



Kitto

Greek Tragedy

Greek Tragedy

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H. D. F.

Kitto

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A literary study

With a foreword by Edith Hall



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FOREWORD TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION *EDITH HALL*

More people in the English-speaking world, in North America just as much as Britain, have been introduced to Greek tragedy over the last seven decades by H.D.F. Kitto than by any other scholar, and translations of this book into Polish and Greek have allowed it to reach even wider audiences. Given the avalanche of studies of Greek tragedy which have been published during this period, the continued appeal of Kitto's study, first published just before World War II in 1939, is truly remarkable. When I was studying Greek tragedy as an undergraduate, in the early 1980s, some of my more condescending teachers already regarded the mass popularity of Kitto's book as embarrassing, and the book itself as an anachronism. But it was the undisputed favourite amongst my fellow students, as well as theatre professionals and the wider public, and the reasons for its reputation as a 'classic' of its kind seem even more obvious to me today. The ancient Greeks themselves said that literature had two basic functions – to give pleasure and to be useful – but that it is ideal and very rare for the two qualities to be combined in one work. Generations of college students, sixth-formers, directors and actors have found *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study* invaluable as they first approached the confusing and gloomy pagan dramas by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. But it is perhaps even more important that they have found it great fun to read.

When the first edition appeared in 1939, Kitto's book felt fresh, ingenious, and pathbreaking. With a few notable exceptions, most previous books on Greek tragedy had focussed on dry philological questions of mythical variants, language and metre, or theology and ritual, and had presented the Greek tragedians as solemn sages who had propounded eternal philosophical and metaphysical truths in arcane and highflown language. Kitto saw Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in a quite different way, as practical men of the

theatre, playwrights producing dramatic art designed to be appreciated in performance, and this approach, unsurprisingly, resonated with a much wider readership than most pre-war books about classical literature. The intensity of his ongoing engagement with the plays as living cultural phenomena is shown by the extent of the revisions he made for the third edition, reproduced here, which came out more than twenty years later, in 1961. By that time he had refined his view that the power of any artwork, dramatic or otherwise, was inseparable from its fusion of formal factors, such as metre and structure, and its ethical, emotional and philosophical meaning and significance. The third edition of *Greek Tragedy* everywhere reflects the overriding principle which he felt animated all great art, articulated in 1956 in *Form and Meaning in Drama*: 'I have come to believe more firmly, and I hope to follow more consistently, as a principle of criticism, the idea that in a great work of art, whether a play, a picture, or a piece of music, the connexion between the form and the content is so vital that the two may be said to be ultimately identical.' We can be sure that in this, his third and final edition of *Greek Tragedy*, we have something approaching his definitive thoughts on Greek tragedy, and its marriage of form and content, since he carried on teaching and writing long after his retirement in 1962. He was a robust personality and would certainly have insisted on producing a new edition had he changed his mind substantially thereafter.

The date at which this third edition appeared – 1961 – is itself very significant. In the late 1960s and 1970s, public attitudes to Greek tragedy began to be revolutionised by a new wave of professional productions of an intensely avant-garde nature, using nudity, abandoning proscenium stages, and challenging their audiences' stereotypes of classical theatre. These productions also emphasised the social issues explored by the ancient plays. The prominence of women, war, and ethnic difference in many of the Greek dramas inevitably made them hugely attractive to directors and translators looking for vehicles for impassioned feminist, pacifist and anti-racist polemic. But Kitto's book, rather than looking old-fashioned, proved inspirational in this cultural development because he emphasised the importance of understanding the works not only ethically but as poetic and dramaturgical artworks, which is after all the type of elementary understanding on which every theatre director fundamentally relies.

In the 1980s and 1990s, partly in response to this new wave of productions, a correspondingly sociological approach to Greek drama came to dominate the Classics academy. Scholars were enquiring into the connexion between tragedy and the material and social realities of the new Athenian democracy which produced it. How did the plays work in live performance, with chorus, masks and machinery, exits and entrances, in the social and religious context of the Athenian sanctuary of Dionysus? How did the

citizenship-based social structures of the Athenian city-state reveal themselves in tragedy? How were state cults, festivals and rituals reflected in the plays? What has Oedipus' dilemma to do with being an Athenian citizen spectator? Once again, Kitto's literary and dramatic approach, which was largely unconcerned with the minutiae of the material, social and political context in which the texts were produced, continued to prove a favourite amongst students and directors. It did not date and it seemed to be able to transcend all passing intellectual fads and fashions. Today, in the third millennium, attitudes to tragedy have come almost full circle in scholarship. There is a renewed interest in the universal relevance of these plays to a wide range of audiences, democratic and otherwise, across the ancient Mediterranean, and in their aesthetic form and lyrical qualities. Kitto's approach has therefore been completely vindicated as of lasting relevance.

The most important element in his book's stamina is its author's unwavering conviction that his subject-matter was of very great significance and deserved to be studied intelligently and in detail. This conviction comes to infect every reader. The qualities which make the book so enduring are also closely bound up with its author's pleasant, witty, accessible and sometimes polemical style of writing: a contemporary called him a 'genial, eloquent and controversial' scholar. Bang in the middle of a complicated argument on ethics and religion in Aeschylus, for example, he helps his reader to find their feet by invoking a vivid scenario: 'we might picture two of Aeschylus' fellow-citizens trudging home, ruminating on what they had seen' (p. 5). Few of Kitto's contemporary scholars liked to imagine the citizens of Athens, still often as white-robed philosophers inhabiting a marble utopia, 'trudging' anywhere.

Kitto always said that it was far more important to ask the right questions than to imagine that you are arriving at the right answers. He was able to ask such important questions because, unlike many intellectuals, he had an unpretentious willingness to talk clearly about the fundamental building-blocks of dramatic art – plot, character, hero, structure, form, meaning, technique – in ways that any interested adult or teenager can understand. At the very heart of his approach is the principle that an over-arching understanding of the genre of Greek tragedy can only emerge from an acknowledgement of how different from all the others is every single one of the thirty or so surviving plays. Greek tragedy as a cultural phenomenon is much more than the sum of its parts, but this can't be appreciated without treating each of the parts separately. Each playwright made a different contribution to the evolution of tragic theatre, and in each of his plays aimed at different effects in order to produce different meanings. Hardly anyone else other than Kitto, before or since, has attempted to analyse every single tragedy in a single accessible volume, treating Aeschylus' strange *Suppliants* with just as much

seriousness as Sophocles' famous *Oedipus*, or Euripides' (in 1939) little known *Helen* and *Phoenician Women* in similar depth to his *Medea* or *Bacchae*. But these individual discussions are carefully placed so as to form part of a story of a dynamic art form in continuous evolution, changing and developing in the hands of master craftsmen.

Kitto structures his argument according to an easy-to-grasp tripartite scheme of 'Old', 'Middle' and 'New' tragedy, approximately corresponding to the style of the three playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. This may today seem to some scholars like an over-simplification, especially since some of the ancient dates for the plays' premieres, which seemed certain in the mid-twentieth century, have been called into question. But it still underscores a fundamental truth: Aeschylus' early plays, with their two actors, extended choral lyrics, and undeveloped heroic subjectivities, are very different from, for example, Sophocles' *Oedipus*, with its brilliant triangular scenes exploiting the third actor, and its obsessive protagonist. In turn, some of Euripides' later plays, with their extended humour, upbeat endings, and large casts, can't be appreciated as dramatic artworks if assessed and analysed according to the same criteria as Sophocles' *Oedipus* or *Antigone*. Kitto was not prepared to allow scholarly subtleties to prevent him from explaining to a potentially novice reader, with determined lucidity as well as intellectual sophistication, the basic steps taken in the early evolution of tragic drama. Here is a fairly typical statement on the differences between two playwrights in their handling of the interplay between fate and character:

The Aeschylean universe is one of august moral laws, infringement of which brings certain doom; the Sophoclean is one in which wrongdoing does indeed work out its own punishment, but disaster crimes, too, without justification; at the most, with 'contributory negligence'.

No other critic has made this crucial distinction so clearly or so well. Time and again when I re-read Kitto, I realise that he had the knack for articulating what seems, after you have read his judgements, to have been obvious all the time.

How did Kitto become such an excellent critic of Greek tragedy, and so skilled at expressing his views with such humour, clarity and accessibility? His deeply conventional childhood and education do not fully explain his unusual gifts; indeed, they should have produced a much dustier scholar. He was a headmaster's son, born in 1897 in Stroud, Gloucestershire, and attended the local Grammar School. From there he went up to read Classics at St. John's College, Cambridge, and moved seamlessly, without leaving academia, to teach Classics at the University of Glasgow until his appointment to the chair of Greek in Bristol in 1944. It was therefore in Glasgow that he first wrote

Greek Tragedy, and although that city has always enjoyed a lively theatrical culture, ancient Greek plays were not, in Kitto's day, often performed. But he brought to his reading of the tragedies a variety of unusual perspectives which allowed him to see them as scripts for live performance (he always discusses the characters in the present tense as if they are living, breathing entities) in a manner that remains unique today.

First, he was a talented musician and enthusiastic cellist, married to an excellent pianist, and his passion for music and rhythm shines through his appreciation of the ancient plays as what would today be called 'multimedial' scores for sung and danced performance. In this he was completely ahead of his time, some of his assessments anticipating by decades the 'performative turn' in ancient theatre studies that was to take place in the 1970s. Secondly, he had a passion for cinema, and was a keen amateur movie maker. His understanding of the visual and power and scripted economy of the Greek plays clearly sometimes reflects his interest in the 'talkies' as the mimetic medium that was taking its first great evolutionary strides during the years while he was writing *Greek Tragedy*. Thirdly, he had a zealous admiration for contemporary Greece and its people, acquired on an extended walking tour he had enjoyed with his wife. Although they lost the many films they had recorded on their travels, he described their encounters instead in his first book, *In the Mountains of Greece* (1933). Vivid, affectionate, often hilarious, his interactions with Peloponnesian peasant communities clearly informed his understanding of the ancient Greek audiences for whom the tragedians wrote – those citizens 'trudging' back to their village – at a fundamental level. But fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, Kitto always thought about ancient Greek drama in comparison and counterpoint with other types of drama, rather than with Homeric epic, or Socratic philosophy, or the lyric poetry of Sappho and Anacreon. In this capacity to see drama as a medium which deserves transhistorical study on its own terms, rather than as a branch of literature, he was, once again, ahead of his time. Indeed, he is widely credited with having been the chief architect of the new Drama Department at Bristol University, the first to be opened in Britain, in 1947.¹ This conviction that drama deserves to be studied on its own terms meant that he read not only Greek drama and the scholarship upon it (although he had indeed read and absorbed everything significant ever written on the subject), but all western drama: medieval Mystery Plays, Calderón and Lope de Vega as well as Shakespeare, Corneille, Racine, Ibsen and Shaw. Some of his closest friends and colleagues were not classicists but drama specialists, such as Glynn Wickham and Leo Ayles. He was consistently involved in productions of

¹ See the obituary by S.J. Tester, *Gnomon* 55 (1983), 182–3.

drama of all kinds at Bristol, as well as providing fine translations for those of Sophocles.¹ Kitto felt passionately that Oedipus needed to be discussed alongside Hamlet as well as Achilles, and Medea alongside Lady Macbeth and Ibsen's Nora, as well as Hecuba. But he never wavered from his conviction that the Greek tragedies have not only proved seminal to the western dramatic tradition, but that in terms of craftsmanship and power they are just as good, and often better, than any which have been written subsequently. As one eminent contemporary reviewer of the first edition of *Greek Tragedy* commented, in mild surprise, if we are looking for an interpretation of a particular drama, Kitto's book, unusually, 'leaves in us a strong desire to read the play again'.²

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¹ These translations, first published in 1962, were reissued with my Introduction and Notes in the OUP World's Classics series in 1994 as *Oedipus the King, Antigone, Electra*.

² H.J. Rose, review of Kitto's *Greek Tragedy* in *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 61 (1941), 44.

PREFACE

A book on Greek Tragedy may be a work of historical scholarship or of literary criticism; this book professes to be a work of criticism. Criticism is of two kinds: the critic may tell the reader what he so beautifully thinks about it all, or he may try to explain the form in which the literature is written. This book attempts the latter task. It is neither a history nor a handbook; it has, I think, a continuous argument, and anything, however important, that does not bear on that argument is left out.

Longinus says, in his fine way, *ἡ τῶν λόγων κρίσις πολλῆς ἐστὶ πείρας τελευταῖον ἐπιγένημα*: literary criticism is the last fruit of long experience. My criticism is the fruit, if it is fruit, of an experience different from that which Longinus had in mind, the experience of putting awkward questions to a class and having to find answers to them – why did Aeschylus characterize differently from Sophocles? why did Sophocles introduce the Third Actor? why did Euripides not make better plots? This book is nothing but the answers to a series of such questions; the answers may be wrong, but the questions are right.

I make one basic assumption of which nothing that I have read in or about Greek Tragedy has caused me to doubt the soundness. It is that the Greek dramatist was first and last an artist, and must be criticized as such. Many Greeks, like many moderns, thought he was a moral teacher. No doubt he was, incidentally. Many English schoolmasters assert that cricket inculcates all sorts of moral virtues. No doubt it does, incidentally; but the writer on cricket does well to leave this aspect of his subject to the historian of the British Empire.

Not that any dramatist, especially the Greek, who was so consciously a citizen, can be indifferent to morality. His material, the thoughts and actions

of men, is essentially moral and intellectual, more obviously moral than the musician's, more obviously intellectual than the painter's, and he must be honest with his material. But the material will not explain the form of the work. There is something deeper that does this, something apprehensive, not dogmatic, something as intuitive as that, whatever it is, which moves a composer or painter to activity. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides each have a different fashion of tragic thought; this it is that explains the drama.

When therefore we say that the Greek dramatist was an artist, we are not using a tired platitude meaning that he preferred pretty verses and plots to ill-made ones; we mean that he felt, thought, and worked like a painter or a musician, not like a philosopher or a teacher. Being a dramatist he must deal with moral and intellectual questions, and what he says about them is a natural subject of study; but if we are to treat the plays as plays and not as documents we must, as in criticizing painting, free ourselves from 'the tyranny of the subject'. If we can grope our way to the fundamental tragic conception of each play or group of plays, we can hope to explain their form and style. If not, we expose ourselves to the temptation of thinking that changes of form and style were sought for their own sake (which may be true of us but is not true of the Greeks), or to the temptation of treating form and content separately, or of falling back on that unreal figment 'the form of Greek Tragedy', something which evolves historically and takes the individual plays with it. For us, there is no such thing as 'the form of Greek Tragedy'. The historian, looking at Greek Tragedy from the outside, can use this conception, but our business is with individual plays, each a work of art and therefore unique, each obeying only the laws of its own being. There were limits fixed by the conditions of performance (practically the same for Euripides as for Aeschylus); within these wide limits the form of a play is determined only by its own vital idea – that is, if it is a living work of art, a ζῶον, and not an animal 'after Landseer'.

We shall therefore always begin by trying to understand the nature of the dramatic conception that underlies a play or group of plays. We shall ask what it is that the dramatist is striving to say, not what in fact he does say about this or that. The 'meaning' contained in many a dramatic speech or chorus may be as direct as the 'meaning' of a passage in Aristotle's *Ethics*, but that 'meaning' which alone will explain the form of the play is something more akin to the 'meaning' of a Rembrandt or of a Beethoven sonata. It is, of course, much more intellectual, for the dramatist's apprehensions go at once into imagery closer to our intellectual life than the imagery of the painter or composer. The difference of medium, and consequently of method, is so great that direct comparison between drama and these other arts is rarely of much use except to the one who makes it. Nevertheless, we must remember where we are, and hold fast to the difference between the 'meaning' of a philosopher and the 'meaning' of an artist.

Can we go further? Can we explain, by reference to the communal life of which the poets were a part, how it came about that they 'meant' these particular things? We can certainly guess, and some of our guesses will no doubt be right; perhaps we can do more, but I have not regarded this as any business of mine, as our present concern is criticism and not biography. Criticism, it seems to me, can without discredit begin with what is in the poet's head, without inquiring how it got there.

The literary importance of Greek Tragedy has not yet been forgotten by Professors of English, who sometimes expect their pupils to have some acquaintance with it. It is because I hope that this survey may be of interest to students of literature who have no Greek that I have given translations where possible. But we Hellenists have our feelings, like other men, and I have left in Greek two recurring words: *ἁμαρτία* (hamartia) is the tragic flaw of Aristotle's theory, and *ὑβρις* is hybris.

My obligations are many and difficult to count; I hope I have been honest in acknowledging debts. I realize uncomfortably that often I quote others only to disagree with them. I am grateful to the Editor of *The Times*, who very willingly gave me permission to use copyright material valuable to me. My warmest thanks are due to my colleague Mr A. W. Gomme, for reading my scripts and making many salutary remarks about them. For the same friendly and critical services, most generously given, I owe a debt which now I cannot pay to my late colleague W. E. Muir, whose early death has taken away a good scholar, a firm and sensitive judge of literature, and one *ποθεινὸς τοῖς φίλοις*.

H. D. F. K.

The University
Glasgow
March 1939

NOTE TO THE THIRD EDITION

As the chorus remarks in the *Agamemnon*, even an old man can learn. I was unwilling to emit, in this edition, statements which I no longer believe to be true; therefore I have entirely rewritten chapters III and IV, on the *Oresteia* and the Dramatic Art of Aeschylus, the sections on the *Ajax*, *Trachiniae*, and *Philoctetes*, with certain minor reconstructions and many consequential changes. The discovery of about two square inches of papyrus compelled me also to remodel, though not very seriously, the first part of [chapter I](#).

H. D. F. K.

The University
Bristol



LYRICAL TRAGEDY

1. THE 'SUPPLICES'

The first two editions of this book opened with the assertion that the *Supplikes* is the earliest work of European drama. It now seems possible – some would say certain – that this is not true; that the trilogy was first produced not in or near 492 B.C. but much later, probably in 464, after the *Persae* and the *Septem*. The belief in the earlier dating never rested, of course, on any documentary evidence but chiefly on considerations of style, some of which (as I record with some complacency) I had rejected as evidence of date: namely, that in this play the real protagonist is not an actor but the chorus, and that the second actor is handled rather clumsily. Nevertheless, the general impression of archaism, combined with what Bowra well called 'the loaded magnificence of the style',¹ seemed reason enough, in the absence of direct evidence, to think it an early play.

This view was indeed challenged, notably by E. C. Yorke.² Yorke analysed a certain metrical phenomenon in the seven plays – resolution of a long syllable in the iambic trimeter – and showed that if the frequency of such resolution increased with the poet's increasing years then the *Persae* (472 B.C.) is the earliest play, and that the *Supplikes* would fall between it and the *Septem* (467). But the assumption is hazardous; closer inspection suggests that the dramatic quality of a scene had something to do with the incidence of these resolutions – as is certainly the case in Sophocles.

¹ C. M. Bowra, *Ancient Greek Literature*, p. 81.

² *Classical Quarterly*, 1938, p. 117.

But in 1952 there was published a fragment of papyrus from Oxyrhynchus,¹ which to all appearance derives ultimately from the didasalia, the official record of the dramatic contests in Athens. The fragment says that in the archonship of somebody whose name begins Ar ... (unless these two letters were the beginning of the word *archon*, which is not very likely) Aeschylus won the first prize with this trilogy, Sophocles the second prize, and Mesatos the third. If the reference is to the first production of the trilogy, which is the natural interpretation, but not indubitably the correct one, then the production certainly did not take place near 490, when Sophocles was a boy five or seven years old. He won his first victory, at what may have been his first attempt, in 468. The only year in the neighbourhood that provides a suitable archon is 464: Archedemides. The obscure Mesatos remains a difficulty. In Epistle V of Euripides he is mentioned alongside Euripides' younger contemporary Agathon, which would put him firmly in the later part of the century. The epistle is indeed what we harshly call a 'forgery', written possibly as late as the fifth century A.D. Yet a forger has every reason to be careful over detail: this one may have known what he was talking about. There is indeed an inscription² which records names of dramatists apparently in the chronological order of their first successes, and places a certain ... tos next to Sophocles. If this name was Mesatos, and not for example an unrecorded Stratos or the like, it would agree with the papyrus very well.

The fragment is so carelessly written that the Oxyrhynchus editor said of it 'There are things about this text which make one sceptical of its authority'; and there is another fact which should be taken into account. F. R. Earp, in his *Style of Aeschylus* (1948), submitted the plays to an exhaustive stylistic analysis. In every one of his statistical tables the *Supplices* comes out on top, indicating – if such evidence has value – that it is the earliest of the seven. Nothing led Earp to suspect that it could be later than the *Persae*, and his results, in other respects, are self-consistent. It has been suggested, as a compromise, that the trilogy was kept in cold-storage for some twenty-five years, for political reasons.³ Not perhaps impossible, but unlikely, and the reasons adduced seem to me entirely to misjudge the 'political' significance of the play; as will be argued below, it is hard to see what more Aeschylus could have done to make it clear that his 'Argos' was not contemporary Argos.

The nature of the theme (if I have correctly interpreted it) and the power with which it is handled certainly do not suggest the immaturity of youth.

¹ P. Oxy., 2256, frag. 3.1b – perhaps most readily available in Murray's revised Oxford text of Aeschylus.

² I. G. II, 2325.

³ A. Diamantopoulos, *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, LXXVII, Part 2, 200 ff.

Therefore, though without any burning conviction, I accept the evidence of the papyrus at its face value, and turn to more interesting matters.

Some of the older judgements of the play were based in part on the belief that it is a primitive work, partly on a sheer inability to understand a form of drama which is unfamiliar to us. It is natural, but wrong, to approach a work of art with a preconceived idea of what it ought to do, and how; such criticism may go very far astray. The critic tries to read into the play what he expects to find, and when he does not find it he is disappointed. Thus, Tucker found that the *Suppliants* 'fails in dramatic effect.... There is no thrilling action in the piece, and despite its admirable poetry it would have fallen flat' but for the spectacular effect of the chorus. Bowra, many years ago now, wrote: 'Such action as there is consists of their [the suppliants'] efforts to secure protection, and the arrival of a herald from Egypt announcing the presence of the rejected suitors'¹ – a summary which leaves out the situation which makes the play a tragedy. Or, starting with the doctrine that Aeschylus was a religious teacher and the educator of his people, *Erzieher seines Volkes*, we may say, with Pohlenz, that the play concerns the protectors more than the protected, which is true, and holds up to the Athenian democracy the inspiring picture of a whole people, the Argives, taking upon itself the greatest dangers because it puts religious duty before everything – which is not true, since Aeschylus takes some trouble to point out that the King and his people are in a cleft stick: if they will not protect the suppliants, they will have to brave the anger of the offended gods.

By all means let us think some passages in the play clumsy; nevertheless the greater part of it handles a profoundly tragic situation – and a familiar one – with immense power. Our first duty is to discover where Aeschylus laid the emphasis; we may assume that he built the play as he felt it. Certainly, those who find it undramatic cannot tell us, except by accident, what it is about, for they will not have seen the drama.

It begins dramatically enough. The chorus enters, dressed in Egyptian fashion, and chanting to the processional anapaestic rhythm a great invocation of Zeus, the Zeus who protects the Suppliant and has brought these victims of violence safely across the sea from the Nile to Argos; and with Zeus are presently linked the other gods, those of the sky and those of the underworld. The particular situation is being placed in the widest possible context. The *parodos* gives us the necessary facts easily: Danus, the flight from the suitors, the suppliants' own Argive descent. Why they are fleeing from the suitors is not yet made clear; the chorus mentions *hybris*, and *θέμις εἴργει*, Right forbids. We are given a clear impression of these young women – full of energy, passionate in their resistance, firm of faith in the gods.

¹ *Ancient Greek Literature*, p. 81.

The parodos is followed by a long ode. A slow and steady rhythm is started, and the chorus proceeds to dance and sing some 140 verses. There is no suggestion of immediate action, debate or intrigue; the ode, one-sixth of the whole play, would take something like fifteen minutes in performance, the time of an ordinary symphony-movement. This shows what wind is blowing in the theatre: the audience, clearly, is in no hurry to see the actors and action.

Since the rhythms of the poetry give us a slight and distant impression of the nature of the dances and their visual effect, we will give them a little attention. The ode opens, with Zeus and Epaphus, in the stately 'Dorian' rhythm. With the more personal tone of the second pair of stanzas the chorus turns to the impulsive choriambic: |—∪:∪—|—∪:∪—| (duple, not triple, time), but still closes quietly with a smooth iambic (or trochaic) verse. The third pair are well balanced: they open with a steady hexameter, work up to choriambic, and again end smoothly. In the fourth pair we return to Zeus and to a steadier rhythm; and this leads to the unmistakable outburst of

*ιάπτει δ' ἐλπιδῶν
ἀφ' ὑψιπύργων πανώλεις
βροτούς, βίαν δ' οὔτιν' ἐξοπλίζει*

where the weight of the rhythm marks the climax of this part of the ode.¹ The next pair introduce something new: harsh, clumsy spondees and tribrachs, which seem appropriate to the passionate lamentation and foreign-sounding invocations in the two stanzas and their refrains. It would be a reasonable inference, perhaps even a necessary one, that the accompanying dance was of the same character. The audience was not simply listening to poetry; it was experiencing a combination of the three arts, poetry, dance, and music, all surely saying the same thing, each reinforcing the others.

In view of what was to happen to the tragic Chorus before the century was out, it is not superfluous to notice how closely the poet sticks to his dramatic theme. We are always told, with good reason, that Aeschylus was a great religious poet; what impresses one in this ode is that he is a great dramatic lyricist, never making philosophic or mythological or decorative diversions. So dynamic a combination of rhythms is essentially of the dramatic poet, composer, choreographer. To the chorus, Zeus is to be their protector; Io is their claim on Argos; they think naturally of Philomela; they do not stay to narrate her story, as a late Euripidean chorus might. Then comes the appeal to the Justice, the Dike, of the gods, followed by those two splendid stanzas in

¹ ∪ — (∪) — (∪) — ∪ —
∪ — ∪ — (∪) — ∪ — (∪) —
∪ — ∪ — (∪) — ∪ — ∪ — (∪) —

which, for their own assurance, they sing of the power of Zeus. Here we reach an almost Hebraic intensity, but it is the intensity of the dramatic poet, not of the philosopher or theologian. After this, the change described above: Greek by descent, they are Egyptian by upbringing. They began in Dorian rhythm and spoke in true Greek strain; they end with the rhythms of despair, with wild, uncouth language, and with threats of hanging themselves at the altars of the gods – threats which they are presently to apply to the King of Argos.

‘So, through the mouth of the chorus, does Aeschylus declare his faith in a Zeus who is the refuge of the oppressed.’ This kind of thing is easily said, and has been said. Unfortunately, either this is nonsense or the play itself is. It is a hypothesis which scholars have sometimes found convenient, that the dramatists would use the chorus as their ‘mouthpiece’; sometimes even that anything said in a play represents what the dramatist would have us believe. As this directly concerns our understanding of Greek drama, we may take the present opportunity of considering it.

An example of the extreme view comes to hand in Professor Hugh Lloyd-Jones’s article *Zeus in Aeschylus*,¹ in which it is said, about the *Septem*: ‘We are repeatedly told that Zeus and Dike are on the side of Eteocles and the defenders; this is implied at 443–6, 565–7, and 630, and is clearly stated at 662–71, where Eteocles calls Dike the maiden daughter of Zeus and affirms that Polyneices, from his earliest years, has had no part in her.’ It will be enough to consider the last of the four passages. If Aeschylus intended us to believe this about Zeus, Dike and Eteocles, he was a very inept dramatist and his audience were remarkable people. For what happens? With this declaration on his lips Eteocles goes out to meet his brother in single combat, and each of them is killed. Is not this sufficient comment on what Eteocles has said? Or did Aeschylus imagine that in a play words have meaning, but events none?

But there is also the audience to consider. Returning to the *Supplices*, we might picture two of Aeschylus’ fellow-citizens trudging home to their village after the trilogy, ruminating on what they had seen. They would recall (we will suppose) that in the *parodos* and again later (vv. 529 f.) the ill-used Suppliants appealed to Zeus to protect them and drown their oppressors at sea. How was Aeschylus to prevent them from remembering, too, that in fact the wicked Egyptians turned up in Argos, undrowned, perfectly dry? and from concluding either that there is no point in praying to Zeus, or that Zeus is something other than the Suppliants imagined?

In short, unless the mental processes both of Aeschylus and of his audiences were something beyond our comprehension, the poet had one mouthpiece and one only: the play in its entirety, not in bits and pieces. This

¹ *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, LXXVI (1956). The passage quoted is on p. 59.

chorus, certainly, is not Aeschylus' 'mouthpiece' but his creation – and a very dramatic one.¹

During the ode, one figure has remained stationary, Danaus. Now he comes forward to speak, and what he has to say hardly makes our blood run faster. He tells his daughters that he is as prudent by land as he has been at sea; with unnecessary amplitude he tells them that a company of men is approaching. He is dull. Having said that, we should ask ourselves what is the substance of the short scene. To us it may be a bore, but the question is – if we can answer it – what response to it did Aeschylus expect from his audience? Two things happen: first, Danaus counsels his daughters to place themselves as suppliants at the altar of Zeus, and to be submissive, as becomes the suppliant; second, prayers are offered to Zeus, Apollo, Hermes. There is no difficulty in the prayers; we are once more to understand that the gods are going to preside over the action of the trilogy, that it will have no merely personal or local orbit. As for the other point, it seems reasonable to suggest that it is a preparation for what is to come and has been foreshadowed already: these Danaids can hardly be called submissive, 'like doves' (v. 223), towards the King; and this may prove to be not merely an interesting bit of decorative character-drawing, but something central to the whole trilogy. Do the Danaids fully understand and accept the laws of the god to whom they are appealing?

Pelasgus enters – it is convenient to use the name, though Aeschylus does not – and is invited to say who he is. In reply, he traces his lineage from 'earth-born Palaechthon', describes at length his kingdom, which embraces all Greece and Macedonia too, and then goes on to explain why this particular region is called Apia. (Aeschylus, like Euripides, and unlike Sophocles, did not always eschew matters of extraneous interest.)

Why all this? It is often assumed that for reasons of current politics Aeschylus wished to gratify Argos, or to commend friendship with Argos, rather than with Sparta, to his fellow-citizens. The assumption would be better founded if we were firmly assured of two things: that Aeschylus was rather stupid, and that in his Athens any approach to poetic imagination was punishable by death. Peloponnesian Argos, smarting under her supplanter Sparta, was one thing; this misty Pelasgian Argos, comprising regions that Agamemnon never knew, is utterly different; it would have been poor propaganda to retire so far from any historical reality. Contemporary Argos might have been gratified if an Athenian poet had asserted, or implied, her title to pre-eminence in the Peloponnese, but Argive Dodona and Macedonia are not politics. And if we are to think of current politics (and forget Zeus for the moment), would the Athenian voters in the audience be favourably disposed

¹ The urn-speech in Sophocles' *Electra* further illustrates this very elementary argument. – Below, p. 150.

towards Argos by the thought that their own city, at this remote time, was an unmentioned detail in this vast Pelasgian kingdom? In fact, when Pelasgus does refer to the plain in which historical Argos stands, he calls it not Argos but Apia; and when he ends his long speech, perhaps not very happily, by saying 'Be brief; this city does not love long speeches', everyone in the audience would instantly think not of Argos but of Sparta.

Surely what Aeschylus is doing is plain enough. As he universalizes the particular action by interweaving with it the agency of gods, so he escapes from local boundaries by imagining a vast kingdom. His mythical Argos, with its anachronistic democracy, stands for Greece in general, any Greek city. His Argos that stretches beyond the Pindus has something in common with Shakespeare's Bohemia which has a sea-coast.

The stichomythia that follows has been called 'a long-winded genealogical orgy'.¹ This is to misunderstand it. What we have is the proof of their Argive descent which the Suppliants give to Pelasgus. Certainly it does not need much acumen to see that the proof is very thin; all they prove is that they know the story. But in a play pitched on this lyrical plane it would be a mistake to demand a rigid proof. If one lay ready to hand, well and good; if not, then it is almost enough that the forms of proof are duly gone through. Our real interest is to know if Pelasgus will accept the claim; only in a later and sophisticated form of Greek drama will such a proof itself become a source of dramatic interest and delight.

Though the first part of this act is not very exciting, what remains makes ample amends. From v. 324 until the end of the scene, and beyond it, we have a presentation of a tragic situation that will hold its own with any. The power and certainty of it are astonishing. Twenty-four verses are enough to explain the coming of the chorus and to show the King that a chasm is opening beneath his feet. *Πέφρικα λεύζζων* he cried: 'I see, and shudder.' He is in a cleft stick: either he must undertake a dangerous and unwanted war, or he must risk the anger of the gods. This having been made clear to the unhappy King, the Danaids take advantage of their lyrical position to push home their appeal by a liberal use of the urgent dochmiac metre, accompanied no doubt by some passionate dance-figure.

In the whole of this scene, with Danaus not indeed off the stage, but quite otiose in the background, we can see what kind of dramatic effect late sixth-century tragedy might have produced in the hands of a master, the tragedy that used only a single actor with the chorus.² All is formal, as formal and vivid as a Miltonic sonnet. The doubts, fears, considerations of prudence that

¹ H. W. Smith, *The Drama of Aeschylus*, p. 40.

² See below, pp. 19 ff.

pass through the King's mind are distilled into five-verse stanzas, as formal as are the lyric stanzas of the chorus. The character, speech, arguments of Pelasgus are formalized in the same degree, necessarily; there is no pretence that we are following, with Sophoclean subtlety, the successive thoughts or emotions that pass through his mind. 'Let no quarrel, unexpected and unforeseen, come upon the city. The city has no need of these.' 'Assist you I cannot, without hurt; yet to reject your prayers, that too is hard.' Translated, the words are unimpressive, but no one familiar with the early Greek manner will miss the power either of the formal speech or of the formal scene, submitted to so severe a discipline. Our standard must be Simonides' epitaph, not a speech from Oedipus. Equally formal is the short speech 406–17, with its last line echoing the first. To call it stiff and undramatic is easy and wrong. The whole play is cast in a lyrical, unnaturalistic mould; we must not at one moment praise the odes for being Pindaric and at the next censure the dialogue for not being Sophoclean.

While the King stands motionless, contemplating the terrible alternatives, the chorus dances before him in the heavily swinging cretic rhythm (five-time). It seems to have something of a hypnotic force; it presents the appeal of the suppliants carried beyond the reach of language. We are told that Pelasgus is no character, only an abstraction. This is not quite true; he has all the character that the situation requires, and if Aeschylus had given him more, it would have been only an irrelevance. Character-drawing for its own sake is not necessarily a dramatic virtue. Pelasgus has mind and strength, for he can remain steady even under this assault. He emerges clear-eyed: 'There is no issue free from disaster.' With no rhetoric, but with an eloquent restraint, he leads up to his anguishing point: *ὅπως δ' ὄμαιμον αἶμα μὴ γενήσεται*, 'But that our kinsmen's blood be not shed ...' – the overmastering thought to which he returns a moment later: *ἀνδρας γυναικῶν οὐνεχ' αἰμάξαι πέδον*, 'That in a women's quarrel men's blood should stain the ground ...!' (449, 477). His uninvited guests have brought him to a pass where he has to choose between a war whose horrors he does not gloze over, and the unnamed terrors of the gods' wrath. Until this day he was the contented ruler of a prosperous state; now he is in torture. Unless Aeschylus was not a builder but only a decorator, this must be the centre of his thinking in this play, as it certainly is the centre of its tragic feeling. Because certain women away in Egypt have suffered violence, and because they have an ancestral claim upon Argos, this has come upon him; and this, perhaps, does something to explain the slightly too bland tone of his opening speech: it was to prepare for the contrast. Pelasgus has tried reason. He has argued that marriage between cousins is no bad thing: it keeps the family together. He has asked 'what if your laws sanction this marriage?' All is swept aside; the Danaids detest the marriage, and appeal to Dike. Through no Aristotelian *ἀμαρτία*, through no

deficiency of character or sense, the King, and his people, have suddenly fallen into this awful dilemma.

It is perhaps the most purely tragic of tragic situations: a total divorce of suffering from guilt or responsibility, a situation that Aristotle would not accept, because he found it shocking, *μιαρόν*. Perhaps it is too soon to ask what Aeschylus thought about it; we may, however, spare a moment for the observation that it is fairly constant in the tragic poets, though Aristotle rejected it and other philosophers have been uneasy about it.¹ It is the situation that engulfs Antigone; as she says, 'What law of the gods have I transgressed? Why should I look to Heaven any more?' Some have duly found the required *ἀμαρτία* in her, being in this respect more loyal to Aristotle than to Sophocles. There is Orestes; there is Hamlet, and many others in Shakespeare: the good Duke of York in *King Richard II*, torn between his sworn loyalty to an unjust king and his loyalty to a kinsman whom that king has wronged. There is Blanche in *King John*, fated to see her wedding stained with bloodshed, unable to wish success to either side in the impending battle between her kinsmen. Perhaps most tragic of all are the Father who has killed his Son and the Son who has killed his Father in *King Henry VI Part III*. In their several degrees all suffer, and none is in any way responsible. Macneile Dixon's answer is that the tragic poets, wiser than the philosophers, recognize that there is a tragic flaw, but one that sometimes is not in the character of the sufferer, but in the universe itself. I doubt if the tragic poets would agree. The miseries that fill *King Henry VI* are explicitly ascribed by Shakespeare to moral violence: see the prophecy made by Warwick (Part I, II, 124 ff.), so like the opening verses of the *Iliad*. Falconbridge says (*King John*, II, i, 574 f.) what Shakespeare so often implies:

*The world itself is peisèd well,
Made to run even upon even ground.*

When it does not run even, when disaster befalls the innocent, the reason is, in Shakespeare, as in the *Antigone*, that human folly has made the ground uneven. What Aeschylus thinks about the tragedy of Pelasgus and his citizens remains to be seen. He created it, he presents it powerfully; it will be strange indeed if he has not thought about it.

Pelasgus is overwhelmed by the situation; his mind is numb. But the poet has not yet done with him. The Danaids have already applied the screw to him; they proceed to turn it with a deliberation that seems almost devilish:

¹ See W. Macneile Dixon, *Tragedy*, pp. 128 ff.

- *We have one more word of supplication.*
- *I am listening.*
- *We have strings and cords for our robes.*
- *That is very proper in women.*

A commonplace verse? As commonplace as Duncan's 'This castle hath a pleasant seat'.

- *New ornaments for the altars.*
- *You are giving me riddles. Speak clearly.*

They do. They explain that they will insult and defile the altars of the Argive deities by hanging themselves there.

- *It is a thing that scourges my heart.*
- *Now are your eyes open.*

So too are ours. If the King will not protect the Suppliants at the price of his citizens' blood staining the ground, the whole land will have to endure the anger of Heaven. The people itself must choose.

The ode that now begins opens with an impressive invocation of Zeus, the Supreme Power. The prayer is repeated, that Zeus may destroy the Egyptian pursuers at sea. Then the Danaids dwell on the strange story of their ancestress Io, loved by Zeus, persecuted over sea and land by Hera, half-transformed into the shape of a cow, guided to Egypt, and there delivered by Zeus of a glorious son, whom all proclaimed the son of Zeus, for none but Zeus could have overcome the wrath of Hera. The story, as handled here, seems to have an affinity with the Prometheus trilogy and with the *Oresteia*: out of violence and cruelty and confusion come at last order and harmony. In the *Oresteia* we can follow the presentation of the dramatist's thought to the end; in the Danaid trilogy and in the *Prometheia* we are unluckily in the position of one who has to leave the theatre at the end of the first of the three plays: we can only surmise where it will end, what the poet has in mind. However, this ode, centrally placed, makes it once more plain that the supreme power of Zeus will dominate the whole. As to this, it is customary among scholars to say that Aeschylus exalted the religion of Zeus; we might consider a different way of putting it. Aeschylus asserts, here as elsewhere, that there is a supreme power; that is to say, there is a unity in things, some direction in events, which imply a supreme power; and this he identifies with Zeus. In him the Suppliants have put their trust – but it by no means follows that Zeus is exactly what they suppose. Some disillusionment awaits them.

Zeus is made prominent also in the short *episodion* that follows, the shortest in extant Greek drama. Danaus brings the good news that the Argive assembly, with impressive unanimity, has resolved to protect the Suppliants, at any cost. It has been said that here Aeschylus was concerned to give to Athens a picture of the ideal democracy, to show how Leaders and Led should work together. If this is all we can see in the passage, this, no doubt, is what we shall see. But half of the speech is devoted to the tragic dilemma, which is now put before the people as the Danaids have already put it before Pelasgus; and Danaus' last words are 'Zeus brought it to fulfilment.' We spoke, a moment ago, of Orestes; let us mention him again, for is not this desperate choice that is forced upon the Argives very like the choice that confronts Orestes? If Zeus is supreme, and is not malignant or incompetent, how do these things come about?

The short episode is followed by a long hymn of gratitude. This too is severely formal in style. The chorus invokes blessings on Argos; not vague ones, like Prosperity, Peace, Honour. It happens that Peace with Honour do figure among the desirable things, but they appear in explicit form: 'May they offer to foreigners, before girding themselves for war, satisfaction by fair agreement.' Nothing Utopian; they pray for what is possible. Prosperity also is concrete: 'May the lambs in their fields be fertile; may the land be rich in crops in each season.' They bless thoughtfully, and in the accusative and infinitive construction, like a law or proclamation.

Once more the rhythmical figures are worth attention. After the brief anapaestic prelude there are four pairs of stanzas; the rhythms fall into three groups. Group A, which begins each or the first six stanzas (followed in each case by Group B), consists mainly of two metrical phrases, — ∪ ∪ — ∪ —, and its variant ∪ ∪ ∪ — ∪ —, the dochmiac: short, energetic phrases, marked by Mazon¹ *assez agité*. Group B is mainly — ∪ — ∪ ∪ — ∪ —, the glyconic, or its equivalent — ∪ — ∪ ∪ — —, the pherecratean. These are calmer rhythms. The alternation of the two groups evidently gives variety within a firm framework, but it also reinforces the sense, as we should expect: in the first pair of stanzas, the *assez agité* rhythm conveys the prayer, and Group B conveys the reason why the prayer is being made. In the second and third pairs, the suffering which is being deprecated is, usually, given to Group A, and the opposite state of happiness to Group B. Group C appears in the last two stanzas, which sum up the whole in a prayer for peace with gods and men; it is a bigger, more swinging rhythm, well characterized by Mazon as *large et décidé*.²

¹ In his Budé edition of Aeschylus.

² This rhythm made a brief appearance in the first ode (above, p. 4), and is used extensively in the *Agamemnon* (below, pp. 96 ff.).

υ — (υ) — (υ) — υ — υ — (υ) —
 υ — υ — (υ) — υ — υ — (υ) —
 υ — υ — (υ) — υ —
 υ — υ — (υ) — υ —
 υ — υ — (υ) — υ — υ — (υ) —

We can see therefore, however dimly, something of the firm and intelligent lines of the whole composition. It is followed by a dramatic turn of events. Danaus, who (we must suppose) has been looking out to sea, has descried a ship that bears the hated Egyptians. No miracle has occurred to stop them; Greek gods, in serious tragedy, do not work miracles, except within a perfectly intelligible and intelligent dramatic convention.¹ Therefore the next few dance-movements are very different in character; the Danaids are terrified. Danaus assures them that the altars will protect them until he returns with help, that the Argives will fight in their defence, that the Egyptians will not find an easy landing, in the dusk; but the terror of the chorus gives a vivid impression of the ruthlessness of the Egyptians.

Danaus goes off to summon help. Aeschylus is using only two actors; therefore the one playing Danaus must be given an exit in order to reappear as the Herald. We may guess too that Aeschylus was not reluctant to have the suppliants entirely unprotected, except for the altars; the violence of the Egyptians becomes the more apparent. Of the ensuing ode there is no need to say more than that it leaves us in no doubt that the Danaids will do anything rather than yield. Then comes a wild scene badly battered in our MS. tradition: we must imagine the orchestra filled with wild movement, violence made manifest. For the moment, the dance and music are more important than the words.

No one will complain that the passage between Pelasgus and the Herald is undramatic, or lacking in character-drawing. Pelasgus' proud refusal to give his name, the dignity with which he rejects the Herald's demand, his readiness to throw the taunt of beer-drinking at the Egyptians, make him much more than a lay-figure. But when the Herald makes his exit, with the threat of war, all the stuffing seems to go out of the play. The King's short speech about the entertainment of the Danaids in Argos is well enough, but why must these vivid young women ask that Danaus be sent back to determine the matter for them? Would it not have been a natural and satisfying conclusion to the play if the Danaids had now made their way into the city under the impressive escort of the King himself?

When he comes, Danaus does little to increase his dramatic stature. He tells his daughters that the citizens have been very considerate to him, but this

¹ See below, pp. 125 and 266.

information hardly justifies his reappearance. For the rest, he talks to his daughters like a father, and an anxious one: they are beautiful, very desirable; life in a foreign city is difficult and can be perilous; let them guard against the snares set by Aphrodite.

As for the persistent flabbiness of Danaus, it is often said that it is a sign of immaturity in the dramatic art of Aeschylus; he has not yet mastered the art of using the two actors with the chorus. It is indeed not easy to think of this play as coming half-way in time between the *Septem* and the *Oresteia*, yet we must be careful. Aeschylus was never a conventional or a cautious dramatist; once he saw a tragic theme, he was not easily deterred from dramatizing it. In the *Persæ* he wrote a play that lacks a central character and is nearly all narrative; in the *Prometheus* he has a central character who cannot move, and delivers a long series of long speeches. These are signs of courage rather than of immature technique. Danaus, beyond a doubt, had an independent role in the second and third plays of the trilogy; in the first he is a mere shadow of his daughters. Aeschylus did not mind.

We may be tempted to think that Aeschylus brought back Danaus merely because he is the father of the Danaids, and then could find nothing for him to do except talk like a father. But is this enough?

There are those to whom the final scene of the *Agamemnon* is a sad anticlimax. It is – if we allow ourselves to think in terms of modern drama, with its emphasis on the interesting individual; but we have the *Oresteia* complete, and we can see, if we will, how the dramatic themes used in the Aegisthus-scene not only develop themes used already in the *Agamemnon* but also are a necessary and powerful preparation for much that follows. It is very far from being an anticlimax. Therefore, though of course nothing can be proved, we should consider the possibility that the same may be true here, and not be too quick in accusing Aeschylus of ineptitude. What is said here about the difficult position of foreign guests in a strange city, especially when they are beautiful young women, may have been a much more organic part of the whole than is visible to us.

But there is something else. When a dramatist does not do the obvious thing, as when Aeschylus does not make Pelasgus escort the Danaids into the city, his critics should take the elementary precaution of asking if, by not doing it, the dramatist has achieved some other effect which the obvious would have precluded. The play does, in fact, end with a stroke which is quite unexpected and typically Aeschylean, and could not conveniently have been contrived if Pelasgus were waiting to take the Danaids into Argos. They raise a hymn in honour of the city; they invoke the virgin-goddess Artemis, and pray that they shall not come under the law (*ἀνάγκη*) of Aphrodite. Then Aeschylus suddenly liberates the tongues of a group of serving-women whom hitherto we have taken to be supernumerary silent

actors.¹ It is very like what he does in the *Choephoroi*, when at a crisis he suddenly gives a voice to the silent actor Pylades.² This too is a crisis. The serving-women sing: 'My prudent hymn does not disregard Aphrodite. She, with Hera, comes nearest in power to Zeus ... For the fugitives I foresee cruel grief and bloody wars. Why has the pursuit been so swift and sure? What is fixed, that will surely come to pass. The will of Zeus cannot be opposed.' That is, marriage is the natural law; to oppose it is idle. The further exchanges between the two choruses cannot be sorted out with complete certainty, but the serving-women seem to warn the Danaids that they are praying for too much; the purposes of Zeus are not to be discerned by men, and one cannot appease the unappeasable. Such is the thought on which Aeschylus brings to a close the first of the three plays.

How did the trilogy continue? and what is it all about? Unfortunately, we can be only tentative. The keystone of the myth was that the Danaids were compelled to marry their cousins, that on the wedding-night each of them, by arrangement with Danaus, murdered her husband, except one, Hypermestra, who spared hers through her desire for children, and that she became the ancestress of a royal house in Argos, including Heracles. Aeschylus had indeed a masterful way with legends, but naturally he did not make them unrecognizable; he certainly incorporated in his trilogy these features of the story, but about important details we remain in the dark.

The *Supplices* is the first play in the trilogy; the fact has been denied, but that shows only that in criticism there is no position so untenable that some intrepid spirit will not be found occupying it. It is known that Aeschylus wrote a play called *The Egyptians*; it is likely that this was the second part of the trilogy, and that the Egyptians formed the chorus. If so, the Danaids did not appear – to the relief, perhaps, of the actor playing Danaus. From this play only one word remains: Zagreus. It is not illuminating. The third play was *The Danaids*, and here we are much more fortunate with our fragments. Atheneus records that Aphrodite appeared as a character in the play and delivered a speech of which he quotes seven verses:

The holy Sky loves to pierce the Earth, and love for the union seizes the Earth.
Rain from the moist Sky falls upon her and makes her swell. She brings forth
for man flocks of sheep and Demeter's grain; from this liquid marriage trees
grow to their perfection; and it is I who am the cause.

¹ There is no indication of this in our MSS., but the passage is not otherwise intelligible.

² See below, p. 73.

The fragment does not greatly help us to reconstruct the plot: obviously, Aphrodite is defending the action of Hypermestra, and, at least by implication, condemning her sisters; but in what circumstances we cannot be sure. It does however emphatically restate and amplify the theme announced in the *finale* of the *Supplices*, and thereby gives a clear indication of the general scope of the trilogy.

It is not quite a hymn to the glory of Zeus. We may indeed say with truth: 'It is from Zeus that the whole trilogy derives its significance, and around his name that the composition [the *parodos*] is designed.'¹ But what is Zeus? Aeschylus tells us more than once that he does not know. Thomson continues: 'A question of religion is thus raised which is going to dominate the whole play, or rather the whole trilogy. Is Zeus indifferent to justice? Will he allow brutality to triumph?' But this is so evidently a question expecting the answer No that none but a simple-minded dramatist would ask it. Aeschylus' questions were not so easy. Pohlenz makes two interesting remarks on the Zeus of the play:² 'His mind is an abyss which no mind can fathom: Seine Sinn ist ein Abgrund den kein Blick ermisst,' and 'Zeus does not abandon his own: Zeus verlässt die Seinen nicht'. The first is true, tragic, and Aeschylean; the second, if true, is not tragic, but belongs to a German chorale as much in feeling as it does in rhythm. Who protects the Danaids? Not Zeus. Zeus does not answer their prayer and drown the Egyptians; they escape the hated marriage only by the murder for which, probably, they must atone. Are they 'die Seine'? We must not hastily assume this because they appeal to Zeus and win our sympathy. Zeus has two daughters, Artemis and Aphrodite: the Danaids, like Hippolytus in Euripides' play, give all their devotion to Artemis and none to Aphrodite – as, presumably, the Egyptians give all theirs to Aphrodite and none to Artemis. Both goddesses are parts of a whole, and the Whole is Zeus. The trilogy is not a pious demonstration; it is a tragedy.

How far can we go in reconstructing it? Did the threatened war take place, or was it somehow averted? Argos of the Pelasgi became Argos of the Danai; therefore Danaus succeeded to Pelasgus. But how? Ancient authorities knew two variants. Apollodorus records that Pelasgus ceded the throne voluntarily to Danaus; Pausanias, that the change was made by a decision of the people. If Aeschylus used either of these versions, the former, though improbable, seems the more likely. Pelasgus did indeed say 'The people is quick to blame', but his own behaviour was so irreproachable that one does not easily foresee deposition. Hermann argued that there was a war, and that Pelasgus was killed; Wilamowitz, that there was no war, but a compromise.³ Surely

¹ G. Thomson, *Greek Lyric Metres*, p. 82.

² *Griechische Tragödie*, pp. 35 and 38.

³ G. Hermann, *de Aeschyli Danaidibus* (Opusc. II, 319 ff.) Wilamowitz, *Interpretationen*, p. 20.

Hermann's view is the more probable; the prophecy of the serving-women supports it. Wilamowitz found unnecessary difficulty in explaining how, if there was a war, the chorus of the second play could be the Egyptians. But we need not assume that Aeschylus condemned himself to dramatize every bit of the story. If in the second play the Egyptians are already victorious, or Pelasgus slain, then the arranging of terms between them and the Argives and Danaus would give enough material for a play. The objection to Wilamowitz' view is the compromise: why should the Danaids give way, except under dire compulsion? 'Honourable marriage, not a violent one,' says Wilamowitz. But the Danaids have made it quite clear that they will have no marriage of any kind. One point to bear in mind is the description we have been given of the great extent of Pelasgus' kingdom; one does not easily imagine that it was defeated in war with Egypt. Yet the Pelasgi did become Danai. Perhaps therefore we may surmise that honours were even in the battle, but that Pelasgus was killed. Thus Argos, now leaderless, might without dishonour offer the throne to Danaus if he could make terms with the Egyptians, and he, with some justification, could concert his plot with his distracted daughters. Certainly the death of Pelasgus would be no unlikely consummation of the tragic dilemma in which we have already found him placed; and if we feel inclined to ask if the Zeus of Aeschylus would permit the destruction of a king who had come to the defence of suppliants, we should reflect that this Zeus is no comforting embodiment of a pleasing 'natural justice': he did not prevent the wicked Egyptians from reaching Argos, and in the *Agamemnon* he has a King destroyed because the king has done precisely what he, Zeus, intended. These Greek gods usually prefigure the sort of thing that does happen rather than what we may think ought to happen.

Now we may consider the Danaids: their trial, their punishment. Were those who killed their husbands arraigned for murder, and before the people of Argos, on the grounds that they had brought blood-pollution on the land? Or was it Hypermestra who was accused?¹ We could approach this question with a little more confidence if we knew what happened to the forty-nine; but we do not. The myth which condemned them to draw water for ever in leaky vessels is certainly not Aeschylean. Another story had it that Lynceus, Hypermestra's husband, avenged his brothers by killing all his sisters-in-law and Danaus too: we will not easily believe that Aeschylus used so violent a denouement.

The appearance of Aphrodite in the third play stands in a very natural relation with the close of the *Suppliants*. Now, Pindar uses a myth in which the

¹ Mazon says: 'Hypermestra est d'abord l'objet de la colère de Danaos, car elle a trahi les siens, en laissant vivre un vengeur des Egyptiades.' (Edn. Budé, Notice, p. 8.)

Danaids are put up for marriage, not very gloriously, as prizes for all-comers to contend for in a foot-race: they were stationed at the end of the course, and each successive suitor, as he reached it, took his choice.¹ It seems likely that Aeschylus used the same myth; Mazon indeed conjectured that Pindar may have taken it from Aeschylus. So the forty-nine Danaids would be compelled to accept the *Κυπρίδος ἀνάγκη*, the universal law of nature, against which they protested in the first play. We might further conjecture that if the suitors were not Argives the city would at once be relieved of any pollution which their continued presence might entail. Hypermestra on the other hand remains in Argos and becomes the ancestress of the new royal line and of Heracles. So at last does a descendant of the Princess Io return to the land from which Io had been driven by the jealousy of Hera. This would imply that it was the forty-nine who were put on trial, not Hypermestra. The punishment, if indeed this is what Aeschylus contrived, is obviously not a punishment for homicide, but for disregard of Aphrodite. So far as the Egyptians are concerned, perhaps the decision was that they deserved what they got. And since we are guessing, let a final guess be ventured. Bearing in mind the bold dramaturgy of the *Eumenides*, where Apollo defends Orestes, the Erinyes accuse him, and Athena sits in judgement with human colleagues, may we not think it conceivable that in the *finale* of the Danaid trilogy there appeared not one goddess but two, Artemis alongside Aphrodite? Her function would be to denounce the lustfulness of the Egyptians, and thereby to secure the acquittal of the Danaids from the charge of murder.

All this is very uncertain. We shall be on rather firmer ground if we return to the play that has survived and ask ourselves what it is about.

Drama, we are told, always involves conflict. In the *Supplices* it abounds: the Danaids conflict with the Egyptians; Pelasgus and his citizens have to choose between conflicting policies either of which will bring them death and possibly destruction; finally, so far only adumbrated, there is in the Danaids themselves the latent conflict between Artemis and Aphrodite – a conflict that should not exist. Yet over all there stands the ultimate power of Zeus.

*The world itself is peisèd well,
Made to run even upon even ground.*

We have asked if Aeschylus too built on this foundation. Some part of the *Supplices* may be thought consistent with it. Pelasgus' dilemma need not imply an irrational universe, a Zeus whose mind, in so far as it is not quite obscure, is self-contradictory. It is a perfectly normal tragic sequence, familiar to us

¹ Pythians IX, 111 ff. This ode was composed in 474 or near it.

also from the classical English tragic poet:¹ moral violence, an offence against Dike, breaks out in Egypt when the Egyptians resolve to marry their cousins against their will. Resisting this, the Danaids flee, and show no little violence themselves when they threaten to defile the altars. Pelasgus is faced with a conflict of duties, in which we, like Pelasgus, may seek a just resolution, but the search is vain; not because the universe is irrational, *ἀνευ δίκης*, but because the course of Dike has been violently disturbed by the Egyptians. It is for this reason that Pelasgus finds 'no way out except through disaster' (v. 442). In such a case we can pray the gods to come to our rescue, but (as Antigone found) the gods will not. Neither in mature tragedy nor in life itself do we find that the gods who made the laws will intervene in a particular case to prevent the laws from operating. Zeus does not prevent the Egyptians from reaching Argos safely, nor from so far prevailing that the Danaids have to marry them. Yet neither does Zeus prevent the Danaids from murdering them, nor – if our reconstruction is near the truth – do they have to pay in blood for their bloodshed. They must indeed make atonement to Aphrodite, but when this is done, Dike is re-established.

This, perhaps, is acceptable so far as it goes, but there is another theme in the play: Io. Her story, we can be quite certain, had for Aeschylus some deep significance: in a later trilogy too he used it, interwoven with the story of Prometheus. Each trilogy is now a fragment, so that we can be only tentative. In *Prometheus Vinctus* the cruelty and indeed tyranny of Zeus towards Prometheus is in juxtaposition with his cruelty towards Io. Prometheus can prophesy that out of Io's suffering blessing will come,² and that from her descendant Hypermestra will spring the royal line of Argos, and Heracles who will release Prometheus; but at the beginning the love of Zeus for the young princess is presented as no more than a passion which Zeus is determined to satisfy,³ and if her father will not compel Io to yield to him, Zeus will destroy his whole family with a thunderbolt. It is a blind passion not essentially different from his blind rage against Prometheus. Yet in each case the violence passes. In these two broken trilogies much, necessarily, remains obscure; yet the idea emerges fairly clearly from the Io story that sheer violence and chaos in the universe give place in time to peace and order. Fortunately one trilogy remains intact; that one certainly enforces the same idea. How prominent it may have been in the Danaid trilogy one cannot tell.

¹ I have briefly discussed this in an essay on the *Histories of Shakespeare: More Talking of Shakespeare*, pp. 33–54 (Longmans, 1959).

² P.V. 846–76.

³ P.V. 640–86, especially 649 f. and 654.

2. THE 'SUPPLICES' AND PRE-AESCHYLEAN TRAGEDY

Greek tragedy passed through distinct forms, and unless we wish to stultify our criticism by complaining that the *Troades* is not so 'well-constructed' as the *I.T.*, or by finding the *Septem* stiff in comparison with the *Tyrannus*, it is well to make clear the main features and peculiar virtues of each. The significant forms seem to be four, of which the first three are clearly marked. Aristotle remarks briefly, and without a word of explanation, that Aeschylus introduced the second actor, and Sophocles the third, with scene-painting. The meaning of these innovations will be the theme of much that follows; for the moment it is enough to observe that they give us important landmarks. Tragedy was profoundly modified by each. We have the Thespian lyrical tragedy with one actor, the early Aeschylean with two, the Sophoclean with three. It will be convenient to call the early Aeschylean Old Tragedy, the Sophoclean Middle, and the late-Euripidean drama New. The differences we have in mind are other than those personal to the three poets. The *Medea* has more in common with the *Antigone* than with the *I.T.*; and New Tragedy was written by both Euripides and (apparently) Agathon. From Old Tragedy our surviving plays are the *Septem*, *Persae* and *Prometheus* – the last in spite of its three actors, and even if Professor G. Thomson is right in putting it later than the *Oresteia*. The *Supplices* is a link between Old Tragedy and the still older Lyrical Tragedy which is the subject of our present inquiry.

Neither about the form nor about the essential spirit of pre-Aeschylean drama have we any direct evidence.¹ We know that it was enacted by one actor and chorus,² but this does not take us far. Aristotle speaks of tragedy casting off the satyric element and discarding the trochaic metre, but there is little help here. In the first place, Pickard-Cambridge³ gives serious grounds for supposing that Aristotle was only theorizing, and in the second, even if Aristotle's account is true, we cannot imagine that tragedy was satyric in style and irresponsible in spirit so late as 535 B.C., when Peisistratus made it part of his enlarged and glorified Dionysiac Festival. We know from Aristotle that

¹ Kranz, *Stasimon*, is full of interesting speculation on the development of choric forms, but here we are concerned with the dramatic form of the plays as a whole.

² What the size of the chorus was I resolutely refuse to discuss; but one question interests me. It is generally accepted that it was a chorus of fifty, and Wilamowitz, in his robust way, said that it was ridiculous to suppose that the later chorus of twelve could possibly have impersonated the fifty daughters of Danaus. This has some force; but in the last play, when Hypermestra had presumably severed herself from her sisters, did Aeschylus use a chorus of forty-nine? The effect of a dance with one dancer missing would be striking, and perhaps not too bold for Aeschylus.

³ *Dithyramb, Tragedy, and Comedy*, pp. 128 ff.

it took a long time for Comedy to be thought worthy of a place in the festival: the tragedy of Thespis must surely have been a serious form of art.

However, if we limit ourselves to the period immediately preceding Aeschylus we may form a general impression by arguing backwards from the *Supplices*, an apparently hazardous enterprise which is made possible by the dramatic idleness of Danaus. The play is in all essentials single-actor drama up to the point where Danaus is able to do something useful by going into Argos.

The first and most obvious merit of the *Supplices* is the power of the lyrical passages. Aeschylus deals with the chorus as surely and confidently as Sophocles with dialogue. There is no sign of hesitancy. If we had no external evidence, we should still be certain that the lyrical was the oldest part of tragedy, for it is sufficiently obvious that Aeschylus had behind him a long tradition. But not only is the composition of the odes firm and varied; the characterization too is mature. These people are no band of singers and dancers, but the Danaids, and they could never for a moment be confused with the Chorus of another play. Sophocles' choruses, praised though they are by Aristotle, never reach this degree of characterization.¹ We realize clearly enough in the *Ajax* that they are Salaminian sailors, in the *Antigone* Theban senators; these all sing in character, but their character is not stamped on their songs or speech as the character of the Danaids is. They will sing *πολλὰ τὰ δεινά* and we think of them as pure Chorus; a moment later they will say something to Creon, and we realize that they are Theban senators; the Suppliants never for a moment allow us to forget that they are the Suppliants.

We can go further. Aeschylus makes this character dynamic as well as vivid. Greek tragedy never interested itself, except perhaps in some lost trilogies of which the *Prometheia* is a possible example, in the development of character,² but it did gradually reveal an already developed character. Aeschylus does this simply but very powerfully with his chorus here. The Danaids are partly Greek, partly barbarian; their reliance on Zeus emphasizes the one strain, their violence the other. The first long choric movement closes very dramatically with the emergence of the barbarian strain, and sets up a contrast which Aeschylus uses repeatedly, like some powerful and unifying basic rhythm. Sophocles never did this either; Aeschylus scarcely again. We shall see later why not.

For pre-Aeschylean tragedy then we can postulate a high level of competence in the management of the chorus and in its dramatization. 'The Chorus

¹ Not a complaint but a compliment, see pp. 134 f.

² Professor Webster has argued (*Introduction to Sophocles*, pp. 94 ff.) that it did, but only by assuming that an important change of mind (e.g. Ajax resolving not to kill himself after all) is development of character. What is the Greek for 'character' in this sense? It cannot be *φύσις*, and it obviously is not *ἕξις*; and *τὴν γνώμην μετατιθεσθαι* does not mean 'develop your character'.