

conquered; the king was come; and the queen's wild fancy about the beacon might well be perfectly innocent. If indeed they had had time first to consider and then to put questions! But the herald, mad with rapture, was in no mood to catch hints. While they were fumbling with vague suggestions of danger at home he had darted off again upon the topic of his sufferings; and before they could recover the subject the queen was upon them and had promptly dismissed the herald with a message of welcome to his master¹.

The elders made indeed an effort to detain him by a question as to the safety of Menelaus, who had not been mentioned, a most unfortunate question, as the reply to it necessarily disclosed the destruction of the fleet, and by this news they were sufficiently distracted from more opportune reflexions until the king's arrival. The king arrived, with the companions of his voyage and their escort, and the success of the plot was almost assured.

The king arrived at the fortress, and his loyal friends saw with surprise, that the triumphant crowd by which he, his soldiers, and they were now surrounded, seemed to consist of the very men whom they had most reason to suppose disaffected. So striking was this, that even in the moment of welcome they could not but remark upon it resentfully, and warn the king not to be deceived by this show of unanimous rejoicing². Agamemnon, putting their hint to previous reports³, understood them perfectly. Indeed he had returned full of anger against his subjects and of suspicion against his wife, and spoke as if it had been his express object to aid the conspirators, by aggrieving any waverers among their party or any loyalists who on the way from the sea to the castle had joined the company or were otherwise accidentally present. He and the gods of Argos had won a glorious triumph; but he had been ill served abroad and ill served at home, and so the offenders

¹ The brief conversation between the elders and the herald (*vv.* 543—555) and the manner in which by their hesitation and his impatience the minute is lost seems to me an admirable stroke of dramatic art. Equally good is the dexterity and presence of mind shown by the queen at her re-entrance (*v.* 592). Here the slip of a word might have been fatal. If she referred to the supposed message from Troy, she risked a remark from the herald; if she was seen to avoid the subject, she ran still more risk from the

suspicion of the elders. What she actually says is so adroitly turned, that while she seems to treat the matter with simple frankness, there is not a word which could suggest to the uninformed herald that there was anything remarkable in the time or circumstances of the message she mentions. To relish this kind of linguistic skill was a speciality of the Attic audience. It is the essence of their famous 'irony.'

² *vv.* 774—800.

³ *v.* 821.