

studiously obtruded, would, if it stood alone, make the first part of the *Agamemnon* a confounding problem. But it is combined with another mass of difficulty, less prominent perhaps to the eyes of us moderns, but at Athens and in the time of Aeschylus equally fatal to that temporary and conventional belief without which the imagination is helpless. The story of the beacons is in one sense a fine story; that is to say, it is told in fine verse, and the actual description, how the fiery signal was sped, is unsurpassed or unrivalled in its own style of eloquence. But for all that the story is in its whole conception and all its incidents incredible, and it is impossible that a popular audience in ancient Athens can ever have thought otherwise.

In the first place, looking at the matter generally, it is permissible, when we reflect that the *Agamemnon* was written by a grave man of long experience in peace and war, and to satisfy an audience which contained perhaps more men personally familiar with the conduct of great affairs than ever assembled elsewhere—it is permissible, I say, to wonder, that so much should be made of a transaction which, for any relation it has to life, is more worthy of an inventive schoolboy. Here is a great monarch, conducting a distant war of uncertain duration. He establishes between his camp and his capital a system of communication on a grand scale, far larger than anything of the kind actually existing, when Aeschylus wrote, in the Greek world<sup>1</sup>. For what purpose? Naturally, we suppose, to aid his plans. Not at all. At the close of the war, as the ignorance of the elders requires us to suppose, no message had ever been sent, and no message but one was expected. The beacons were maintained and watched night after night, simply that, if and when Troy should fall, this news, expected for ten years, might have a chance, if the weather were favourable, to reach Argos some weeks or some days sooner than it would do in any case. And as if this notion were not puerile enough, the natural facts are distorted so as to exaggerate the absurdity to the utmost. For in the result it seems to be by the merest accident that the beacon-message arrives before the king. But for the storm he would doubtless have got home first.

Again, if we admit the beacons as a conceivable scheme, what are we to say of the useless and impossible mystery with which they are surrounded? The Athenians were to suppose, that for a year at least there had been maintained on a hill close to Argos, night after night, a

<sup>1</sup> The generals of Persia were supposed to have projected something similar, though more practicable, at the time of their marvellous expedition (Herod. 9, 3).

It does not appear how far they succeeded, but it is not unlikely that their plan suggested the idea of Aeschylus.