

common occupation, and Athens was full of lads writing, as Aristophanes says, 'tragedies by the thousand.' On the other hand, at the commencement of the century writers were not many, and a literary public scarcely existed at all. One necessary effect of this movement, which took place chiefly in the second half of the period, was to multiply enormously the current varieties of the popular tales; until at last, as we see by the practice of Euripides, the Athenian playwright was brought, with respect to the fore-knowledge of his story by the audience, nearly to the situation of the modern playwright, and found it convenient, if not to tell the whole of it, at least to mark in outline the version of it from which he started. But the original practice, dating from the time when the legends current at one time and in the same city were still fairly harmonious, was to presuppose the story as known; and as a fact there is perhaps not one play of Aeschylus or of Sophocles which would not considerably puzzle a reader who should sit down to it, as to a drama of to-day, having very little or no information on the subject and expecting everything essential to be supplied by the author.

For a play of Aeschylus then the question, What is the story?, so far from being frivolous, is of the first importance; and so far from being necessarily easy, it is almost certain to offer some difficulties, and might very well prove unanswerable. To reconstruct stories in the exact form which prevailed at Athens in the days of Aeschylus, from the indications afforded by plays presupposing the stories, and from the indirect and ambiguous evidence of such other versions of the same legends as may be more or less perfectly preserved to us, is a task requiring the greatest care. It is not likely ever to be accomplished with all the success that might be wished, and is so far from accomplishment as yet, that in nothing which relates to the study of the poet is there left more room for improvement. We are now to enquire how the matter stands at present with regard to the story of the *Agamemnon*.

The reader who gradually becomes familiar with successive commentaries upon this play, will gradually become aware that they agree with one another in one remarkable peculiarity. As a rule, the first duty performed in the introduction to a drama is to give an accurate and straightforward account of the story. No edition known to me ventures to tell without disguise the story of the *Agamemnon*. I do not of course mean merely that the story told is not correct. This would be to assume the very point we are to discuss. I mean that the story, as it is commonly understood, is itself not told without concealment and practical misrepresentation. The reason for this will be only too