

watch forming part of a system of communication with the absent army, and that all this while, so strictly had the secret been kept, the elders of the city had not the least notion of it, nor had ever dreamed of such a thing as possible!

But these general objections, though serious enough, are nothing to the grotesque and wilful violations of nature which appear in the details. It is here that the modern reader most easily deceives himself, forgetting the local and contemporary point of view. No one disputes indeed, so far as I am aware, that the story told by Clytaemnestra is impossible; but most of those who write on the play ignore the subject so far as they can<sup>1</sup>: and hardly any one considers how the matter would look to an Athenian of the Marathonian generation. Yet place and time are the essential conditions.

Men are the willing slaves of imagination; and the inventor who frankly transcends our range of experience may with moderate skill carry us wherever he pleases. But so long as he purports to keep within our experience, the ablest inventor has but a strictly limited power. Not Shakespeare himself could have made the Londoners content to suppose that a Spanish ship lying at the Nore had fired upon an English ship lying at the Tower. They simply could not suppose it. Yet this is the sort of fiction which the Athenians, a people singularly severe in their criticism of the imagination, are supposed to have accepted without demur, and honoured with their highest reward. The description of the beacons (*v.* 293) is curiously complete and careful. Every stage is marked and named beyond possibility of mistake. The first three stages are, as above said, from Mount Ida to the island of Lemnos, from Lemnos to Athos, from Athos to the highest point of Euboea. The distances are for the first two stages about sixty miles, for the third stage nearly a hundred miles. It is needless to prove that beacons at these intervals would be useless, useless under any circumstances, and although we should not throw in, as Aeschylus would appear to do, the special facility of a tremendous storm, raging in the very region of the longest transit. Let it be supposed (and it is an outside supposition) that in the atmosphere of the Mediterranean, on a night perfectly clear, a bonfire one hundred miles away might be made out with certainty. What would be the use of a signal, intended to operate at some unknown time in the course of the year, if it were so arranged as to be defeated by the slightest haze at any point in a traject of one hundred miles? Did then the Athenian

<sup>1</sup> Not however all; see Paley.