

INTRODUCTION.

1. *The Problem.*

WHAT is the plot of the *Agamemnon*? When the dramatist began his work, what was the story which he proposed to tell, or rather—the difference of phrase is not unimportant—which he proposed to illustrate?

To one familiar only with drama produced under modern conditions, it might well seem strange that this question should be propounded at all. Surely, it might be said, this ought to be a simple matter, to be settled at the first reading. If a drama does not convey its own story, entire and unmistakable, what does it convey? So we might argue, naturally enough, from the conditions of the theatre as we know them in modern times: but so would not argue those who have given much reflexion to the theatre of Athens, and especially of Aeschylus. Every one knows, even if the full significance of the fact is not always sufficiently estimated, that the tragedians of Athens did not tell their story at all, as the telling of a story is conceived by a modern dramatist, whose audience, when the curtain goes up, know nothing which is not in the play-bill.

The story of an Athenian tragedy is never completely told; it is implied, or, to repeat the expression used above, it is illustrated by a selected scene or scenes. And the further we go back the truer this is. Some of the plays of Euripides, such as the *Hippolytus*, are sufficiently complete in statement to be understood perhaps wholly without external aid; and Sophocles fills in his outline more than Aeschylus. Such was the natural result of altered circumstances, of that multiplication of literature and growth of literary education which was the chief characteristic of the fifth century. Before the close of the century the process had so rapidly advanced that literature was a