

audience not know these distances and their relation to the visibility of a beacon? How could they possibly fail to know the facts, and to have such a vivid consciousness of them as could not for an instant be put by? Euboea, the terminus of the most prodigious leap, was geographically and politically almost part of Attica itself. Athos, the starting-point of the leap, lay right in the eye of Athenian policy and trade, always specially directed to the north and north-west of the Aegæan. The people were essentially a people of seamen. When the *Agamemnon* was produced they had been engaged for twenty years in a struggle for the naval dominion of those very seas, a struggle upon which depended most of their wealth and all their national importance. They were familiar with beacons in peace and in war, and used them, as of course everywhere else, in Euboea, to signal to Skiathos, a distance of some twelve miles¹. The statement that a beacon-signal was transmitted in the midst of a storm from Athos to Euboea stood to the knowledge and habits of Athens then in much the same relation as the statement that a steamer ran across the Atlantic in one day would stand to the knowledge and habits of Liverpool now.

And here again, as in the matter of time, the story is not merely absurd in fact, but wilfully and as it were purposely absurd. If the geographical facts were to the poet perfectly indifferent, why is he at such pains to be precise? Nothing would have been easier or more natural, in a mere exercise of the imagination, than to leave the details in some obscurity, to start the signals upon a more or less practicable route, and then to fetch the matter off with generalities. But Aeschylus leaves not a loop-hole; and when he comes to the most miraculous part of the story (*v.* 298) he is careful to give our incredulity a jog.

But if the defects of the fable are glaring (and on this enough seems to have been said) they are also extremely dangerous. What is the real opinion of modern critics on this point, the critics themselves show by a testimony more telling than any direct condemnation, by ignoring and, as far as possible, concealing the facts. No one, as I have already said, ventures to tell, as it is received, the story of the play. As an example I purposely choose (for the criticism is in no way personal) a book to which I am much indebted, the edition of Mr Sidgwick. 'The action of the play in details,' says Mr Sidgwick in his Introduction, 'is as follows:—

Agamemnon has been absent for ten years at Troy. Meanwhile his wife Klytaemnestra has been ruling Argos in conjunction with her lover Aegisthos.

¹ Herod. 7, 182.