now arranged that, on the king's arrival, the cunning and capable queen should receive her husband with all appearance of affection, should conduct him to the bath previous to the usual sacrifice, should there drop the valance or canopy over him, and

[1] vv. 194—233, 452—64, 560—71, 829—33, etc.

[2] The importance of the part played by Aegisthus, in the version of the story which Aeschylus followed, was first emphasised by Dr Verrall, to whom here, as elsewhere, I am much indebted. While I cannot agree with Dr Verrall (as will be seen later) about the precise nature of Aegisthus' plot, I think it clear from v. 1609 that a plot of some considerable kind is presupposed.

[3] vv. 553—5, 871—2, 1585, 1608, 1625—7, etc.

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despatch him thus entangled; while he himself, being precluded from appearing in public, should lurk in the vicinity, and, upon a signal of Clytaemnestra's action in the palace[1], should overpower with his partisans the following of the king, and join hands with his accomplice before the royal castle. From this stronghold he meant to govern Argos with absolute power, bribing some and coercing others. In the event the plan was much simplified by the fact that Agamemnon's fleet was utterly dispersed by a storm on the way home, so that the conqueror of Troy landed with the crew of a single ship, and fell an easy victim[2]. The return of the king, his murder by Clytaemnestra, and the usurpation of Aegisthus, form the subject of the *Agamemnon*.

THE DRAMA.

This action, of which the preliminaries (so far as they are stated or seen to be implied in the play itself) have been narrated above, is disposed by the poet into four broad chapters. The first is taken up with the announcement of the fall of Troy; the second with the return of the king; the third with his murder; the fourth with the immediate sequel of the murder. Each of the first three divisions is subdivided, on a rough principle of symmetry, into two parts. The reception of the news from Troy precedes by a considerable interval its public declaration at Argos; the entrance of Agamemnon's herald precedes the entrance of the king himself; and the prediction of his murder by the prophetess Cassandra (whom he brings in his train) precedes, by a very short interval, its actual execution. The last division likewise falls into two parts, the first of which consists of Clytaemnestra's open justification of her act, and the second of Aegisthus' exposition of his conspiracy; the whole accompanied by recriminations between each of these persons and the body of faithful elders who compose the Chorus of the play. We will now trace the course of the action down to the entrance of the herald, at which point a question of some importance arises.

[1] This detail is doubtful, but see v. 1354.

[2] vv. 327—8, 666—8, 1636—40, 1650, etc.

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The scene, which is laid before the royal palace, opens at night. A watchman is discerned on the roof. He explains that his business is to look out for the beacon, complains of his hardships, utters a few dark hints about the state of affairs within, and expresses a forlorn wish for the conclusion of his watch. While the word is yet in his mouth, the fire appears. He greets it with a cry of joy, raises a shout to apprise Clytaemnestra, executes a dance, adds a few more hints of a dubious nature, and disappears (1—39).

By the queen's orders offerings are despatched to all the neighbouring shrines, and flames arise through the darkness. A group of elders, ignorant of the news, assembles to inquire the reason. In despondent tones they observe that the kings and their army have been absent at Troy for close on ten years, yet the war still continues. They comment on their own feebleness, which caused them to be left behind. The queen enters to kindle the altars near the palace, and they question her in the hope of some comforting news. For the present she does not answer, but goes off, apparently to complete the ceremony by leading the sacrificial chant to which she alludes later (40—103).

The Chorus, left alone, relate the omen which attended the departure of the kings, its exposition by Calchas, his prophecy of good and evil, and yet of further evil. Then, after a preface justifying the ways of Zeus to men, they proceed to the sacrifice of Iphigeneia. The father's tears, hesitation and eventual submission are depicted. The sacrifice itself is partly described; but they stop short of the fatal stroke, and pray that the good foretold by Calchas may now come about, as then the evil, dismissing his prediction of further evil as so much premature sorrow. On this note of uncertainty the ode concludes (104—269).

The night is far spent, when the queen reappears and announces the fall of Troy. The elders, with tears in their eyes, question her as to the proof and period of the capture. Pointing to the dawn, which ushers in her glad news, she informs them that it occurred in the night just past. They ask how she could learn so quickly, and in reply she narrates the transmission

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of the fiery signal from hill to hill, over sea and plain, by means of successive beacons. At the end of her rapid narrative the elders invite her to repeat it for their fuller comprehension. She contents herself with restating the chief fact, and goes on to draw a picture of the captured city, with its medley of victors and vanquished; deprecates any wanton sacrilege on the part of the former, who have still to get home with the blood of the dead upon their hands; and concludes by excusing her fears as natural to a woman, and praying that all may be well in no doubtful sense. The elders, having had leisure to reflect during this speech, accept her evidence as certain, and turn to praise Heaven for its mercy (270—366).

They begin by celebrating the power of Zeus, and his unerring chastisement of guilt, as seen in the case of Paris. This judgment refutes the saying that Heaven is indifferent to human sin, a doctrine traceable to the temper engendered by a sudden plethora of riches. Wealth without righteousness insures a man's ruin, his children's ruin, his nation's irreparable harm. It brings him to a bloody end, unregarded of God or man. The crime of Paris, the flight of Helen, the desolation of the Argive home, are then described in verses famous for their tender beauty. But instead of reverting to the theme of divine justice, the Chorus passes, by an easy but remarkable transition, to the general grief at Argos, caused by the death of kinsmen at Troy. The private quarrel of the Atridae has made them hateful at home. They may have conquered, but they have slain many; the gods take note of that. They may have won great glory; let not their hearts be lifted up, or Zeus will blast them. A middle station between conquest and captivity is the best. The tone of triumph with which the ode began has relapsed into one of dark foreboding. At the very close they call in question the truth of the fiery message which prompted them to sing. With a short lyric colloquy to this effect the music dies away. In the next scene Agamemnon's herald is observed approaching (367—507).

Here, then, we must pause to touch on a matter which has caused some discussion in recent times. An ancient commentator remarks: 'Some find fault with the poet that he represents the

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Greeks as returning from Troy on the same day[1].' A modern commentator, Mr Sidgwick, remarks[2]: 'Observe that the herald arrives from Troy, announcing the return of Agamemnon, immediately after the beacon fires, on the morning after the capture. Such violations of possibility were held quite allowable by the licence of dramatic poetry.' Dr Verrall, justly objecting that neither the theory nor the practice of the Athenian drama bears out the last assertion, founds on this apparent discrepancy of times a new interpretation of the play. On a certain night a fiery signal announces the capture of Troy. In the course of the next morning the victorious king arrives, after having demolished Troy and traversed the whole length of the Aegaean Sea. One or other of these statements must be false. But, as it is certain that the king does arrive in the latter part of the play, while it is equally certain that a fiery signal is received in the first part, it would seem to follow that this signal cannot announce the capture of Troy. From the entrance of Agamemnon to the close of the play it is never mentioned. The story told by Clytaemnestra, of the chain of beacons extending from Ida to Arachnaeus, is improbable in itself; still more so if, as we learn later, a violent storm was raging in the Aegaean at the time of transmission. What, then, was the meaning of the signal? According to Dr Verrall, there was but one beacon altogether, and it was kindled on Arachnaeus by the conspirator Aegisthus, who there kept watch for the return of the king; and it was intended to warn Clytaemnestra in the city, and his adherents elsewhere, of Agamemnon's approach, that all their plans might be ready for the murder of the king and the seizure of the citadel which commanded the country. A watchman had been set on the palace roof to look out for its appearance. To avoid suspicion, he was chosen from among the loyal servants of the house; to account for his task, he was told that a beacon was expected, announcing his master's success at Troy; and 'his vigilance and silence were secured by threats and bribes.' On the night of Agamemnon's return, when the signal was fired, the queen,

[1] Schol. v. 509 *τινὲς μέμφονται τῶι ποιητῆι ὅτι αὐθημερὸν ἐκ Τροίας ποιεῖ τοὺς Ἕλληνας ἥκοντας.*

[2] Note to v. 504 (509).

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desirous to secure the persons of her principal opponents, sent for the elders to the palace, and informed them that Troy had fallen that very night. In reply to their inevitable question as to the receipt of the news, she swept them off their legs with a graphic but fictitious narrative of the transmission of the light from Troy to Argos. Left to themselves, the elders naturally began to entertain doubts as to the truth of the story, when Agamemnon's herald appeared, confirming indeed the fall of Troy, but, by the very fact of his arrival, showing the queen's relation to be false. By a train of accidents, however, the elders allowed the herald to depart without advising him of their suspicions. Meanwhile the plot grew ripe for execution, and was subsequently carried out.

Such, in brief outline, is Dr Verrall's account of the story, presumed as familiar at Athens, which Aeschylus undertook to illustrate. By reducing the circuit of the action it does at least avoid the absurdity of supposing that events which must necessarily take several days happen within the course of a few hours. Although it is itself open to several objections of detail, chief among which is the astounding falsehood in which the queen involves herself, without apparent necessity, by choosing to impart to the elders her secret information of the capture of Troy, I do not propose to follow these out. A graver objection is that, by making the business of the watchman a blind and the plurality of the beacons imaginary, the first part of the play is reduced from a substantial to a factitious transaction, and the massive structure of the drama, with its three broad chapters of the announcement, the return, and the murder, seriously undermined. I will therefore state the reasons which, in my opinion, make it needless to resort to this new interpretation.

It is buttressed by various arguments, but it rests on the assumption that the time of the action is continuous from start to finish; or rather, that it is contained 'within the early hours of one morning.' Now, if, in the first part of the play, a fiery signal purports to announce the capture of Troy; and if, in the second part, the destroyer of Ilion himself appears, the first and most natural supposition is that the events of the play are

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not closely consecutive in time, but are divided by an interval sufficient to permit of this happening. Is there anything in the play which absolutely forbids such a supposition? I venture to assert that there is nothing at all; that there is not a single circumstance which compels us to suppose that the events which follow v. 493 occur on the same day, or within the same week, as those which precede; that the criticism mentioned by the old commentator is unfounded; that Mr Sidgwick's observation falls to the ground; and that Dr Verrall has taken hold of the wrong limb of the difficulty. Instead of inferring that the beacon cannot announce the capture of Troy, we ought to infer that the king does not arrive in the course of the next morning. How this interval was conveyed to the audience, we can only guess; but Blomfield's suggestion is probable, that the Chorus leaves the theatre for a short space after v. 493.

On what arguments does the supposed circumscription of the time depend? Dr Verrall says, 'Language could not be clearer than that in which we are told that the herald arrives while the queen's announcement of the beacon-message is passing from lip to lip.' This is quite true; but it would be a nine days' wonder, if not more. While the report of the great event was still unconfirmed, nothing else would be talked about at Argos. Is it surprising, then, that the topic of discourse on either side of v. 493 is the same? And is it anything but the mere sequence of verses in the page, which prevents our imagining the requisite interval of time between that verse and the next? The break is not so directly patent as at *Eum.* 235 and again at *Eum.* 566, because at both these places the scene is changed as well; but if the language is closely scanned, the fact betrays itself sufficiently. The elders have been discussing with one another the probability of the fiery message being true. Suppose the time perfectly continuous. One of them catches sight of a herald, and expresses himself thus:

> τάχ' εἰσόμεθα λαμπάδων φαεσφόρων
> φρυκτωριῶν τε καὶ πυρὸς παραλλαγάς,
> εἴτ' οὖν ἀληθεῖς εἴτ' ὀνειράτων δίκην
> τερπνὸν τόδ' ἐλθὸν φῶς ἐφήλωσεν φρένας.

Would anyone, who had just the moment before been keenly

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discussing the fire, and who now saw his chance of settling the truth at once, stop to talk about 'successions of light-bearing torches, of beacon-watches, and of fire'? He would simply say 'the fire.' It is fairly clear that an interval has elapsed, probably marked by the departure of the Chorus from the scene, and that this recapitulation is designed to fix the attention of the audience on the resumption of the subject. The poetical excuse for it is no doubt, as Dr Verrall remarks, that a certain tone of contempt is here in place; but this contempt is even more appropriate after the lapse of an interval than when the fiery message is still recent.

But the herald upon entering salutes the risen sun, addresses the gods whose statues face it, observes that the king has returned 'bringing a light in darkness,' and narrates the fierce gale which befell the Greek fleet one night upon the sea[1]. The expressions are suitable to a morning hour. However, there are more mornings in the year than one, and the language would be equally pointed on any morning that the king's vessel happened to arrive. Indeed, for the expression 'a light in darkness' to receive its full force, the herald should be conceived as arriving shortly after dawn. But if the action all takes place on one day, the dawn is long since past[2]. The greater part of one episode, and a complete choric ode of a hundred lines, have intervened, which means much in a Greek play. If the action is continued on a different day, we can imagine the herald's entrance at whatever hour we like.

On receiving the news of the capture, the queen institutes a sacrifice. On the return of the king a sacrifice is also got ready. Dr Verrall identifies these two, or supposes the one to be the completion of the other, both alike occurring on the same day. I see no reason for this view. So far as can be determined, the first appears to be an offering of oil and incense, or other combustible substances, hastily made to celebrate the glad news[3]. The other is a grand and elaborate affair, in which sheep are to be slaughtered, prepared to express thanksgiving for the king's safe and unexpected arrival, and to provide the household with a

[1] vv. 513, 524, 527, 658. [2] v. 291.
[3] vv. 83—96, 599—602.

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