

his audience or his readers might be perfectly content. But the wild assumptions debited to the *Agamemnon* explain nothing, lead to nothing, serve nothing. If the circumstances of time and place were as natural as they are in fact prodigious, the supposed story would still be a marvel of discontinuity. Let any one suppose the opening scenes of the play, as far as the entrance of the herald, to have survived as a fragment; let him notice the striking incidents which centre upon the announcement of the beacon-message, the night alarm, the amazement of the elders, their vain attempt to get more information from the queen, their open incredulity; and then let him consider how he would have conceived the lost remainder. Why does the poet occupy us with the beacons at all? When with all this expense of falsehood the king is at last brought upon the stage, and the play, which is now nearing its middle, begins for the first time to be connectedly intelligible, all the preliminary apparatus, as we have already said, is simply neglected. Nay more, the only fact which emerges, if anything does, from the perplexity of the introduction—that the king in some unexplained manner came home with astonishing speed and arrived almost as soon as he was announced—, so far from accounting for the sequel, greatly aggravates the difficulties of a narrative, which could ill afford the increase.

Almost every fine story, and in particular almost every story suitable for the stage, contains a certain element of essential improbability. Contrast, so important in dramatic effect, will generally require surprising incidents, and what is surprising cannot be altogether likely. The story of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra is no exception to this general rule. It is not impossible, but it is essentially improbable, that a powerful monarch, returning from a great and glorious expedition, should be murdered by his wife and her paramour, and that the murderers should not only escape immediate punishment, but should usurp the throne and establish themselves in possession. It would be much in such a case if the guilty pair could save themselves by a prompt flight from the vengeance of the triumphant husband. That in the very moment of his new strength and popularity they should actually overthrow him and take his place is a thing which only under the most peculiarly favourable circumstances could either happen or seem credible. The first task therefore of a narrator, who for the sake of the striking situation should undertake to present such a story, must be to create these circumstances, and upon his skill in doing this his success, if he were a dramatist, must in the first instance largely depend. For however it may be with the student or the reader, a popular