THE GENIUS OF SOPHOCLES[1].

THE most brilliantly joyous of all comedies were brought out in a city vexed during the years that gave them birth by every kind of misery in turn; by want and pestilence, by faction and the mutual distrust of citizens, by defeat on land and sea, by the sense of abasement and the presage of ruin. During more than twenty years of war Aristophanes was the best public teacher of Athens; but there were times when distraction was more needed than advice. One of the best of his plays belongs to the number of those which were meant simply to amuse the town at a time when it would have been useless to lash it. The comedy of the "Frogs" came out in a season of gloomy suspense—just after Athens had made a last effort in equipping a fleet, and was waiting for decisive news from the seat of war; in January of 405 B.C., eight months before Ægospotami and about fifteen months before the taking of Athens by Lysander. A succession of disasters and seditions had worn out the political life of the city;

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patriotic satire could no longer find scope in public affairs, for there were no longer any vital forces which it could either stimulate or combat. Nor could the jaded minds of men at such a time easily rise into a region of pure fancy, as when nine years before, on the eve of the last crisis in the war, Aristophanes had helped them to forget scandals of impiety and misgovernment on a voyage to his city in the clouds. What remained was to seek comfort or amusement in the past; and since the political past could give neither, then in the literary past—in the glories, fading now like other glories, of art and poetry.

It was now just fifty years since the death of Æschylus. It was only a few months since news had come from Macedonia of the death of Euripides. More lately still, at the end of the year before, Sophocles had closed a life blessed from its beginning by the gods and now happy in its limit; for, as in his boyhood he had led the pæan after Salamis, so he died too soon to hear the dirge of Imperial Athens—the cry, raised in the Peiræus and caught up from point to point through the line of the Long Walls, which carried up from the harbour to the town the news of the overthrow on the Hellespont.

With the death of Euripides and the death of Sophocles so recent, and no man living who seemed able to replace them, it might well seem to an Athenian that the series of the tragic masters was closed. In the "Frogs" Aristophanes supposes Dionysus, the god of dramatic inspiration, going

down to the shades, to bring back to Athens, beggared of poets and unable to live without them, the best poet that could be found below. It is hard to imagine anything more pathetic than an Athenian audience listening, at just that time, to that comedy in the theatre of Dionysus; in view of the sea over which their empire was even then on its last trial; surrounded by the monuments of an empire over art which had already declined—in the building, at once theatre and temple, which the imagination of the poets lately dead had long peopled with the divine or heroic shapes known to them and their fathers, but in which, they might well forebode, the living inspiration of the god would never be so shown forth again.

The interest of the comedy does not depend, however, merely on its character of epilogue to a school of tragic drama so masterly, of so short an actual life, of so perpetual an influence; it takes another kind of interest from the justness of its implicit criticism; the criticism of a man whose wit would not have borne the test of centuries and the harder test of translation, if he had not joined to a quick fancy the qualities which make a first-rate critic.

When Dionysus reaches the lower world, an uproar is being raised among the dead. It has been the custom that the throne of Tragedy, next to Pluto's own, shall be held by a laureate for the time being, subject to removal on the coming of a better. For some time Æschylus has held the

place of honour. Euripides, however, has just come down; the newer graces of his style, which he lost no time in showing off, have taken the crowd; and their applause has moved him to claim the tragic throne. Æschylus refuses to yield. As the only way of settling the dispute, scales are brought; the weightiest things which the rivals can offer are compared; and at last the balance inclines for Æschylus. But where, in the meantime, is Sophocles? He, too, is in the world of the dead, having come down just after Euripides. "Did he" (asked Xanthias, the slave of Dionysus) "lay no claim to the chair?" "No, indeed, not he," answers Æacus: "No—he kissed Æschylus as soon as he came down, and shook hands with him; and Æschylus yielded the throne to him. But just now he meant, Cleidemides said, to hold himself in reserve, and, if Æschylus won, to stay quiet; if not, he said he would try a bout with *Euripides*."

It is in this placing of Sophocles relatively to the disputants, even more than in the account of the contest, that Aristophanes has shown his appreciativeness. While he seems to aim merely at marking by a passing touch the good-humoured courtesy of Sophocles, he has, with the happiness of a real critic, pointed out his place as a poet. The behaviour of Sophocles in the "Frogs" just answers to his place in the literary history of his age. This place is fixed chiefly by the fact that Sophocles was a poet who did not seek to be a

prophet; who was before all things an artist; and who, living in the quiet essence of art, represented the mind of his day less by bringing into relief any set tendencies than by seizing in its highest unity the total spirit of the world in which he lived and of the legendary world in which his fancy moved, and bringing the conflicts of this twofold world into obedience, as far as possible, to the first law of his own nature—harmony. The workings of this instinct of harmony will be best seen, first, by viewing Sophocles as a poet in two broad aspects—in regard to his treatment of the heroic legends and in his relation to the social ideas of the age of Pericles; next, by considering two of his special qualities—the quality which has been called his irony, and his art of drawing character.

The national religion of Greece was based upon genealogy. It carried back the mind by an unbroken ascent from living men to heroes or half-gods who had been their forefathers in the flesh, and thence to gods from whom these heroes had sprung. The strength of a chain is the strength of its weakest part; enfeeblement of belief in the heroes implied enfeeblement of belief in the gods. The decreasing vividness of faith in the heroes is the index of failing life in the Greek national religion.

At the beginning of the fifth century before Christ this belief in the heroes was real and living. The Persian Wars were wars of race, the first general conflict of Hellene with barbarian; and

it was natural that in such a conflict the Greek mind should turn with longing and trust towards those kindred heroes of immortal blood who long ago had borne arms for Achaia against Asia. It was told how, on the day of Marathon, the Athenian ranks had been cheered by the sudden presence among them of Theseus; while through the press of battle two other combatants had been seen to pass in more than earthly strength, the hero Echetlus and he who had given his name to the field. Just before the fight at Salamis a Greek ship was sent with offerings to the tombs of the Æacidæ in Ægina; and when the pæan sounded and the fleets closed, the form of a colossal warrior was seen to move over the battle, and the Greeks knew that the greatest of the Æacid line, the Telamonian Ajax, was with them that day, as he had been with their fathers at Troy.

But from the moment when the united Greek effort against Persia was over, the old belief which it had made to start up in a last glow began to die out. The causes of this decline were chiefly three. First, the division of once-united Greece into two camps—the Athenian and the Spartan,—a division which tended to weaken all sentiments based on the idea of a common blood; and the belief in the heroes as an order was one of these sentiments. Secondly, the advance of democracy, which tended to create a jealous feeling and a sarcastic tone in regard to the claims of the old families; chief among which claims was that of

kinship with the gods through the heroes. Thirdly, the birth of an historical sense. Before the Persian crisis history had been represented among the Greeks only by local or family traditions. The Wars of Liberation had given to Herodotus the first genuinely historical inspiration felt by a Greek. These wars showed him that there was a corporate life, higher than that of the city, of which the story might be told; and they offered to him as a subject the drama of the collision between East and West. With him, the spirit of history was born into Greece; and his work, called after the nine Muses, was indeed the first utterance of Clio. The historical spirit was the form in which the general scepticism of the age acted on the belief in the heroic legends. For Herodotus himself, the heroes are still godlike. But for Thucydides, towards the end of the century, the genuine hero-ship of Agamemnon and Pelops is no more; he criticises their probable resources and motives as he might have discussed the conduct or the income of a contemporary. They are real to him; but they are real as men; and, for that very reason, unreal as claimants of a half-divine character.

The great cycles of heroic legends furnished the principal subjects of Attic tragedy. Three distinct methods of treating these legends appear in Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

The spirit of Æschylus is in all things more Hellenic than Athenian. The Pan-hellenic heroism of which in the struggle with Persia he had himself

been a witness and a part is the very inspiration of his poetry. For him those heroes who were the common pride of the Greek race are true demigods. In his dramas they stand as close to the gods as in the Iliad; and more than in the Iliad do they tower above men. With him their distinctive attribute is majesty; a majesty rather Titanic than in the proper Greek sense heroic. What, it may be asked, is the basis of this Titanic majesty? It would be easy to say that the effect is wrought partly by pomp and weight of language, partly by vagueness of outline. But the essential reason appears to be another. The central idea of Greek tragedy is the conflict between free-will and fate. In Æschylus this conflict takes its simplest and therefore grandest form. No subtle contrivance, no complexity of purposes, breaks the direct shock of the collision between man and destiny. Agamemnon before the Fury of his house is even as Prometheus facing Zeus.

In thus imagining the heroes as distinctly superhuman, and as claiming the sympathy of men rather by a bare grandeur of agony than by any closely-understood affinity of experience, Æschylus was striving to sustain a belief which had not gone out of his age, but which was dying. In his mid-career, about ten years before his Oresteia, the so-called relics of Theseus found at Scyros were brought to Athens by Cimon and laid in a shrine specially built for them. The distinctly religious enthusiasm then shown implies the old faith. It is hard to suppose that a like incident could have

brought out a like public feeling even thirty years later.

Euripides, towards the end of the century, stood in nearly the same relation to his contemporaries as that of Æschylus to his at the beginning: that is, he was in general agreement with their beliefs, but held to some things from which they were going further and further away. The national religion was now all but dead. By the side of philosophic scepticism had come up the spurious scepticism which teachers of rhetoric had made popular. The devotional need, so far as it was felt, was usually satisfied by rituals or mysteries brought in from abroad; the old creed was not often attacked, but there was a tacit understanding among "able" men that it was to be taken allegorically; and a dim, silently spreading sense of this had further weakened its hold upon the people. What, then, was a tragic poet to do? The drama was an act of worship; the consecrated mythology must still supply the greatest number of its subjects. Euripides solved the problem partly by realism, partly by antiquarianism. He presented the hero as a man, reflecting the mind as well as speaking the dialect of the day; and he made the legend, where he could, illustrate local Attic tradition. The reason why this treatment failed, so far as it failed, has not always been accurately stated. Euripides has sometimes been judged as if his poetical fault had been in bringing down half-gods to the level of men and surrounding them with mean and ludicrous troubles. Probably this notion has been

strengthened by the scene in the "Acharnians" (the really pointed criticisms of Aristophanes upon Euripides are to be found elsewhere), in which the needy citizen calls on Euripides and begs for some of the rags in which he has been wont to clothe his heroes; and the tragic poet tells his servant to look for the rags of Telephus between those of Thyestes and those of Ino. But the very strength of Euripides lay in a deep and tender compassion for human suffering: if he had done nothing worse to his heroes than to give them rags and crutches, his power could have kept for them at least the sympathy due to the sordid miseries of men; he would only have substituted a severely human for an ideal pathos. His real fault lay in the admission of sophistic debate. A drama cannot be an artistic whole in which the powers supposed to control the issues of the action represent a given theory of moral government, while the agents are from time to time employing the resources of rhetorical logic to prove that this theory is either false or doubtful.

Between these two contrasted conceptions—the austere transcendentalism of Æschylus and the sophistic realism of Euripides—stands the conception of Sophocles. But Sophocles is far nearer to Æschylus than to Euripides; since Sophocles and Æschylus have this affinity, that the art of both is ideal. The heroic form is in outline almost the same for Sophocles as for Æschylus; but meanwhile there has passed over it such a change as came over the statue on which the sculptor gazed