

The news of the capture of Troy is daily expected, and the play opens with the appearance of the night-watchman on the roof, waiting (as he has been for a year past) for the beacon fire which is to announce the victory. While the watchman is complaining of his trouble, the flame flashes out, and he goes to tell his mistress (Prologue). The chorus enter and sing: meanwhile the queen comes out and is seen lighting the altar fires and preparing for a festal display in honour of the event. The leader of the chorus learns from her the tidings, and after describing the beacon-race, she imagines the scene in Troy and expresses a hope that all will end well (Scene 1). *After another choric song* the Herald appears, who describes first the sufferings before Troy, and finally the storm which scattered the fleet; the queen sends by him *a welcome to her lord* (Scene 2). *In Scene 3 Agamemnon returns with Cassandra etc.*

Now could it possibly occur to any one upon reading this—more especially if he happened to know that Aeschylus, like a modern dramatist, did not limit his plots to any special period of time—but with or without this information could any one suspect from the above, that all these events are represented as occurring within a few hours? Should we not assume, and is it not indeed tacitly implied, that the action of the *Agamemnon*, like that of its continuation, the *Eumenides*, is divided; and that the necessary lapse of time between these ‘scenes’ is either expressly noticed, as in the *Eumenides*, or left open to our imagination? But is this what the editor means? On the contrary, long afterwards in the course of the notes we come upon the following, ‘504. Observe that the herald arrives from Troy, announcing the landing of Agamemnon, immediately after the beacon fires, on the morning after the capture. Such violations of possibility were held quite allowable by the license of dramatic poetry.’ This last statement shall be considered presently. But first let us ask why, if this violation of possibility is so simple and so common, it should not be exhibited in the commentary with the same frankness as in the play? Why is ‘the action of the play in details’ so described as to suppress a feature which we are to observe, and why is the like device adopted, as it is, by one writer after another? It is prompted by the instinct of self-preservation. The expositor, loyally identifying himself with the author, feels that, whatever he may say about dramatic license, the reader will as a fact be repelled at starting by the wanton perversity of the fiction; and he screens it accordingly. How is it that no similar apprehension occurred to the dramatist?

For as to the statement that on the Athenian stage ‘such violations of possibility were held quite allowable,’ I must take leave to say that it is not only without evidence, but altogether contrary to the evidence. There is no example ‘such’ or approximately such; and the theoretic