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CHAPTER I

ORIGINS

In the *Persae* of Aeschylus the queen Atossa elicits from her councillors the astonishing fact that citizens of Athens "call no man master, and are called by no man slaves." That kind of sentiment was always welcome at Athens, and Tragedy, which expresses not only individual genius but also the collective feeling, was not slow to meet the demand. The three Tragedians, Aeschylus and Sophocles and Euripides, are poets of fifth-century democracy, and represent three phases of its life, the growth, the achievement, and the not less fruitful death-struggle. Aeschylus, who represents the age of effort and expansion, was born under the despots, and was a youth when, by the laws of Cleisthenes, the city won the form, if not the substance, of complete democracy. He fought at Marathon, which meant not only freedom from the barbarian, but also the assurance that the despotism would not be re-established, and he survived the constitutional changes which made Pericles supreme. The next thirty years are associated with the name

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of Pericles, who made effectual the power of the democracy and governed only because of his unrivalled personal ascendency. The steady but by no means effortless brilliancy of this generation is reflected in the poetry of Sophocles. When Pericles died, Athens had entered on the struggle in which, after tragic heroism, after suffering and triumph, sordid in turn and generous, she was stripped of power and humbled at the feet of Sparta. Euripides is the poet of this final age. Different as these three men are, they are all alike democratic. The willing subjects of laws which they themselves created and approved, Athenians and Athenian poets hated the name of tyrant, the symbol of lawless arbitrary power. Yet the arbitrary power of the Peisistratids had made democracy possible, and Tragedy, the poetry of the democracy, was nursed to greatness under the patronage of the sixth-century "tyrants."

Ultimately the power of a despot depended upon his popularity. That fact, not simply personal ambition, made Peisistratus build ships, encourage commerce, beautify the city, and by lavish hospitality attract poets and artists to his court. His support was to be found among the common people, relieved by his single rule from the oppression of the nobles. But the nobles who were concerned to discredit him had in religion a powerful weapon. The safety of the state depended on the due observance of religious

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rites; and the effective popular religion of Attica in the sixth century was connected with local Heroes rather than with the Olympian Gods. The local cults often associated with the grave of the Hero, who was a defender if propitiated, but if offended a dangerous enemy, were maintained and controlled by the heads of noble houses. To support a despot against the nobles of a clan was, therefore, to support an adventurer against the representatives of the local Hero. It was partly as an antidote that the despots encouraged the great Hellenic worship of Zeus and his interpreter Apollo. For this reason, among others, they assisted Delphi in the glorification of the great Hellenic Games. Peisistratus, for this reason, began the vast temple of Zeus, and gave the recitation of Homer a regular part in the religious ritual of the state: for the gods of Homer are Hellenic, not local. Finally, this is why he identified himself especially with the cult of Dionysus, a late arrival in Greece, a popular god, whose worship belonged to no special class of persons, and had, moreover, an element of enthusiasm admirably calculated to supplant devotion to the local cults.

To Dionysus Peisistratus built a new temple. In his honour he founded, or at any rate magnificently reconstituted, the festival known as the Great City Dionysia. At this festival in March 534 (or 535) B.C. the first tragic contest of the Athenian state took

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place, and the victor, Thespis, must be honoured as reputed founder of the Attic drama. Already Thespis had performed at village festivals, but now for the first time his "Tragedy" was produced at the expense and for the honour of the city. As to the nature of his work and the influences which moulded Tragedy in the generation before Aeschylus, evidence is confusing, theories are numerous and too confidently maintained. Conjectures which seem to their authors mutually exclusive often appear to contain some elements of truth: for the Aeschylean drama is a complex work of art, developed under many artistic and religious impulses, not to be ascribed to any one exclusive "Origin." The task of these forgotten poets was to produce a performance worthy of a great new festival, impressive from a religious point of view and efficacious, and from the artistic point of view delightful. To these ends they must have devoted anything impressive in ritual, anything delightful in art which suited the general character of their composition.

The festival belonged to Dionysus of Eleutherae, a village on the northern border of Attica: and it is possible that this new Dionysus was introduced to the city by Peisistratus for his new festival. In any case, the coming of Dionysus Eleuthereus to Athens was commemorated every year by the procession in which the god was taken from his temple out along

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the road to Eleutherae, brought back with pomp to the place of the tragic performances and solemnly seated to preside over the spectacle. Now a cult epithet of this Dionysus was *Melanaigis*—the god

Fig. 1. Dionysus and Maenads.

with the black goat skin—a fact which has been thought significant in view of the name *Tragoedia*, or *goat-song*. Dionysus, it is argued, is the spirit of life in all things, in trees and animals as well as in the vine with which, in historical times, he is especially

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associated. He is often represented as half man, half tree (in fig. 1, for instance, where the god is a draped pillar or tree-trunk with a human head, and is decorated with grapes, ivy, honeycombs, and a necklace of dried figs because he is the god of all vegetation, not merely of the vine); and he might be worshipped as an animal, particularly as a bull. Further, in his cult the worshipper identifies himself

Fig. 2. A Boeotian Dionysiac Ritual.

with the god, becomes in fact by "enthusiasm" literally filled with the god. In other words the worshipper impersonates the god. Thus in fig. 2, the dancer on the table (perhaps the most primitive form of stage) is probably performing a rude dramatic impersonation of the god, represented by the branch on the left. His headdress is like that of Dionysus in fig. 1. His wreath may be a prize. The Bacchants,

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again, who tear and devour a living animal, do so in order that the life of the animal-god may fill them and make them potent. The singer of the dithyramb to Dionysus the Bull roars like a bull and becomes a bull himself. Similarly, it is suggested, the Satyrs with their horses' tails (cf. fig. 3) were originally worshippers of a Horse Dionysus, dressed up as horses in order to be sensitive to the god. Finally, the followers of the Goat Dionysus dressed themselves as goats.

The theory is obviously attractive: recent observations in Thrace and elsewhere have given it fresh allurement. Dionysus is still worshipped in his ancient haunts, though his worshippers are not aware of his identity. Mummers dressed in goat-skins, their faces covered with the skins, perform a dramatic ceremony in which a black-goat-man slays a white-goat-man, and the wife of the victim laments over her lord. Much of the ritual is obscene, and there is little doubt that the original intention was to promote fertility by reproducing in a magical performance the death and resurrection of the vegetation spirit. Some such ritual may well have belonged to Dionysus Melanaigis of Eleutherae. Can we then infer that the name of Tragedy, the mask, the lyrical lament, even the normal theme of tragedy—the *Pathos* (suffering, passion) of a god or hero—were already, in embryo, present in this ritual?

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The evidence for Dionysus the Goat is very slight: on such evidence it would be easy, as Dr Ridgeway says, "to turn the Olympian gods into a flock of goats." Athene, for instance, bears the *aigis*. The same scholar gives a more plausible account of the goat-skin worn by gods or worshippers, by pointing out that a goat-skin is the primitive peasant's dress, and that ritual is invariably conservative about costume. Still it is possible to under-rate the Dionysiac element in the making of drama. A ritual such as has been described has elements both of seriousness and of obscenity. The latter element found its affinity in the Satyric drama, said to have been introduced from the Peloponnese some years after the victory of Thespis. Throughout the fifth century tragic poets were expected to conclude their series of three tragedies with a Satyr play, lighter in tone, commonly performed by a chorus of the rustic, half-bestial attendants of Dionysus. This type of drama does not here concern us, for it is not Tragedy. Readers who care to pursue the enquiry into this direct offspring of the Dionysiac worship may be referred to Shelley's translation of the *Cyclops*.

The serious element (appropriate to such a conception of Dionysus as is seen in fig. 3) may well have been developed by poets who desired to add splendour to the festival. Already the worship of Dionysus had found artistic expression in the

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dithyramb. This hymn (perhaps originally a rustic improvisation to the Bull Dionysus) had been elaborated into a work of art by Arion of Lesbos (the home

Fig. 3. Dionysus with Satyrs.

of music) at the court of another tyrant, Corinth. Competitions in the singing and dancing of dithyrambs between choirs of men and boys were a regular

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part of the Dionysiac festival at Athens. They were distinct from the tragic contests, but no doubt influenced the musical part of Tragedy. The number of performers was, for instance, fixed by Arion at fifty; and it is quite likely that the Suppliants of Aeschylus were actually fifty in number. In any case the Dorian choral lyric must have been the obvious model for a poet who desired to give artistic form to any public worship, and of all forms of lyric the dithyramb was most likely to influence the poet who was honouring Dionysus. The subject, however, might be entirely unconnected with the god. Tradition says that the people objected to the introduction of alien myths, and cried, "Nothing to do with Dionysus." It may have been so. But the change is not without precedent. When an epic reciter celebrated a god at his own festival, he would often dismiss the god in a few lines or a perfunctory formula and pass at once to some heroic story more interesting to his audience. It is not known how soon the dithyramb was used for other than Dionysiac themes, but Simonides of Ceos (born about 556 B.C.) composed one in honour of a Hero, Memnon, son of the Morning. It is not known, again, how far the tendency of human beings to be dramatic had affected choral lyric at this time. The chorus may already have broken into groups who addressed each other in a lyrical dialogue: the leader may have

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