

that a man, who had spent most of his life in writing plays, when he came to lay down the lines of his supreme masterpiece, should encumber himself at starting with absurdities so glaring, so dangerous, and so gratuitous, as this fable exhibits in all its parts? Let us look at it for a moment from these three points of view.

And first, that the absurdities are conspicuous. If we assume, for the sake of argument, that it was indifferent to Aeschylus and the Athenian audience whether the story told was conceivable or not, we may still wonder why the poet should so labour to be false. The first 'act' of the *Agamemnon* is constructed exactly as it would be, if designed to show the monstrosities of it in the strongest light. It is one huge contradiction. It is divided by a crisis, the entrance of the herald (*v.* 508), into two nearly equal parts, the substance of which may be summarised by the statements, (1) that from the fall of Troy to the commencement of the play is a period of two or three hours, (2) that in this interval have occurred the events of several weeks. About this there is not and cannot be any difference of opinion. It is certain, in the first place, that the action is continuous, and falls within the early hours of one morning. Language could not be clearer than that which shows us that the herald arrives while the beacon-message is still in process of becoming known (*vv.* 481—498)¹. Even the progress of the hour from darkness to daylight is duly noted, as we have seen. But it is needless to labour the point. Had it been possible to suppose the action divided (as in the *Eumenides*²), or to assume anywhere a long lapse of time (as in the *Suppliants* of Euripides), the modern readers of the poet, who, as we shall see, are painfully conscious of the puzzle, would have marked the interval long ago. And yet, on the other hand, look at the necessities of the situation, as they are thrust upon our notice by Aeschylus himself. That on the morning after the sack of Troy the weary and famished Greeks would be making the most of their comfortless repose, and be in no condition to think of anything else, is obviously true. But if Aeschylus proposed to bring them that very morning to Argos, why should he insist on reminding us, before their appearance, that they must at this very moment be in Troy,

¹ See also *vv.* 1040 foll.

² The example of the *Eumenides* is indeed sometimes cited, as if it explained and justified what would otherwise be surprising in the construction of the *Agamemnon*. There is no resemblance between them. The *Eumenides* is simply

divided, like a play of Shakespeare, into three scenes, confessedly separated by gaps of time and changes of place. If the *Agamemnon* were similarly divisible, there would be nothing peculiar about it. See further an Essay on 'The Unity of Time', in my edition of Euripides' *Ion*.