Aeschylus and Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy

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AESCHYLUS AND ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF TRAGEDY

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Traditional criticism of Greek tragedy has generally centered around the Poetics of Aristotle as its point of departure. His theory of tragedy has been its guide, and each tragedian has been interpreted according as his plays fitted into this mold. Never has there been any question, as far as this method was concerned, of doubting for a moment that each dramatist intended to conform to this formula.

Yet one does not have to read very far in traditional Aeschylean criticism to sense something is wrong. It is not that the critics deny the greatness of Aeschylus, but they generally fail to substantiate their claims and fail to do justice to the plays of this master dramatist. Most of their criticism has concerned itself, rather unsuccessfully, with answering difficulties which arise from their method of procedure. Little of their work strikes us as very penetrating or satisfactory, and, with them as our guide, we do not feel that we have been helped much in appreciating and understanding Aeschylus as a dramatist. Either he is represented as a primitive pioneer and innovator

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1 By traditional Aeschylean criticism we mean that which is found in the works of such well known authors, to name the most important of them mentioned in this thesis, as Professors Gilbert Norwood, A.E. Haigh, Maurice Croiset, H. Patin, H.W. Smyth, T.D. Goodell, Gilbert Murray, Lewis Campbell, J. T. Sheppard, T.G. Tucker, A. Sidgwick, and C. M. Bowra.
through whose efforts tragedy was finally able to attain its natural perfect form, or as a genius whose irresponsible mania hindered him from writing plays which conformed to the ideal as laid down by Aristotle. At least it is not Aeschylus whose claim to greatness cannot be denied.

What is the reason for this confusion in Aeschylean criticism? Our contention is that the plays of Aeschylus do not conform to Aristotle's formula. Neither was Aeschylus trying to write plays of this nature nor was Aristotle unaware that the drama of Aeschylus was a completely different species from that which he had analyzed in the Poetics.

Indeed Aristotle himself gives us reason for thinking this as is shown by the fact that he was very wary in his references to Aeschylus. It seems as though he was a bit uneasy over the place of that grand and unique tragedian. As Professor Kitto remarks:

To suppose that he was unaware of the essential difference between Aeschylus and Sophocles seems rash; it is perhaps legitimate to argue that his complete silence about Aeschylus the dramatist shows that he was aware of it; nothing that Aeschylus did could serve him either as a model or warning.

Furthermore, no one can fail to notice with Professor Haigh that "throughout

this treatise the standards of dramatic writing are supplied by Sophocles and Euripides.  

Still, it seems some remarks of Aristotle himself in his Poetics, especially concerning the evolution of tragedy, have been the occasion or maybe the cause for the traditional manner in which Aristotle has been approached by critics. However, we maintain, this is a gratuitous assumption and that it cannot be proven from the text that Aeschylus was one of the representatives of the species of Greek tragedy which Aristotle subjected to dissection and analysis in his Poetics. In fact we can argue to the contrary from what Aristotle says, as we shall show in the last chapter.

It has been only recently that some critics, realizing the need of a revision of our theories of literary criticism when we approach Aeschylus, have abandoned the traditional method and attempted to interpret Aeschylus from some other point of view. The results of their efforts have been most satisfactory in some cases, and at least they have shown what can be done if we stop interpreting Aeschylus with a confidence that Aristotle did not have and free ourselves of preconceived ideas of what the plays of Aeschylus ought to do and how they ought to accomplish this end.

4 Haigh, p. 123.
5 Aristotle, Poetics, 1449a, 9-18.
Three authors, in particular, who have thus departed from the traditional approach, are Professor E. T. Owen of Toronto University, Reverend William P. Hetherington, S.J., and Professor H.D.F. Kitto of the University of Glasgow. These three authors start from different points of view or different approaches and, most interestingly, come to many similar conclusions. Each starts with the assumption that there is no relation between Aristotle and Aeschylus and goes on to interpret Aeschylus in some other manner. Owen proceeds from historical fact and his theory of interpretation is based on the belief that the function of the choral recitals was and remained a religious ritual. Father Hetherington begins with an a priori theory concerning poetical inspiration while Kitto restricts himself to the purely artistic aspect of the plays in his attempt to explain the form in which the plays were written.

However, it is not our intention to attempt an interpretation of Aeschylus nor to criticize the theories of these three men. Rather, it is our purpose to show by a comparison of five plays of Aeschylus with Aristotle's theory that there is no relation between them. Much of the material of this thesis will be taken from these three authors, but the purpose of our investigation will differ from theirs in that they start with the assumption that there is no relation between Aeschylus and Aristotle and go on to interpret Aeschylus in some other manner, while our purpose will be to prove the validity of their assumption by a formal comparison.
CHAPTER II

THE POETICS

Before we begin our comparison between the tragedies of Aeschylus and Aristotle's Poetics, it will be helpful to consider the Poetics in itself in order that we may see how this work fits in with Aristotle's other writings; what is the character of the work, its style and form; what was its background; what influenced it; what was Aristotle's aim and purpose in writing it and what use has been made of it in later ages.

The Poetics was written more than 100 years after Aeschylus' death in 456 B.C.; and although no definite date can be assigned to it, it probably belongs to the maturity of Aristotle's genius, to that period at Athens, when as head of the Lyceum (335-322 B.C.), Aristotle was organizing research in every field of inquiry, and producing his systematic works of philosophy and science.

His contribution to criticism forms part of a larger and original scheme which aimed at nothing less than a survey of all knowledge, and thus included many sciences differing in kind. An explanation of the real character of the work, the place it occupies in Aristotle's philosophy, and the nature of the truth enshrined in its pages, is supplied by Aristotle himself.
Among the various branches of his philosophy, the Poetics belong to what are known as the productive sciences; and these together with the practical sciences, which were Politics and Ethics, differed vitally in character from what were known as the theoretical sciences, namely, Mathematics, Physics, and Metaphysics. The immediate purpose of all sciences alike was "to know"; but between the ultimate purposes of the productive and practical sciences on the one hand, and of the theoretical sciences on the other, there were important differences. Whereas the theoretical sciences aimed merely at knowledge and the contemplation of knowledge, the final object of the productive and practical sciences was the application of knowledge to some definite end. Thus the practical sciences aimed at knowledge with a view to influencing conduct, the productive sciences at knowledge with a view to making useful and beautiful objects; and this broad difference had its counterpart in different truths arrived at in the theoretical as opposed to the other sciences. Upon this truth Aristotle insists in more than one place, and it contains an important principle to be remembered in the application of these theories which Atkins notes:

The theoretic sciences, he maintained, dealt with matters independent of human volition, and therefore aimed at truth of a universal kind. The productive and practical sciences, on the other hand, had to do with matters into which the human factor entered; and in consequence they could yield only general rules, rules which held good in the majority of cases, but which lacked the finality of the truths of the theoretical sciences. Hence the real nature of the
Poetics and also of the Rhetoric. As representative of the productive sciences in Aristotle's scheme of philosophy, they are concerned primarily with a knowledge of art for its own sake; nor are they intended to supply universal truths about things that are fixed and unalterable. Their intention was merely to help in the making of a good poet or orator, by formulating rules of a general kind, that is, rules with no claim to any sort of finality. And this fact has to be remembered in any attempt to understand the works and their teaching. It is especially important in view of later history, and the use made of the Poetics in the Renaissance.1

Likewise Professor Fyfe in the introduction to his edition of Aristotle's Poetics states:

The aim of the Poetics is equally practical. It is a textbook of instruction. Aristotle tells his class what to seek and what to avoid in the construction of poetic drama; what is the effect at which such drama aims; how the achievement of that aim determines the form of the drama; by what means that aim is achieved and by what defects a dramatist may fail to achieve it; what are the charges that critics bring against poets and how such charges may be countered.2

Besides being but a partial treatment of the subject proposed, some amount of difficulty is also presented by the style and form of the work.3

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3 The Poetics contains perhaps 10,000 words; though there are grounds for thinking that it is imperfect as it stands and that a second book has been lost which contained in all probability a theory of comedy and Aristotle's explanation of 'catharsis'. Cf. Poetics, ed. by Ingram Bywater, Oxford University Press, 1909, p. xx ff.
Belonging as it does to the "acroamatic" or advanced discourses of Aristotle, as distinguished from others of a popular kind, the Poetics is written in an esoteric style, that is, a style which was intended for the initiated, and for circles already familiar with author's terminology and thought. The work thus demands from its reader a certain preliminary knowledge to enable him to supply what is left unsaid or else to interpret what is said obscurely. As Lessing pointed out, Aristotle must everywhere be interpreted by himself, that is, in relation to his other works; for if we read Aristotle in detachment no other author is more liable to be misinterpreted and misunderstood. Butcher repeats this warning and gives as a conclusion of the result of his work on Aristotle this statement:

Fortunately, the general views of Aristotle on Poetry and Art are not affected by the minor difficulties with which the Poetics abounds. Incomplete as our material is when all scattered references have been brought together, the cardinal points of Aristotle's aesthetic theory can be seized with some certainty. 4

And this initial difficulty is increased by the condition in which the work has come down. The work is obviously not in a form intended for publication by its author, for there are irregularities and anomalies which suggest a lack of revision, while the material throughout is presented in a strangely unequal fashion. 5

5 Cf. Poetics, ed. by Ingram Bywater, p. xiv.
Atkins says of it:

Some passages, for instance, are written in a clear consecutive style, others, again, in a loose elliptical form; there are contradictions, digressions, omissions, and other marks of haste; while there is also an occasional uncertainty in the use of terminology, technical terms like "imitation" being used in more senses than one, whereas other terms are employed without any sort of explanation.\(^6\)

And as a conclusion from these facts he says:

What these facts suggest is therefore a collection of Aristotle's MS. or lecture-notes posthumously edited by some of his pupils; and this is probably the genesis of the Poetics, a parallel of which would be found in the case of his Ethics.

Other critical works, now lost, he had also written; and among them were some early dialogues intended for popular reading, and written in a style subsequently commended by Cicero. To this class belongs the work On Poets, which has been claimed to be the source of certain definitions of tragedy and comedy which were destined to play a large part in later critical history. Whether this claim is justified is seriously questioned; but what seems certain is that in these dialogues Aristotle had attempted a popular treatment of literary topics in imitation of Plato, and that their loss has deprived us of some interesting sidelights on Aristotelian theory. However, despite these problems, it is reassuring to note with Atkins that: "It may safely be taken

\(^6\) Atkins, p. 76.
\(^7\) Ibid., p. 76.
that in the Poetics and the Rhetoric the essence of Aristotle's critical thought has been preserved; and with them we have reached one of the supreme moments of critical history.\(^8\) This point is worthy of note because it will be with the main principles of Aristotle's theory of tragedy, for the most part, that we will be comparing the tragedies of Aeschylus.

Additional light is thrown on our understanding of the Poetics by considering the background and influences that had a bearing on this work. Aristotle, throughout his work, is covertly criticizing Plato. In his discussion he constantly draws on Plato for doctrine and terminology, reinterpreting or refuting them, while engaged in developing new doctrines of his own. Plato had challenged both tragedy and the epic on account of their nature and effects; he had demanded poetry of a philosophic kind, produced in the light of ideal knowledge. And the nature of the attack determined the line of defence; Aristotle replies to both counts in Plato's indictment, and meets Plato's sensitive hesitation with hard common sense. There is Aristotle's treatment of such questions as the comparative value of tragedy and the epic and the relative importance of plot and character in tragedy; such questions as these do not necessarily arise out of a general exposition of poetry; and Aristotle probably considered them because they were subjects of controversy in his day, at a time, that is, when the claims of Homer and the great writers

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 72.
of tragedy were under debate, and when the vitality of the drama was being
threatened by anarchic tendencies, of which Aristophanes and Plato had
already complained.

It is in the light of these circumstances and when we consider the methods
employed and the lines along which Aristotle worked, that we begin to realize
the true greatness of the Poetics:

Casting aside the 'oracular' methods of earlier philoso­phers who had depended for their results on a sort of
prophetic insight, Aristotle discards also Plato's
intuitive and dialectic methods as being inadequate for
the purpose in hand, which was a positive and coherent
presentmen~ of the truth in regard to poetry.9

For him to know a thing was to perceive its essential qualities and these
qualities he seeks, where poetry was concerned, by a systematic analysis of
the existing Greek poetry. Thus he starts from concrete facts, and his
principles are generalizations based upon those facts. He analyses poetic
compositions and the practice of the great masters, proceeding as in his
Politics, which is based on inquiries into the constitutions of many city
states; so that his method is alike analytic, inductive, and scientific in
the best senses of the terms. He also makes use of psychological methods in
his theorizing, in tracing the origin of poetry back to fundamental tendencies
in human nature and in justifying tragedy by its emotional effects. Then, too,

9 Ibid., p. 76.
he occasionally approaches his subject from an historical point of view; realizing that to study things in their growth is often the best means of appreciating their essential qualities.

Aristotle's treatment of these matters is far from complete. What he says, however, is suggestive in the highest degree, and has formed the starting point of all later literary histories. A biologist and an historian, he was the first to apply these methods systematically to literature; and he did it in such a way that later ages accepted blindly his doctrinal teaching, without realizing at all adequately the basis of human study on which those doctrines ultimately rested. He perhaps more than any other writer, has suffered from the intemperate admiration of his friends. As Butcher says:

There have been periods when he was held to be infallible both in literature and in philosophy. A sovereign authority has been claimed for him by those who possessed no first-hand knowledge of his writings, and certainly were not equipped with sufficient Greek to interpret the text. A far truer respect would have been shown to him, had it been frankly acknowledged, that in his Poetics there are oversights and omissions which cannot be set down to the fragmentary character of the book; that his judgements are based on literary models which, perfect as they are in their kind, do not exhaust the possibilities of literature; that many of his rules are tentative rather than dogmatic; that some of them need revision or qualification. 10

This is a very important point and one which is very pertinent to our comparison. Its implications will become clearer as we proceed but it must be

10 Butcher, p. ix.
insisted upon that what is usually meant by the 'theory of Aristotle' is the
theory of his interpreters. He himself, as we shall see, was very wary in
his references to Aeschylus and never intended to be as dogmatic and universal
as his followers intended him to be.

None the less his work is a storehouse of literary theory, and as Atkins
says:

The miracle of the Poetics is that it contains so much of permanent and universal interest...the work is full of
original ideas that are as true today as when they were first formulated; though with them are mingled others
that are limited in their application, and some again that are misleading or definitely wrong. Yet all alike are of
historical interest, owing to the use made of them by later theorists; and part of Aristotle's achievement doubt-
less lay in having raised the essential problems, even though he was not always sufficiently successful in pro-
viding solutions.11

In the first part of the treatise, Aristotle is concerned with an ex-
position of the essence of poetry, of "poetry in itself". He discusses its
origin, its nature, its effects; and in replying to Plato's attack, he has
established its essential truth, its value to the community and has also pre-
pared the way for aesthetic as distinct from moral judgment. His discussion
is mainly in terms of subject matter, not form, yet he is none the less alive
to the technical side of his subject. If poetry is to him a wisdom, it is

11 Atkins, p. 79.
also an art with its own laws and principles; and indeed, his main object in the Poetics, as opposed to that of Plato in his dialogues, is to show that poetry is as much an art as rhetoric or painting, and to indicate sound methods of poetical composition.

This brings us to a fundamental point. What are we to think of Aristotle's opinion of inspiration? And what are we able to point out in the Poetics on this much discussed point? Could it be that the reason why Aeschylus does not conform to Aristotle's theory is that Aristotle does not consider poetical inspiration which is the key to the understanding of Aeschylus? This is the view of Father Hetherington which we consider more fully later.

Some look upon Aristotle as merely a scientist who looked upon literature with the indifferent eye of an analyst, unmoved by the grandeur of Aeschylus, and who with complete objectivity deduced such principles in the art of literary criticism as are capable of exact definition and settled them once for all. They say his dissection covers all except the principle of life.12 This is true in the sense that Aristotle does either consciously or unconsciously neglect the inspiration theory of poetry in his Poetics, but it is difficult to say just what his ideas were on the subject and how much it

enters into his theory of tragedy. Whether his silence on the subject is to be interpreted as a denial will never be decided. It is true that he refers to inspiration but incidentally in his Poetics, but even this incidental reference seems to show that he is aware of the need for a gifted nature. Furthermore, in his Rhetoric he categorically states that poetry is a thing inspired. Yet, it is also true that like the rest of Greeks he conceives poetry as being largely the outcome of trained skill; and however much he may attribute to instinctive genius, he is even more insistent on the existence of certain artistic laws which serve to guide and regulate the poet's activity so that probably the question of the relative importance of genius and art was not pertinent to his treatise since his aim was to enable poets to write well knowingly.

Aristotle begins his discussion of tragedy with a definition based largely on his previous generalizations. Tragedy he defines as:

An imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.

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14 Aristotle, Rhetoric, III, 7, 11.
15 Poetics, 1449b 24-28. S.H. Butcher's English translation is used throughout. ἐστὶν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πρᾶξις σκούδαις καὶ γελείας μέγεθος ἐχόμενης, ἡδυμένῳ λόγῳ χωρίς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, ὅρντων καὶ ὃ ὁ δι' ἀπαγγελίας, ὁ ἔλεος καὶ φόβος κέραινον τῆς τῶν τοιούτων καθαρσίν.
As Lucas remarks, "The definition seems simplicity itself. And yet it can be doubted whether any sentence in literature, outside theology, has contained a greater hornets' nest of controversy."\(^{16}\) We will only discuss such parts of it as are pertinent to our comparison and which will come up later in our consideration of the plays of Aeschylus.

Aristotle uses the word 'imitation' but divests it of Platonic connotation. Against Plato, Aristotle insists that art represents nature and is not an imitation of an imitation. The objects of imitation are men in action,\(^{17}\) that is, human action, thoughts, emotions, in fact, human life in general.

Concerning the final cause or the specific function that Aristotle assigns to tragedy, we must remember Aristotle's definition is half a defence. His insistence on what might seem to us an insignificant feature of tragedy is to some extent an ingenious piece of special pleading. Of Aristotle's theory of Catharsis Atkins writes:

\begin{quote}
Whether Aristotle has here hit upon the whole, or even the essential truth, is however not so certain; for to modern minds tragedy seems to aim at something more than the elimination of repressions; nor are the emotions of pity and fear alone concerned. There is for instance the nobler function of enlarging men's experience, of giving them a truer insight into human life and destiny, and of enabling them to endure great moods; and with these matters Aristotle does not deal.\(^{18}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{16}\) F. L. Lucas, Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics, New York, Harcourt Bruce, 1929, p. 16.

\(^{17}\) Poetics, 1448a, l.

\(^{18}\) Atkins, p. 86.
Lucas goes farther in stating that while the theory of Catharsis is a far too moral account of the effects of tragedy it still is not an adequate account of its moral effects. 19

Having thus defined tragedy, Aristotle proceeds in analytical fashion to consider the elements out of which it is composed; and these he describes as Plot, Character and Thought, all of which are concerned with the object presented; Diction and Melody, which have to do with the means of representation; and Spectacle, relating to the manner of representation. Of these elements the first two are the main elements of tragedy and our discussion will center about them.

Aristotle claims the plot is of supreme importance, more important than the mere revelation of personal qualities (Character), or the intellectual processes (Thought) of the dramatic characters concerned. And this point he is at some pains to establish, as if anxious to meet current criticisms of his day. He maintains that tragedy is an imitation, not of men but of action and life, and since life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality, plot is obviously the essential element. Character he regards as merely subsidiary, since it only adds the revelation of what is best revealed in action. Then there follows a somewhat remarkable sentence which it

19 Lucas, p. 36.
would be well to keep in mind in our discussion of characterization in Aeschylus. Aristotle says: "Without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character." He does not qualify this remark but goes on to complain that the tragedies of most of the modern poets fail in the rendering of character; and of poets in general this is often true. Nor he maintains, does a string of speeches, however finely-wrought or expressive of character, provide the same tragic effects as a well constructed plot; for the latter includes what he considers the most powerful elements of emotional interest in tragedy--Peripeteia or Reversal of Situation, and Recognition scenes.

Such then, being Aristotle's views concerning the importance of plot, it is not strange that he inquires into this element of tragedy at great length. According to his definition of tragedy, the tragic action must be complete and of a certain magnitude; and these features, it necessarily follows, are also characteristic of the plot, "A well constructed plot", he asserts, "must neither begin nor end at haphazard." There must be a limit of length, a certain order of its incidents; and these requirements are in accord with an aesthetic law, since beauty depends on magnitude and order. Aristotle now adds that the length is determined, not be consideration of stage production,

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20 Poetics, 1450a, 23-24. ἐτὶ ἀνευ λυν πράξεως οὐκ ἄν γένοιτο τραγῳδία, ἀνευ δὲ ἃθων γένοιτ' ἄν.

21 Ibid., 1450b, 33-34. δεὶ ἀρα τοὺς συνεστῶτας εῖ δύθους μήθ' ὅποθεν ἐτυχεν ἄρχεσθαι μηθ' ὅπου ἐτυχε τελευτάν.
but by the nature of the drama itself; and provided there is no confusion or obscurity, the greater the length, the more beautiful will be the piece by reason of its size.

It is however, in what he says about the requisite order of the plot that Aristotle is most illuminating; and in his insistence on logic, order and perspicuity, we see the essence of the classical spirit of the ages, an echo of the doctrine laid down by Plato. Moreover, he is but following Plato when he prescribes for the plot a unity of action, a unity of an organic kind, capable of admitting the complexity of living things, while possessing also the vital relation of their parts. Thus there are to be no irrelevant incidents, and further, there must be a rigorous connection of the incidents employed; they must be bound together in a probable or necessary sequence.

Of these two principles Atkins remarks:

This then is what is known as Aristotle's law of probability; a law relating primarily to structure, not to subject matter and one of Aristotle's most valuable contributions to literary theory. The hint for this doctrine of the unity of action came originally from Plato; and Aristotle makes it the basis of his whole poetic theory. But in taking over the idea he developed and explained it.

22 Ibid., 1451a, 9-11.
23 Cf. Plato, Phaedrus, 264c; Parmenides, 145a; Gorgias, 503e.
24 Atkins, p. 98.
Here it will be well to note that this unity of action is the only law of the kind prescribed by Aristotle; though later ages read into his work other laws known as the unities of time and place. However, in fairness, it should be noted that Aristotle began it or set the error going by observing that a tragedy, contrariwise to the epic, endeavors as far as possible to keep within the limit of a single circuit of the sun, or something near that.\textsuperscript{25} Here, however, no law was implied; it was merely a record of common practice, which was far from inviolable. Of the second law, the unity of place, there is no trace in the \textit{Poetics}. Likewise, it is worthy of note that in explaining his theory of probability, Aristotle brings in his doctrine on the universal, maintaining that the poetry deals with the universal and therefore it is more philosophic than history, which expresses the particular.\textsuperscript{26}

Aristotle's attention is now directed to the subject-matter of the plot; and he proceeds to discuss the themes best calculated to produce the necessary tragic effects of pity and fear, for the tragic effects should spring out of the plot itself and without any sort of artificial aid. It is clear that the tragic theme in general must be of human suffering, and he adds that those themes are best which contain an element of surprise, though the thrill of the unexpected must not be due to mere chance but must follow on naturally from what has preceded.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Poetics}, 1449b, 12-13.  
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}, 1451b, 3 ff.  
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, 1452a, 4-6.
From here Aristotle goes on to formulate one of his profound generalizations as to the nature of the tragic plot. The ideal tragedy should consist of a 'complex action', i.e. an action containing two features, a peripeteia and anagnorisis, rather than of a 'simple action' in which the change of fortune takes place without these features, and the best form of anagnorisis in coincident with peripeteia. As to the exact meaning of these terms, there has been much confusion. Peripeteia, for the most part, has been taken to mean "a reverse of situation"; and anagnorisis, "recognition", though if this is true, then what Atkins says follows:

But if this be what is meant, then, to say the least, "simple" actions (i.e. action without peripeteia) are excessively rare, since almost all plays comprise "a reversal of situation"; and the Iliad, which Aristotle describes as 'simple', has many such changes.28

Therefore, what he deduces from Aristotle's examples seems true; namely, that 'peripeteia' stands for a 'reversal' of intention, a deed done in blindness defeating its own purpose and anagnorisis for the realization of the truth, an awakening to the real position.29

Hence the ideal plot for Aristotle is one in which the calamity is due to a false move blindly taken by friend or kinsman, a tragedy brought about by human error.30 Here we have the heart of Aristotle's theory, and he

28 Atkins, p. 91.
29 Atkins, p. 91.
30 Poetics, 1453a, 15-16.
explains in passing that this is why the best Greek tragedies were confined
to the stories of a few houses since such stories alone provided the sort of
plot he had in mind. However, he is careful to add that the writer of
tragedy was not limited to such stories, and that there were narratives of a
fictitious or historical kind, which served the tragic purpose.

Aristotle insists that the unhappy ending is the right ending, though he
does not exclude the happy ending and even admits that some place it first.
However, he holds that this is due to popular taste and is not the true tragic
pleasure but more in keeping with comedy than tragedy.

Following naturally from his idea of tragedy are Aristotle's pronounce-
ments on the character of the ideal tragic hero. The truth is, so Aristotle
states, that pity can be felt only for one who, while not entirely good, meets
with suffering beyond his deserts; whereas fear is aroused only when the
sufferer is like to ourselves in nature. And these conditions necessarily
determine the nature of the tragic hero. He is a man not preeminently good
though of average virtue, who is overtaken by misfortune brought on, not by
vice, but by some error or frailty. In addition he adds that the tragic
hero should be a distinguished person of high estate, and this he did to add

31 Ibid., 1453a, 19.
32 Ibid., 1453a, 30ff.
33 Ibid., 1453a, 7-10.
to the impressiveness of the catastrophe. This clause, however, does not seem to pertain to the essential part of the definition, the gist of which lies in the hamartia doctrine; and misinterpreted in later ages, it led to the exclusion from tragedy of all but characters of the highest rank. As to Aristotle's meaning, Atkins throws some light in responding to those who take hamartia to mean 'a defect of character' as well as 'an error of judgment' in order to reconcile the difficulties inherent in the theory. He says:

Attempts have therefore been made to reconcile the positions by taking hamartia to mean a 'defect of character' as well as 'an error of judgment'. Yet this almost certainly is not what Aristotle meant; it is reading into him something that is simply not there, interpreting him in the light of later experience. And for a correct understanding of his doctrine certain facts have to be born in mind: first, that Aristotle's theorising was definitely retrospective in kind; secondly, that he is dealing, not with the only form, but with what he regards as the ideal form, of tragedy; and lastly that his tragic theory is all of a piece, so that the clue to the tragic plot is also the clue to the tragic hero. His ideal tragedy we have seen is also the Tragedy of Error; and it therefore follows that the hamartia stands for 'an error of judgment,' the tragic hero for one whose sufferings are due to a false step blindly taken.34

With regard to character in general there is nothing of importance to note and it will suffice to enumerate his remarks. The character of tragedy must be "good," as distinguished from those of comedy; he must be consistently

34 Atkins, p. 95.
drawn, true to life and type. 35 Besides, he adds that in character-drawing, as in dramatic structure, the law of "probability" holds good, so that what a dramatic personage says or does should be the necessary outcome of his character. 36

Aristotle has now dealt with what he regards as the two main elements of tragedy; namely plot and characterization. The remaining four elements he dismisses rather summarily, and on diction alone has he anything substantial to say.

In regard to thought, he refers back to his Rhetoric where he says the subject more strictly belongs. 37 He describes Spectacle as something that has but slight concern with the poetic craft, and is not essential to tragedy. 38 Concerning Melody, or the musical element in tragedy, he has little to say; and in view of the importance of choric song in Greek drama, his silence here is both surprising and significant.

His chief point is that this lyrical element is the most important of those accessories that make tragedy pleasing; though he further insists that the Chorus should be regarded as one of the actors and its songs an integral

35 Poetics, 1454a,15-33.
36 Ibid., 1454a,33-36.
37 Ibid., 1456a,34-36.
38 Ibid., 1453b,9-10.
part of the tragedy, in accordance with the practice of Sophocles and not Euripides. 39

On the remaining element, diction, he has outlined a theory of poetic diction in general. He specifies the various forms the poet may use, and as a general principle, concludes the poetic expression should be clear without being trite or commonplace. 40 It is a great matter to observe propriety in these several modes of expression, but the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the work of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances. 41

These then are the elements of Aristotle's theory which we will be concerned with in our comparison. However, it will be chiefly with those elements which Aristotle considered more essential that we will be most occupied; namely, Character and Plot. For it is these two elements which enter most into the ideal tragedy of Aristotle, and consequently it will be upon these elements that any relationship between Aristotle's theory and the plays of Aeschylus will stand or fall.

39 Ibid., 1456a, 25-27.
40 Ibid., 1458a, 18.
41 Ibid., 1459a, 4-8.
CHAPTER III
THE SUPPLICES

With these thoughts in mind then, let us look at Aeschylus and decide whether we can accept the traditional interpretations which are based on Aristotle or whether we are justified in saying that, if we are to understand and appreciate Aeschylus, we must interpret him otherwise than in the light of the Poetics.

The first two plays that we will consider are but isolated parts of trilogies, the other plays of which have perished, so that we cannot hope to be able to draw definite conclusions from them. Yet, what we have of the trilogies gives us enough to enable us to see what Aeschylus is about and serves as a confirmation of many of the conclusions that we will make from the Oresteia, the only complete trilogy we have of Aeschylus. Moreover, since the Supplices does not present Aeschylus to us at his greatest and since it is his earliest extant play, it should be for us the key to the Oresteia and even Aeschylean drama itself. And finally, in our judgment, a consideration of plays will show us how helpless traditional criticism is to deal with them and point out some of the unfair conclusions to which the traditional critics are forced.
Now let us look at the Supplices and see what critics say of it. Professor Tucker finds that it "fails in dramatic effect. There is no thrilling action in the piece, and despite its admirable poetry, it would have fallen flat but for the spectacular effect of the chorus."\(^1\) Professor Campbell says of it:

The Chorus is still protagonist, and the lyrical portions are far in excess of the dialogue, of which there is only enough to make the action intelligible. The part of Danaus is hardly distinguishable from that of the Coryphaeus; the only other persons are King Pelasgus and the herald of the sons of Aegyptus. All three are shadowy figures, forcibly but crudely drawn.\(^2\)

Likewise Professor Norwood speaks of it as:

bald and monotonous... such strictures, however, are merely one way of saying that the Supplices is an early work. It would be fairer (were it only possible) to compare it with the drama of Phrynichus rather than with the Agamemnon.\(^3\)

This is as much as can be said for it. Critics can find very little trace of Aristotle, but they do find a lot which puzzles them. They can only look at the plot and character and say that the play is primitive drama, and that it is interesting and important in so far as we can see drama coming to birth. The plot, according to them is rather undramatic and ill-constructed

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and what "there is of it consists of their (the Daniads) efforts to secure protection and the arrival of the herald from Egypt announcing the presence of the rejected suitors." The long odes at the beginning, which so delay the action, cannot be explained by them, and they are disturbed by the lack of action and conflict. As for characters, Danaus' dramatic idleness is a problem throughout most of the play for, as Kitto observes, "The play is in all essentials single-actor drama up to the point where Danaus is able to do something useful by going into Argos." And even he is no character in the sense Aristotle requires. Norwood in speaking of the characters says:

There is little characterization... The chorus are simply distressed damsels (save for their vivid and strong religious faith), the king is simply a magnanimous and wary monarch, the herald simply a 'myrmidon'.

Thus, as the critics themselves tell us, the two main supports of Aristotle's structure, plot and character, are missing, or if they are there, they are very poorly done. They can find nothing to praise and consequently, rather than be too harsh with Aeschylus, seek ways and means to excuse him and let him off as easily as possible. To such a position does traditional criticism bring us in regard to the Supplices—a position from which there is no escape and from which we will never logically do justice to Aeschylus if it is true "that the Agamemnon itself comes to its own artistically, only

5 Kitto, p. 24.
6 Norwood, p. 85.
when related to the same dramatic genus."\(^7\) This is very important, and if it is true, will be a strong argument for our position.

Yet, independently of this statement, the attitude which critics have adopted in regard to the *Supplies* seems most unfair to Aeschylus, and we feel that there is more to be said for the play. However, this cannot and will not be done until, as some authors have done, we rid ourselves of the notion that Aeschylus' dramatic conception conforms to the type of tragedy which Aristotle has analyzed in his *Poetics*.

Although Aeschylus was a young man when he wrote the *Supplies*, he was already Aeschylus, and we may suppose that he built the play as he felt it. Technical difficulties we may allow him, but we will not readily suppose that he got his proportions and emphasis wrong, as we must admit if we compare him with Aristotle's formula. Maybe the fault is with us because we look in the wrong direction for the interest of the play. As Owen says:

> When he composed the *Supplies* he was not consciously a pioneer fumbling towards a new art reached in the *Agamemnon*; he was already a master craftsman handling with magnificent assurance an existent and fully-developed one.\(^8\)

Likewise Kitto remarks that "the great interest that the *Supplies* has for us

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lies not in its primitiveness but in its maturity,"⁹ and in the dealing between the Chorus and the King "we have before our eyes the splendid and assured triumph of the Tragedy of Thespis, the drama of a chorus and single actor."¹⁰

Whatever explanation we wish to give to the play it is true that it does contain a magnificent dramatic thrill which will be missed if we look for action in the Aristotelian sense. As Bowra says:

> If the play lacks action, it is full of passion and tenderness, and if it seems stiff or simple, it is full of inner dramatic conflict. Every line comes from a powerful vision piercing into the anxieties and torments of the characters."¹¹

This is significant and points to the truth of Owen's statement that for Aeschylus the incidents that occur are not the action but only the occasion for it.¹² Likewise the long choral odes which keep the action at a standstill until the play is nearly half over are something we will meet again, and as Kitto says, "Shows us what wind is blowing in the theatre: the audience is in no hurry to see the actors."¹³ Rather as this play shows, and, as we shall see later, the characters merely present the tragic situation and then fade from sight. The King in the Supplices is the victim of pure tragedy. He is

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⁹ Kitto, p. 1.
¹⁰ Ibid., p. 1.
¹¹ Bowra, p. 82.
¹³ Kitto, p. 4.
overwhelmed, not by any hamartia, but rather by the disharmony in the make-up of things, the flaw in the Universe. Then he passes from view but we are left with the problem which continues through the trilogy.

The simple story of the protection of injured innocence is no dramatic material for such as Aeschylus, and the general development of the rest of the trilogy, which can be guessed with fair certainty, allows us to affirm that here it is not. The plot is not in the action; Aeschylus was concerned with a higher problem, the mysterious will of Zeus.

Thus in this play we must conclude that the chorus and the divine plan are the really important things, and these are points critics have not considered except to censure. However, would it not be fairer to admit our defeat in understanding the play along traditional lines and to seek to interpret it in some other manner? This can and has been done as we shall see later, but we will not attempt to go into this problem here. Rather we will merely allow our observations and affirmations to point the issues which will come to a head in the Oresteia.
CHAPTER IV

THE PROMETHEUS

It is especially when we come to a play like the Prometheus that we begin to wonder about some of the remarks critics have made about Aeschylus.

For example Professor Haigh says:

In the case of Aeschylus, the length of his choral odes, and the simplicity of his plots, were distasteful to an age which had begun to regard the chorus as an excrescence, and which was accustomed to the more complex interests of the later drama.¹

The implication seems to be that he merely lyricized a number of dramatic sagas, with grandeur indeed and picturesqueness, but with little creative power. Yet, all critics must agree that the Prometheus is a masterpiece of dramatic art. Norwood says of it that it "has impressed all generations of readers with wonder and delight."² But we can find no reason for it if we try to criticize the play according to the Aristotelian concept. As H. W. Smyth says:

Aeschylus, discerning in the myth a tragic significance, raised the question of the Divine justice and the Divine government of the world. But, for all its depth, his play is one of the simplest of all dramas; indeed in certain aspects of its simplicity it is absolutely unique. The action proper is confined to a single spot. The hero is immobile; chained to his rock, he is more awe-inspiring than an unfettered sufferer. There is so

¹ Haigh, p. 123.
² Norwood, p. 95.
little play of circumstance from beginning to end that the movement is of the slowest. There is no subtle complication of plot, no metabasis, no reversal of fortune. There is only one character and that is subject to no development. 3

Surely this censure of simplicity does not ring true when in the same paragraph we must speak of depth and simplicity; and when no less competent a critic as Paul Elmer More says of the problem presented in the Prometheus that "the wit of man through thousands of years" has not "found the solution of this mystery." 4 Is not, then, Father Hetherington nearer the solution when he says:

The misconception arises not so much from a mistaken notion of simplicity as from a failure to perceive just what the plot is in Aeschylean tragedy. If, for example, we say that the plot of the Prometheus is simple when judged by Aristotelian standards, the answer is that it lies outside of the Poetics. 5 What Aristotle perhaps did not see is that the plot is more than the story for Aeschylus. His genius is concerned with something more vital than the characters and incidents. He is reenvisioning the legend, charging it with a new life, using it to gain "an insight into the riddle of high interference with human happiness." 6

In some of Aeschylus' plays this may not be clear at first glance, but in the Prometheus it is apparent enough. Even Norwood says that "this play

5 Cf. Poetics, 1456a, 33ff. The text is uncertain but this much may be gathered—Aristotle does not know what to do with purely preternatural tragedies.
is the noblest surviving example of the purely Aeschylean manner, and that here the stark hauteur of the Supplices has developed into a desolate magnificence.\textsuperscript{7} Besides, I think a brief look at the play itself brings us to the same conclusion. Although in the prologue, we find three actors, for the rest of the play our whole interest is centered on the hero and his fate; everything else is subordinated to him, and all the secondary characters act as a foil to bring the central figure into massive relief. In the prologue Prometheus is chained by Hephaestus, and from this point until the arrival of Hermes the situation remains unchanged. Characters appear but nothing really happens until Hermes orders Prometheus to reveal his secret and Prometheus is thrust down to Tartarus for his disobedience. As Kitto says:

\begin{quote}
Aeschylus was committed here to the task of turning a long series of events into drama almost without the help of action...Aeschylus in fact dramatizes the emotions and not the events.\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}

After the prologue is over, the play begins; and we find that throughout it is a play of one static situation whose whole movement is an inner one, beginning with the almost interstellar silence of this remote spot and ending with the thunder of splitting mountains. It is built on a series of impacts --the chorus, Oceanus, Io, Hermes, upon Prometheus--but impacts that produce

\begin{footnotes}
\item[7] Norwood, p. 95.
\item[8] Kitto, p. 56.
\end{footnotes}
light and heat rather than movement. Prometheus is shown in a series of carefully arranged relations: first alone, then with the chorus of Oceanids, then with Oceanus, then with Io. Yet we cannot say that here we have an example of Aristotle's law of inevitable or probable sequence, nor can we say that this involves Aristotle's censure of plays in which scenes could be transposed without making any difference. There is a law, but it is one of increasing tension, not of natural or logical sequence. Oceanus and Io are not there to assist in the presentation of a logical series of events, for as we have seen, Aeschylus is dramatizing a state and not events; they appear simply to develop the inner drama, Prometheus' defiance of Zeus. Such is Aeschylus' way of dealing with the myth. The solitary hero is everything, and not what he does, but what he feels and is. Prometheus' narratives, though they may give the illusion of action, were not designed for this. It is a drama of revelation, not action; of increasing tension in a situation which does not move.

As a consequence of this we find no clash of characters nor, what is more can we discern the heart of Aristotle's doctrine--the hamartia of the main character. It is wrong to even attempt to make of the Prometheus a tragedy of character when it is so obviously a tragedy of situation. Yet Prometheus has often been given a hamartia by authors who have not fully

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9 Poetics, 1451a, 12-13.
comprehended Aristotle's meaning of the term. Prometheus may be accused of stubbornness and self-will, but this is not the same thing. Aristotelian hamartia is not any shortcoming which may be found in a suffering hero. Prometheus' stubbornness increases his suffering but is not the cause of it. The cause of it is that he pitied the human race and saved it from Zeus, which may have been a mistake, but cannot be called a hamartia.

This is as far as we can go with our analysis because here again we do not have the rest of the trilogy, but as far as our conclusions about this play are concerned, it does not matter. We have given enough to show conclusively that here, in a play which some critics even place later than the Oresteia, there is no trace of Aristotle's formula. In fact we could not be farther from it.
CHAPTER V

THE AGAMEMNON

We now come to a group of plays which must serve as the very touchstone of our comparison. Here if anywhere we have sufficient material to work upon, material which gives us an example of Aeschylus' dramatic art in its entirety and at its best. In the other plays we were judging Aeschylus from plays that were but surviving parts of trilogies, and consequently we found difficulties in understanding and judging him on such fragmentary bits. However, here we have an example of a complete trilogy. And what is more, here we have Aeschylus at the maturity of his genius. The Oresteia is beyond compare the greatest work of Aeschylus, and critics have even gone so far as to admit that the "Agamemnon has generally been regarded as the greatest of all Greek Tragedies."¹

This brings us to a point which is worthy of note. These three plays must be judged as a unit. They were written as a unit and as a unit they must stand or fall. To judge them otherwise is to do an injustice to Aeschylus. His dramatic vision is that which extends through the entire trilogy. The medium which he chose is the reflection of this vision, and to attempt to understand and interpret this vision by but part of it is to run

¹ Haigh, p. 116.
the danger of misunderstanding and misinterpreting it, of not judging the parts in their relation to the whole. It seems just as illogical as to attempt to understand the first act of a play of Shakespeare in detachment from the rest of the play.

Thus, it seems, the final and conclusive test of our comparison will be the answer to this question: does the species of tragedy which we find in this trilogy of Aeschylus coincide with the type of tragedy which Aristotle has outlined in his Poetics? To say that one play seems to be an example of it while the others are not is to beg the question. That is to judge one play of a trilogy, and not to judge Aeschylus's concept of tragedy, which he chose to portray in the medium of the trilogy. Yet one might say that Aristotle does not consider the trilogy. That is very true, and, what is more does it not seem to indicate that maybe Aristotle was not considering Aeschylus?

It is true that critics have done justice to the Oresteia and awarded it the title of excellence which it deserves, yet if we examine what they say, it seems as if their praise does not ring true. Either they confine themselves chiefly to the Agamemnon or find themselves making statements that they cannot substantiate. Father Hetherington notes this and draws the obvious conclusion.

It seems at times as if the critics were not really convinced of the justice of their praise...Something clearly is wrong; either the Oresteia as a trilogy
is not great dramatic poetry, or our criticism has not been very penetrating and we have merely been saying what we feel we ought to say. The second alternative alone seems possible: we are surely right in calling the Oresteia great but we are very uncertain about the reasons for its greatness.  

The reason he gives why in judging the Oresteia our critical acumen is at its best but our critical reasoning is extremely bad is that "somehow or other we have to revise our theories of literary criticism when we approach Aeschylus." He says the source of this uncertainty is not far to seek. Our ideas of drama have developed from the notions of the Poetics.  

We find, for example, Professor Murray saying:  

The Agamemnon is not, like Aeschylus' Suppliant Women, a statue half-hewn out of rock. It is a real play, showing clash of character and situation, suspense and movement, psychological depth and subtlety. Yet it still remains something more than a play.  

That is saying that here we have real Aristotelian tragedy which is not really Aristotelian tragedy but something else. And we can be sure that is what he is saying when he goes on to state:  

Its atmosphere is not quite of this world. In the long lyrics especially one feels that the guiding emotion is not the entertainer's wish to thrill an audience, not even perhaps the artist's wish to create beauty, but something deeper and more prophetic, a passionate contemplation and expression  

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2 Hetherington, p. 205.  
3 Ibid., p. 206.  
4 Ibid., p. 205.  
of truth; though of course the truth in question is something felt rather than stated, something that pervades life, an eternal and majestic rhythm like the movement of the stars.

Thus, if Longinus is right in defining Sublimity as "the ring, or resonance, of greatness of soul", one sees in part where the sublimity of the Agamemnon comes from. And it is not worth noting that the faults which some critics have found in the play are in harmony with this conclusion. For the sublimity that is rooted in religion tolerates some faults and utterly refuses to tolerate others. The Agamemnon may be slow in getting to work; it may be stiff with antique conventions. It never approaches to being cheap or insincere or shallow or sentimental or showy. It never ceases to be genuinely a "criticism of life". The theme which it treats, for instance, is a great theme in its own right; it is not a made-up story ingeniously handled.

Maybe Father Hetherington had Murray in mind when he remarked that "critics were not really convinced of the justice of their praise." Here Murray is merely using words to avoid saying what he should say, what Father Hetherington has said above. At least he has recourse to the theme of the whole trilogy, and does not pretend that Aeschylus' purpose was solely to fix our attention on the action of the plot or the characters of this one play without any regard for the other two plays. This, likewise, will be our approach in disentangling ourselves from the problems we will encounter in approaching the plays in the traditional Aristotelian manner. It seems the only logical manner for it is going back to the final cause from which it seems we should start. It is but asking ourselves the logical question: what was Aeschylus trying to do or better still what has Aeschylus done?
Professor Norwood is another good example of Father Hetherington's complaint. He admires the *Agamemnon* but his praise is directed mostly to the lyrics and characters. Goodell likewise speaks of the *Agamemnon* as "a play extraordinarily rich in dramatic material of every kind,"\(^6\) but if we look for further explanation we find that he is concerned only with characters and not in explaining the richness of the dramatic material. The only ones who seem to make any headway in understanding the trilogy as a whole are those who do not try to see in it an example of Aristotle's theory, as for example Professors Smyth, Kitto, Owens and Father Hetherington. However, be this as it may, our problem is to test this conclusion by a consideration of the plays. Let us then consider them in order.

At the very outset of the *Agamemnon* we notice something new. The watchman who opens the play is made to live and striking us as being a real character, yet he is only incidental to the play. This is a far cry from the severity of the *Suppliants* and the *Prometheus* and leads us to suspect that tragedy had entered a new stage. Sophocles had introduced his third actor perhaps ten years before, and here Aeschylus uses him "not incidentally, as he did in the *Prometheus*, but with full acceptance of his implications."\(^7\)

But does the fact that tragedy has entered upon a new stage mean that it has


\(^7\) Kitto, p. 65.
become Sophoclean in its concern with characters? Norwood assures us that it does not allow us to go so far when he observes that:

The characterization shows a marked advance on the Prometheus in variety and colour. This is not so much because three actors are needed as against two in the earlier plays; for though they are necessary, comparatively little use is made of the increased facilities.  

Father Hetherington maintains that:

Aeschylus not only does not use the third character introduced by Sophocles in any way that suggests conflict, but does not even use his second character except for variety.  

Thus Aeschylean tragedy has not changed essentially. It is true that the third character is Sophoclean, but there were also three in the Prometheus. In accepting Sophocles' gift Aeschylus did not write Sophoclean tragedy, but used the third actor in his own way for his own purposes. Kitto explains the watchman thus:

Structurally he is unnecessary. It was possible for Aeschylus to leave the announcement of the beacon-signal to the chorus or to Clytemnestra; ten years earlier he would have done so, but now the third actor is at hand, waiting to be used, and concessions must be made to naturalism.  

Likewise the herald is not used for the sake of plot or characterization, but as Norwood tells us is used to contribute to the atmosphere. Even Cassandra

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8 Norwood, p. 103.
9 Hetherington, Appendix E, p. xx.
10 Kitto, pp. 68-69.
brings no complication. As Father Hetherington points out:

Cassandra's character scarcely adds another personality, or to be more exact, the clash of another will to the situation. Her prophecy is essentially choral. She does not enter into the plot. While we could not wish to lose her out of the play, yet the essentials of her reflections could be sung by a chorus, not so effectively, it is true, but with just as much bearing on the main action.\(^\text{11}\)

Yet what of the other two main characters? First let us notice that if we are to find here an example of the Aristotelian formula of a great man falling from prosperity to adversity through error, we must find it in either Agamemnon or Clytemnestra. If we are to find any theme in this play which would form the background of such a plot, it would have to be the downfall of Agamemnon. Yet, it is abundantly evident that Aeschylus positively does not wish to excite any interest in him. He does not enter until the drama is half over and his active part in the play is brief, less than a hundred lines in all. For Aeschylus he is a man built for ruin from the start. The curse of the House of Atreus has him firmly in its grasp from the beginning. It is the same tragic idea that we have seen in the other plays. The poet's intent is not centered in the hero's falling from prosperity to adversity. He merely pictures the fact while intent on something else.

Kitto explains this new aspect of the poet's manner and accounts for the prominence of Clytemnestra thus:

What is new is that the instrument of doom is presented as fully as the hero. Had Agamemnon returned from Troy into Old Tragedy, he would have found Clytemnestra waiting for him behind the scenes; as it is we see why she does this thing, and, in order that the murder may appear as a cosmic and not as a merely domestic incident, we must see that she is big enough to do it; a sinner as catastrophic as Agamemnon, not merely a false wife who takes to the sword. It is significant that Aeschylus reverses this order. We are not told why she does it until the murder is accomplished; Aeschylus is not proposing to make a character-study of Clytemnestra any more than of Agamemnon...He is the sinner who meets his doom; she is the sinner who continues the chain of evil; the characterization of each and the relations between them are limited to what this conception requires.12

Thus, as in the other plays, we cannot find the relationship of character to plot which Aristotle demands. Here, also, it is the situation which is predominant and our interest in character is limited to what the situation demands. Nor can we hope to find any tragic hero who is the basis of the whole trilogy, for "the chain that links the three parts is not a continuity of character or events but rather the continuity, as we shall see, of theme or religious and moral ideas."13

Let us leave the characters in this play and proceed with the play itself. However, having failed to find the heart of Aristotle's theory, the tragic hero

12 Kitto, pp. 66-67.
13 Smyth, p. 152.
we cannot have much hope of finding much that will resemble Aristotle's for-
mula, of which plot and character are the main elements.

Judged by the dramatic principles of Aristotelian tragedy, the Agamemnon
moves very sluggishly, and very little of it is interesting or even artis-
tically intelligible. The first half of it is clogged with long choral odes
that occupy most of the space, and, so far as they deal with the aspects of
the story, present them in what seems an entirely undramatic way. Surely this
is not the chorus that Aristotle would have nor is it performing its proper
function. Their obvious role is to fill pauses in the action with music and
reflection, to divide the play into acts, to serve in short as a glorified
curtain as they do in Sophocles. A glance at the Agamemnon shows that this
explanation will not suffice. The odes are too long, and too crowded together
to be thus accepted. If we think of them as such, the action becomes absurd.
Of the first eight hundred lines nearly six hundred are sung by the chorus,
that is—according to this interpretation—the curtain is down most of the
time and the audience waiting; and thereafter it falls but once. Truly Owen
was right in saying:

the Supplices is for us the key to Aeschylean drama.
The plot of the Oresteia, the last of his works,
follows the same general lines, though with a much
more complex structure and far profounder impli-
cations. For one thing, the poet has developed

enormously the power of handling the actor scenes, but that should not mislead us into thinking that the centre of his art has shifted from orchestra to stage...

Kitto likewise points out that there is no diminution in the part played by the chorus in the *Agamemnon*. It is the new dramatic technique combined with the old chorus. The actors have a new and a greater stature in this play, but only in this play, yet they are made to move easily and harmoniously within the old framework. They have an active role but it is not the role assigned by Aristotle.

The chorus, Aristotle said, should be a co-actor...as in Sophocles, not as in Euripides; he might have added 'nor as in the *Agamemnon*'. The Chorus is a co-actor in Sophocles because, since we begin with an apparently innocent and a 'happy' man, and since the whole play is a transit from this to guilty unhappiness, and since at the beginning nobody but the audience knows that there is to be an unhappy ending, the chorus must reflect and participate in this growing action. It cannot surround it with an atmosphere of gloom and guilt, because it does not know that such is the atmosphere. The tragic feeling of the whole is concentrated in the character and action of the hero, and the chorus must in some way follow this action. The Aeschylean Chorus is in a totally different position. It is not limited to the growing action; there is no growing action that matters; and the chorus can see that a disastrous issue is likely. It is quite independent of the hero; it can at any moment talk of calamity and it takes its own line. *Agamemnon* is not a tragically divided mind, but a declination from justice, and the Chorus holds before us that idea of Justice...Thus, instead of following,

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16 Kitto, p. 69.
17 Ibid, p. 73.
though augmenting, the action, the chorus comprehends it and brings out its moral significance—that significance which Sophocles expresses in the silent eloquence of his action.  

Obviously whatever explanation we give for the chorus and the long odes, we must alter our notions of what the odes are for. Here is a drama in which choral singing is expected to engage our full attention, in which episode and odes are meant to contribute progressively to the growth of the dramatic effect. It is not Aristotelian, but as Owen says:

The Agamemnon, just as it is, is effective enough to deserve something more of us than what we should judge it artistically as a magnificent drama which had not quite found its proper form, than that we should try to squeeze it into a mold in which it does not fit.

It seems more logical that we start with the assumption that Aeschylus really knew his business and therefore be ready to acknowledge that in the Agamemnon his work runs counter to our conceptions of how a drama should be constructed, it may not be because he did not understand the principles of his art but because he did and we do not. Then, if we find that the drama makes but little progress until it is half over, we should rather, it seems, conclude thus with Professor Owen:

I submit that no artist habitually begins his artistry in the middle of his piece. These plays, whatever

18 Ibid., p. 108.
else they were written for, were written to entertain, or at least to hold the attention of an audience, and therefore it is obvious that they must have had a different sort of interest from that which the critics quoted look for in them, an interest that was engaged and satisfied by whatever it is that is going on before the 'real action' begins; in other words, the 'real action' is not the artistic action of the play, but only part of it. 21

What are we to make of the action of the second part of the Agamemnon? Evidently it must fit in with what has gone before. Owen claims that "the human incidents are shown as parts of a drama that is revealed, and in a sense created by the activity of the chorus." 22 Here in the Agamemnon the choral odes have lifted the action to the plane of the universal, and to the loftier theme of the ways of God to man. Of the magnificent crimson-carpet scene Kitto says:

It is the perfect consummation of the lyrical 'atmospheric' presentation of events past. The scene is new in the old way. It is not new and exciting action, nor new and exciting dialectic, for we are above and beyond both, but it is action and dialectic made lyric. 23

Owen interprets it in like manner, but more fully:

And with the inward eye held to that stupendous spectacle, there is flashed upon the outward eye an actual scene, and this scene a projection upon

22 Ibid., p. 443.
23 Kitto, p. 74.
the material stage of the great spiritual drama
which has been unrolling before the mental vision.
A splendid pageant, crowding into the or-
chestra, draws the eye of the spectator. Every-
thing is done to emphasize the passing from hear-
ing to seeing...

The leit-motif is here, not in sound but in
sight. The scene itself is the symbol. The spec-
tacle is the Ate theme. Its presence marks that
the word has achieved its complete incarnation,
places the human story within that greater action
which is being played out beyond the eyes of the
spectators, and which the chorus have been pain-
fully and with growing apprehension evoking and
revealing. Thus, far from "the conflict of human
wills sinking and dwindling to the scale of a
puppet-show", as Cornford said, the human drama
emerges, raised and magnified to the scale of that
symbolic drama. It is the invisible scene that
becomes visible. The curtain that the choral odes
have been lifting is up for good, and we are now
able to see this transient spectacle of suffering
mortals in its full setting and with its larger
implications revealed.24

This is something much different from Aristotle. Here is no transit of
a mere man from prosperity to unhappiness; rather we are confronted with a
much nobler and loftier theme, and now that we can see it, is itself to move
forward and develop, and its progress constitutes the drama of the Oresteia.
The first development of the subject ends in a harsh and violent discord
which will be resolved finally in the Eumenides. Here is no tragedy of pity
or fear. Aeschylus is concerned with something more than the characters and

24 Owen, The Agamemnon, pp. 151-152.
incidents. He is reinvisioning the meaning of the legend, charging it with new life, using it to gain "an insight into the riddle of high interference with human happiness."25 Furthermore, if we view this play, not as an isolated unit, but as the first part of a magnificent trilogy, then our perspective and interpretation of the parts of this play change, as Owen points out:

Regarded as a single piece, it may well be judged chorally, reflectively, overweighted and in various forms the complaint has been made that the event is hardly big enough to fill the stage prepared in the great odes that lead up to it. But this 'vast enigmatic prologue', as Verrall calls the first half of the play, is proportioned to the whole trilogy. It puts before us the immense scene required for the action the poet designs, lifts our eyes to horizons wide enough to contain it, and the drama of Agamemnon's death is, in that reference, as the first episode in the mighty drama set forth in the Oresteia, the subject of which is nothing less than the cosmic adjustments which the poet has represented as signified by this series of events.26

If this interpretation is correct and can be substantiated by a further analysis of the trilogy, then, it seems, we will have a strong case for our contention that the drama of Aeschylus is a different species from that outlined in the Poetics. The theory of Aristotle cannot, as we shall see, be applied to this trilogy as a whole. And if we make good our claim that the

greatness of the *Agamemnon* can only be justified when it is considered as part of the Orestian trilogy, then not only shall we have accomplished something that traditional criticism has not been able to do, but also shall have given positive proof that there is but little relation between the dramatic vision of Aeschylus and Aristotle's theory.
CHAPTER VI
THE CHOEPHORI

If we have found that the first play of this trilogy is anything but Aristotelian and only makes sense when we consider it as portraying a different species of tragedy, then we might suspect that such will be the case in the remaining plays of the trilogy. Likewise if we found that we cannot gain a correct perspective of the structure of the Agamemnon, unless we view it in relation to the whole trilogy, so we may also suspect that we will have to do the same with the Choephor as with the Agamemnon. Yet, let us make our conclusions from the play itself, and see if we can find any trace of Aristotle's theory here.

One interesting thing which is thrust upon our attention after a study of the Choephor is the fact that here we have a different technique than the Agamemnon, and later we will find the Eumenides different from the first two plays of the trilogy. Aeschylus indeed is the critic's despair because he never writes two plays alike even here in the Oresteia, where we should expect it. This is the reason why he is a difficult dramatist to criticize. There is hardly any feature of his plays that we can point to and call Aeschylean. He does not work steadily in one vein as does Sophocles. Rather, we find that he will do anything that his dramatic conceptions demand. Thus,
it seems, that far from trying to fit the plays of Aeschylus into any set mold, we must realize that each play and each dramatic conception is different, and consequently requires a different mold. In other words Aeschylus' dramatic conceptions formed the molds and the mold did not form the dramatic conception of the plays.

"The Choephori," says Norwood, "is less popular with modern readers than either of its companions."¹ This he attributes in part to the fact that the text of the lyrics is often corrupt. But adds:

It is still more due to no accident, but to technique. The second play of a trilogy was usually more statuesque than the other two. There is, of course, a progress of events, not merely a Phrynichean treatment of a static theme; but the poet carefully retards his speed. Thus the Choephori should be compared rather with the Prometheus than with the Agamemnon. We then observe an improvement—if we wish to call it so—in construction. The great Commos keeps the play almost at a standstill; but the rest of the work is full of dramatic vigor.²

Haigh speaks of it in similar terms. He says:

The latter part of the play, in which the deed is accomplished, displays more ingenuity of contrivance in the management of the incidents than is usual in Aeschylus: and the deception practised by the nurse upon Aegisthus is the earliest example of anything resembling a modern plot. But the first half is almost devoid of action, and consists mainly of the

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¹ Norwood, p. 108.
² Ibid., p. 108.
long 'commus', in which Orestes, Electra, and the chorus stand round the tomb of Agamemnon, appealing to him for aid, and recalling his mournful destiny.

Likewise Sidgwick says:

The Choephori is a short play, being less than two thirds the length of the Agamemnon; and the obvious criticism which occurs to all readers is that, in spite of its shortness, there is too little incident at first: the real action, the execution of the vengeance, does not begin till the play is more than half over. The whole poem contains only 1076 lines; and it is not till line 560 that Orestes unfolds to his sister the plot on which the drama chiefly turns. Nor is the play relieved by much dramatic variety.

Here are the same complaints that we had to contend with in the Agamemnon. Surely, that a dramatist such as Aeschylus should so construct his play, if he were interested only in the story and characters, is hard to see. Especially is this the case when, as we shall see, he is capable of handling both so masterfully when occasion demands. The logical conclusion is that to which Norwood is forced; namely,

That such immense force should be manifested only at the end of the play, that until and during the crisis Aeschylus exerts only sufficient dramatic energy to present his situation intelligibly, is the most significant fact in the Choephori. This is deliberate in an artist who composed the Agamemnon and the Eumenides.

It is significant for us because it shows us that Aeschylus' purpose here

3 Haigh, pp. 17-18.
4 Aeschylus, Choephori, ed. by A. Sidgwick, Oxford, Clarendon, 1884, p. xiii.
5 Norwood, p. 109.
was not to write Aristotelian tragedy. This is clear if he has centered the drama around this long, undramatic kommos. Whatever is the key to this lyric scene must be the key to the play.

Moreover, if in regard to plot, which Aristotle calls the "first principle and soul of tragedy," we must agree with Norwood that Aeschylus has given us "almost as little as we could expect," then we cannot hope to find much in regard to characterization which is so closely connected to plot. That Aeschylus was not trying to write a play of character or has not even chosen to make of the situation a picture of conflict in the mind of the hero is clear from what Smyth says; namely,

No modern dramatist would fail to picture a struggle in the soul of Orestes, as in the soul of Electra, before they resolve upon so repellent a deed as matricide; and no modern dramatist would let slip the moving opportunity to portray at large the tumult of the son when, with bared breast, his mother implores his mercy. But Aeschylus makes short work of the scene. Dealing primarily with the catastrophe, Aeschylus presents the hero with purpose unalteringly fixed at the outset. In the opening scene Orestes appears before us resolved to avenge his father; nor was Clytemnestra's purpose to take vengeance on Iphigeneia's father formed any the less in advance. At the very center of interest lies, to Aeschylus, not the struggle in Orestes' soul but the impulsions to his resolve and the manner of its accomplishment; in fact, had the poet not reverted to the older style

6 Poetics. 1450a, 37.
7 Norwood, p. 108.
of entitling his plays after the chorus, the Libation-Bearers might well have borne the name of its proper hero. 8

This fact is repeated by Norwood when he says:

In the opening stage it is human sin and courage which provide the rising interest; in the third the righteousness and wisdom of the Most High unloose the knot and save mankind; at both periods personality is the basis of action. But in the middle stage the master is not personality, but the impersonal Fury demanding blood in vengeance for blood, a law of life and of the universe, named by a name but possessing no attributes. This law may be called by a feminine title Erinys; it is called also by a phrase: 'Do and Suffer'; it is the shade of Agamemnon thirsting—is it for blood as a bodily drink or for death as expiation?—and sending the dark progeny of his soul up from Hades. This fact, then, and no person, it is which dominates the play, and that is why the persons concerned are for the time no magnificent figures of will or valour or wisdom, but the panting driven thralls of something unseen which directs their movements and decides their immediate destiny. 9

Thus, by following Aristotle we are farther than ever from understanding what Aeschylus is about. We are forced to admit defeat in finding any essential resemblance, and must retrace our steps to the Agamemnon or better still to the Eumenides, as did Norwood above, to get our directions straight.

For Owen the solution lies in considering this play in its proper relation to the other members of the trilogy and to the subject and purpose of the whole trilogy. Interpreting it thus he says:

8 Smyth, p. 194.
9 Norwood, p. 109.
Careless of our praise, unconscious, it would seem, of his own powers, Aeschylus sticks to his subject, and ignores our demands. He constructs this play round the great lyric scene which represents a formal rite of invocation whereby Orestes, Electra, and the chorus of libation-bearers seek to induce the spirit of Agamemnon and all the powers of heaven and hell to assist their work of righteous vengeance. For by so doing he can express his subject in terms of his story: he can keep on the required human plane, and yet draw our eyes beyond it. In such a rite Orestes and Electra naturally and necessarily meet and touch the spirit world where is the true scene of the action. This is the only way he can at this stage depict it; for the story must be told, and his business now is to show Orestes slaying his mother. But it is not the slaying in itself that is of chief dramatic moment; it is the stir and movement in the spirit world which this slaying signifies in its inception and in its results. And it is to this that the ceremonial about Agamemnon's tomb directs the attention...Thus this scene, which we are inclined to feel unduly delays the drama, is the centre of it, and the other scenes of the play have their point and bearing in the light of this one. All that precedes it is designed to set the stage for the ritual; the closing scenes show its results.10

Kitto likewise interprets the Kommos in much the same manner:

We might say what we said of the big ode of the Agamemnon, that this Kommos is action. It contains the spiritual action of the piece: the second part of the play presents the physical counterpart.11

This scene occupies nearly a fifth of the whole play (200 lines out of 1,076) and the remainder which, in the Aristotelian interpretation contains

10 Owen, The Oresteia, pp. 446-447.
11 Kitto, p. 80.
all the dramatic action is carried through with abrupt swiftness. Critics loyally do their best by thrusting into prominence the few scenes that reveal action, intrigue and suspense.

But these are for him quite incidental, and are introduced only when they subserve his main purpose. The problem is set, not to test the human souls of Orestes and Electra, to reveal their characters, but to probe and explore the soul of the universe. The dramatic interest lies in what the structural movement of the whole represents.12

However, this shows us that Aeschylus was quite capable of masterfully portraying characters once the need was there and could give us action that was naturalistic and charged with dramatic effect. And in fact, in this last half of the Choephori, it seems, that Aeschylus comes closer to Aristotelian drama than anything we have seen thus far.

Here we have the chorus ceasing to preside over the action which has become naturalistic and which has passed into the hands of the actors. Here we have examples of intrigue, suspense and surprise, and the extreme of realism in the portrayal of the Nurse. Especially notable is the scene between Orestes and his mother before she is taken in to die. This scene has been much praised for its dramatic power, and justly so. Speaking of it, Owen says:

Its very brevity and curtness add immensely to its effectiveness. But its purpose is to stress the

12 Owen, The Oresteia, p. 447.
dreadfulness of the deed, to rest it wholly on Orestes' obedience to the god's command, and to underline it as a perfect example of the Measure for Measure principle. Orestes sums up the point with admirable clarity in the words which close the scene: "You killed whom you should not, so suffer what you should not."13

This is not the end, however. Orestes is seized with terror and madness begins to assail him. He sees swarming towards him the avenging furies of his mother, and though the chorus assure him it is but his own disordered fancy, he rushes away in a frenzy of fear. The chorus close the play with a cry of doubt and despair. The poet's new and promising development of his subject has ended in a still harsher, more violent discord than the Agamemnon. For Orestes has rested his case upon Zeus; can Zeus himself be wrong? Thus this play carries on the subject of the Agamemnon and prepares the way for the final play of the trilogy, showing us more clearly the subject that is uppermost in Aeschylus' mind and where he wishes us to fix our attention—not on the human action, nor on the characters, but rather on the lofty theme, that runs through the whole Oresteia.

13 Ibid., p. 448.
CHAPTER VII

THE EUMENIDES

Now let us turn to the Eumenides, the final play of the trilogy, which will be the test of so much that we have been saying. We have been insisting that the Orestes must be conceived as one play in three parts rather than three separate plays, and we have also maintained that Aeschylus was not primarily concerned with the legend as such. Now we can consider the goal of the trilogy, as we suggested earlier should be done, and see if what we have been saying follows.

Right away we are faced with a problem which touches the heart of the difficulty. The Eumenides continues after the end of the story. The last quarter of the play is concerned, not with Orestes and his fate, but with Athens, a city which is only incidentally connected with the story, and we are evidently expected to feel that the trilogy reaches its natural consummation and satisfactory solution in the Erinyes taking up their abode in Athens and promising to bless and protect her forever. Croiset dismisses the scene gently, as "a flaw, though not a serious one, in the ensemble of the trilogy."¹ According to his view, Aeschylus has been forced to continue the play to satisfy a minor, incidental interest which was created in the

The departure of Orestes marks the end of that long chain of events which had their beginning in the Agamemnon. In so far as it is the dramatic development of a legend, the trilogy is finished; the acquittal of the son, the avenger of his father is its natural denouement. Smyth takes a via media and explains in what seems a novel, unfounded manner both this fact and also why Orestes' fate is not the important thing in the poet's mind in this play. He says:

The Agamemnon and the Libation-Bearers are each controlled by a singleness of dramatic purpose that rendered it necessary to set the fate of Orestes in the forefront of the final play. In the Eumenides, however, the stricter unity of dramatic progression is no longer maintained. The question for the poet was the installation of a significant action that should make the play contribute its third part to the winning of the prize, and at the same time enable him to attain his ultimate spiritual goal. To this end he shifted the axis of interest from Orestes to the Chorus, which became the true protagonist; with the result that the drama concludes with the attempt to pacify the Erinyes after their defeat before the court.

These positions do not, in our contention, explain either the Eumenides or the Oresteia. Yet, if we approach Aeschylus in the traditional Aristotelian manner, some such conclusion is forced upon us. Does it not seem more logical and fair to Aeschylus to find the solution elsewhere? Norwood

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2 Ibid., p. 258.
3 Smyth, p. 228.
comes very close to Owen's and Father Hetherington's position in explaining
the conclusion because he sees that Aeschylus is concerned with a problem
greater and more sublime than the mere dramatization of the legend of the
House of Atreus. His interpretation is as follows:

The close of the Eumenides is anything but an anti-
climax. It is closely knit to the body of the whole
trilogy, showing the manner in which the playwright
supposes the necessary reconciliation between Zeus
and the Furies to be made possible and acceptable.
The King of Heaven is mystically identified now and
forever with Fate. The joyful procession is the
sign not only that the moral government of the world
has been set at last upon a sure basis, but also that
this government is already in operation and sancti-
fying human institutions. 4

This is what Owen means when he says:

The story is not the poet's subject; his artistic
purpose goes beyond the dramatic development of the
legend; that is why his play does not end with the
story. 5

In each play we have pointed out that Aeschylus was not primarily concerned
with the legend, and here, it seems, is sufficient evidence to support our
contention. What Owen maintains is the subject of the Oresteia is as follows:

The subject of the Oresteia is the creation of a
new moral order; Aeschylus depicts the vast chain
of events which the death of Agamemnon started in
heaven and earth, how it and its results shook the

5 Owen, The Oresteia, p. 442.
universe to its foundations and altered the spiritual history of the world; he presents the legend as a turning-point in the destinies of mankind.\(^6\)

If this interpretation is true, which is most probable, than it is futile for us to look for any similarity between this play and Aristotle's formula. Here is tragedy, yet fundamentally different from that implied in the definition of Aristotle. Aeschylus was not trying to write a tragedy of pity and fear. As Owen says:

\[\ldots\text{Aeschylus was not led to his shaping of the Orestes story by the simple desire to bring out the fearful and pitiable possibilities of the theme. He found pity and fear along the route he was following and used them for all they were worth, but they were not his goal.}\]

Here the Chorus is as much the protagonist as in the \textit{Supplices} "and Orestes and his story drop out of sight as Olympians and Chthonians face one another in their final struggle for the soul of the world."\(^8\) The invisible world has become visible and what we see is the invisible world torn asunder. This is more than a human problem.

The story of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra and Orestes is the sign and cause of a vaster struggle, a vaster problem. The ends and purposes of the world are at stake. The acquittal of Orestes is the natural denoument of the trilogy; it but brings the issue it has raised to a head.\(^9\)

\[^6\text{Ibid., p. 443.}\]
\[^7\text{Owen,} \textit{Tragedy and the First Tragedian}, p. 409.\]
\[^8\text{Ibid., p. 506.}\]
\[^9\text{Owen,} \textit{The Oresteia}, p. 449.\]
When we view the trilogy as a whole, we can see the truth in Father Hetherington's statement that "there are no critical 'problems' in the Oresteia," nor should we attempt to create any. Yet we can see that it is impossible not to create them if we use Aristotle as our standard of criticism. Should we not agree that Father Hetherington is nearer the truth when he writes:

Here, (in the Oresteia) we do the poet little credit by merely pointing out the skill of his technical handling. One half of the Agamemnon is technically perfect; well and good. But it is poor praise indeed to bestow on the poetical masterpiece that is the trilogy. It is a great pity if our standards of criticism are so narrow that we feel we must apologize for the Kommos in the Choephoroi and the reconciliation scene in the Eumenides. Rather, I repeat, if we read them as they are written, we must feel that the power of the poetry is sweeping us along. We shall not think the Choephoroi tedious or the Eumenides unsatisfying.11

As for the rest of the Eumenides, there are a few observations that are interesting. Confirming our statement that it is difficult to pin Aeschylus down to any definite form, we notice that the Eumenides is a play entirely different in technique from anything that we have seen so far.

Instead of a steady tightening of a static situation, made more and more taut until it breaks, we have an exciting series of events and a more obviously dramatic treatment of them. No longer does the play move inevitably along a forseen path; the Eumenides leads us through a succession of dramatic surprises.12

10 Hetherington, An Aesthetic Study, Etc., p. 211.
11 Ibid., p. 209.
12 Kitto, p. 86.
Right at the beginning we have four scenes of the utmost dramatic effectiveness, and yet we are only at line 245. This is indeed different when we reflect that at this stage in the *Agamemnon* we were still listening to the first long ode. This might lead us to imagine that here at last we have action and conflict, yet, as we have seen, it is not action and conflict which is centered around Orestes or as seen through his eyes or mind. Rather than being a tragic hero, Orestes is but the occasion of the conflict which has arisen between certain moral powers of the universe. He can not be a tragic hero for we are assured right at the beginning that the outcome for him will be a happy one. Our interest is not focused on him but rather on this greater issue, and this interest is "a moral and intellectual interest rather than a tragic one."\(^{13}\)

The use of the Chorus too is different from anything we have thus far seen. It is different, but it is still not what Aristotle would require of them. Kitto describes their function in this play as follows:

> The whole secret of the speed and fluidity of this play is that the chorus, while remaining wonderfully lyrical, is entirely an actor, and a realistic one. In order to contend with his chorus, Pelasgus had to assume the bonds of lyricism; here, in order to contend with Apollo the chorus descends into the actor's sphere, arguing, fighting, pursuing, and bringing its lyrics with it. There are no statutory pauses in the action for the

\(^{13}\) Kitto, p. 89.
screwing-up or musical exploitation of a tragic theme; all is action, the Furies are always the Furies. If anyone looks like the usual chorus it is the jury.\(^\text{14}\)

But yet it must be noted that Aeschylus did not surrender entirely to this new-found realism. A trial scene is staged; but how should we consider it? Kitto remarks of it that "as a debate on the guilt or innocence of Orestes it is ridiculous; as a conflict between Apollo and the Furies about Orestes it is magnificent."\(^\text{15}\) Likewise Owen says:

The Oresteia is 'historical' drama, not a philosophical treatise. Aeschylus does not solve these problems, he represents them as solved. He is picturing what has happened in the past, how gods and men came to their present stature. He is presenting mysteries to dignify, uplift, and enlarge man's life, not attempting to explain them. And so, to weigh the arguments put forward in the trial scene as if they contained the poet's reasoned conclusions on these matters, is absurd...Aeschylus is no doubt stating his faith, but he is stating it as a vision; that is, he is putting it primarily before the eyes in concrete symbols, and he uses such symbols as the story he is using supplies or suggests to him. The acquittal of Orestes is one of these symbols, and how it was brought about is the mere picturesque elaboration of a detail.\(^\text{16}\)

The acquittal represents a harmony finally achieved and Owen says Aeschylus represents it "by contriving an artistic harmony"\(^\text{17}\) thus:

\begin{quote}
The scene of the tempting of Agamemnon is reproduced as Athena unweariedly pleads with the Erinyes to enter the proferred shrine. And again, with a blaze.
\end{quote}

\begin{flushleft}
\textit{\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 90.}\textit{\textsuperscript{15} Kitto, p. 91.}\textit{\textsuperscript{16} Owen, The Oresteia, p. 450.}\textit{\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 451.}\end{flushleft}
of color as they don their robes of crimson dye, the theme is translated into spectacle. Through eye and ear the imagination of the spectator apprehends and comprehends the conclusion of the whole matter, as the procession of the Eumenides and their conductors passes on its way, triumphant and rejoicing, chanting the oolugmos, the hymn of jubilee which marks the consummation of a successful rite--the oolugmos which Clytaemnestra and the Libation Bearers had sung in vain. The victory has been won: peace in heaven, and on earth--Athens.\textsuperscript{18}

Thus, we have seen that it is in the final play of the Orestian trilogy that the problems which traditional criticism have raised in the other two plays of the trilogy find their solution. And likewise, we have seen that all the critical problems, which have arisen from considering this play independently of the other two members of the trilogy, disappear when the Eumenides is studied in relation to the whole. This has been our contention and we have seen how strong the evidence is that for Aeschylus the trilogy was the medium of his dramatic vision and not the individual play.

We have studied each play of this trilogy separately and have not found any significant relationship between any of them and Aristotle's theory. This is conclusive evidence in itself, but it becomes all the more convincing when we consider the plays must be considered as parts of a larger unit and Aristotle's theory cannot be applied to so large a unit as the trilogy.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 451.
CHAPTER VIII
CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATION TO AESCHYLEAN CRITICISM

Now that we have seen five of the seven extant plays of Aeschylus, we can summarize our findings and see whether we have been justified in maintaining that the ideal tragedy of Aristotle is different from the dramatic conception of Aeschylus.

First, we have seen that Aeschylus is a difficult dramatist to criticize. Of the five plays that we have considered, no two have been alike, not even in the Oresteia. Yet "in all the variety of the Aeschylean drama, one thing remains constant...that each play is built upon a real dramatic thrill."¹ However, if we approach these plays directly or with the Aristotelian formula in our mind, we cannot but be disappointed by the results. Owen sums it up thus:

Appreciation of the drama (as we understand the word) in the work of Aeschylus takes us but a little way towards understanding what he is about. The point is not that his plays are undramatic, but we have to learn his dramatic language before we can hear his drama. And this means something more than becoming familiar with his theatrical conventions as such; it means adjusting our minds to a fundamentally different dramatic mode.²

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¹ Kitto, p. 96.
² Owen, Tragedy and the First Tragedian, p. 500.
We have outlined Aristotle's doctrine and compared it to five of the plays of Aeschylus, and in each case we have been forced to the above conclusion. In the Supplices and in the Prometheus, we found pure tragedies of situation; in the Choephoroi and Eumenides, intellectual drama; and in none of these plays could we discern the heart of Aristotle's ideal tragedy—the tragic hero. Aristotle's tragic hero, who must not be preeminently good nor an utter villain, but of average virtue, like to ourselves, who is overtaken by misfortune brought on, not by vice, but by some hamartia,3 "is the Sophoclean hero who in himself prefigures the human tragedy, all of it."4

For Aeschylus, the hero must only be a sinner with enough characterization to make him intelligible. He need not be like us, but yet he is far from being the utterly wicked person in whose downfall Aristotle refused to be interested. He is not pictured as passing from prosperity to misfortune, and there is no question of a hamartia.

In the Supplices, as well as in the Agamemnon, there is no character to be developed, for we see the hero from the beginning, complete; he is already doomed. There is no question of his being happy; he is a marked man. In the Prometheus, we likewise have a static situation, for here Aeschylus is dramatizing a state of mind and not events. As for Orestes, his transit is from

3 Poetics, 1453a, 9-10.
4 Owen, Tragedy and the First Tragedian, p. 510.
misfortune to happiness, and he is but the occasion for the action and interest which are centered on the gods themselves.

Failing a tragic hero in the Aristotelian sense, it follows that Aeschylean drama is essentially different in regard to the two main points; namely, plot, or more exactly action, and characterization. Character, as Aristotle says, is the cause from which actions spring, and if we lack the cause, the effect must also be lacking.

This lack of action is the main difficulty which traditional criticism has to contend with in interpreting Aeschylus, and the only solution we found involved a transfer of values. For Aristotle, the plot is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of tragedy, but for Aeschylus it is simply the occasion of a vaster problem or interest.

In the Suppliants, as we have said, the chorus and the divine plan are the important things; the plot is static and anything but dramatic in the Aristotelian senses. The Prometheus is a drama of revelation, not action, of increasing tension in a situation that does not move. The story of the House of Atreus, likewise, is anything but the subject or the main interest in the Oresteia.

5 Poetics, 1450a, 3-4.
6 Ibid., 1450a, 37-38.
Confirming this statement that the plot or actions are not the important thing for Aeschylus is the fact that, according to Aristotle's division, the plots of the plays we have considered are simple and not complex - that is, involving an action in which the change of fortune takes place with peripeteia or anagnorisis or with both. Aristotle's ideal tragedy is complex, in which this reversal of situation and recognition arise from the internal structure of the plot, whereas Aeschylus' plots must be branded as simple; either there is no reversal of situation or recognition, or if there is, it does not arise from the internal structure of the plot so that what follows is the necessary or probable result of the preceding action. In the Supplices and Prometheus we have neither, and the Oresteia, if there is any reversal, it is in the wrong direction. The only example of anagnorisis that we have is in the Choephoroi, and even there, this example is but an incident and not a situation upon which the issue depends.

Lastly and very pertinent to our comparison is the fact that Aeschylus was not trying to write plays of pity and fear, and consequently was not concerned in the purgation of these emotions. This fact introduces other interesting questions; namely, what was Aeschylus' conception of the 'tragic fact' (as Bradley calls it)? What is tragedy? Are Aeschylus' plays tragedies in our sense in substance and not in form, or did he aim at being 'tragic'

7 Ibid., 1451b, 12-18.
8 Ibid., 1451b, 18-20.
at all? These questions carry us beyond our purpose which is to compare the plays of Aeschylus with Aristotle's theory. We have not referred to Aeschylus' plays as tragedies, though to deny that they are would be as wrong as to deny that they are poetry. Surely Aristotle himself regarded them as such, but did he consider them tragedies of a different species from his of "pity and fear"? We cannot say, but only point to the evidence we have.

As far as these questions touch our comparison, besides what we have said in the introduction, we may point out a few pertinent facts. "The name tragedy has in itself no tragic implications and Aeschylus lived before the days of tragic theories...The thing was largely in his hands to make what he liked of it."9 Aristotle, whose authority we are safe in following in historical matters, tells us of what type of stories tragedy dealt with before Aeschylus:

At first the poets recounted any legend that came in their way. Now, the best tragedies are founded on the story of a few houses,—on the fortunes of Alcmæon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus, and those others who have done or suffered something terrible.10

Arguing from this evidence, Owen concludes:

The occasion, we may assume, to some extent limited the poets in their choice, but clearly they were not

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9 Owen, Tragedy and the First Tragedian, p. 498.
10 Poetics, 1453a, 17-22, πρωτον μὲν γάρ οἱ κοινταὶ τοὺς τυχόντας μόθους ἀπηρίθμουν, νῦν δὲ κερὶ ὅλιγας οἰκίας αἱ καλλισταὶ τραγῳδίαι συντιθένται, οίον κερὶ Ἀλκμέα...καὶ δοὺς ἄλλους συμβεβηκέν ἢ καθεῖν δεινὰ ἢ κοινταί.
restricted to subjects tragic in Aristotle's sense or our own. What the tragedians did, according to Aristotle, was to find, by slow experimentation, the most effective sort of story to present under dramatic conditions; their plays were all tragedies in virtue of their technical form, but in his view, those which moved an audience most deeply and directly were the ones that revealed the essential nature of the form; they showed what it could do best, and therefore, what it was meant to be. That is how Aristotle arrives at pity and fear as the essential tragic emotions -- not essential in the sense of necessary to the existence of the thing, but as bringing out most fully the emotional capacity of the form; they are, in short, the most dramatically effective emotions to arouse.\textsuperscript{11}

This interpretation seems to be the true one and is confirmed by Aristotle's own account of the evolution of tragedy; namely that:

\begin{quote}
Tragedy advanced by slow degrees; each new element that showed itself was in turn developed. Having passed through many changes, it found its natural form, and there it stopped.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Thus, it seems, we may safely conclude with Owen, on a historical basis:

\begin{quote}
The "tragic" was not in the mind of Aeschylus as a conscious aim imposed by the conditions of his art. He could choose his subjects pretty well to suit himself and, within the limits of the form, treat them how he liked; so that, if the result is Tragedy, it was something other than the name and what it stood for made it so.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Indeed, our analysis of the plays has shown us that we cannot say that Aeschylus was aiming mainly at arousing these emotions "but that he found pity

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] \textit{Poetics}, 1449a, 13-15.\textsuperscript{13}
\item[13] Owen, \textit{Tragedy and the First Tragedian}, p. 499.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{footnotes}
and fear along the route he was following and used them for all they were worth, but they were not his goal."¹⁴ This is not enough for Aristotle for he is outlining the ideal tragedy and maintains in connection with the arousing of these emotions and the unhappy ending that a tragedy to be perfect according to the rule of art should be of this construction.¹⁵

These are our reasons and our evidence for maintaining that there is no relation between the plays of Aeschylus and Aristotle's theory. Not that we are criticizing Aristotle -- far from it. Rather, our contention is that Aristotle was not considering Aeschylus and would be the first to admit it. This fact is in no way to minimize the importance of the Poetics, for time and literary criticism have ensured that importance. What Father Hetherington says of the Poetics is still true; namely:

There is perhaps no better way of coming to a deep understanding of tragic writers than to consider with Aristotle the difficulties which were to be met, and to enter with him into the very workshop of the poet.¹⁶

Yet "had he taken it upon himself to analyze every significant form of Attic tragedy we would have been spared a deal of trouble... Of the three or four distinct types of Greek Tragedy he might have used he rejects all but one."¹⁷

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¹⁴ Ibid., p. 499
¹⁵ Poetics, 1453a, 22-23.
¹⁷ Kitto, p. 114.
So far in this chapter we have considered what Aeschylus has not been trying to do, and have shown what, in our opinion, is the reason why so much of what has been written about the plays of Aeschylus is unsatisfactory and unworthy of so great a genius. The fault is that traditional criticism has attempted to interpret Aeschylus according to Aristotle's theory, which has no relation to Aeschylus' type of drama. Now let us see how far we can go in seeing what he was trying to do by looking at his works through the eyes of critics, who have accepted our conclusion that Aristotle cannot be used as a basis for interpreting Aeschylus, and who have attempted to interpret his works in some other manner. We will not consider the theories of men like Verrall or Pohlenz, whose views seem too radical to win general acceptance, but we will confine our attention to three men, Professors Owen and Kitto and Father Hetherington, who start from different basic approaches and come to many similar conclusions. These men, assuming that Aeschylus does not conform to Aristotle's theory, start with a common, fundamental principle of criticism which cannot but help us to appreciate Aeschylus more deeply and fully. And if our conclusions from this comparison are valid, the approaches of these men will at least put us on the right track and maybe furnish us with the key to the very heart of his plays.

The fundamental principle that these men use as an approach to Aeschylus may be summed up in the words of Father Hetherington:
We have, I believe, learned what might seem, at first sight, an obvious rule of criticism, which is in fact often forgotten. I mean that the play must be read and understood as it is in itself, as the poet intended it should be, as the Athenians 'heard' it at the tragic festival.18

This is an objective method and a safe one, and the results that it has yielded, where it has been used, are most stimulating, and satisfactory, and encouraging because they confirm and explain the greatness of Aeschylus.

Father Hetherington has given us an aesthetical study of Aeschylus. In an excellent, original exposition of aesthetics in scholastic terminology, he explains the inspiration of a great poet as "intuitus sapientiae"19 -- that is, a fusion of romantic intuition and classical love of wisdom.20 This vision of wisdom is what is communicated, and the universal acceptance of great poetry agrees unmistakably to a communication of the poet's vision.21 In accordance with these tenets, Father Hetherington enumerates the rules which must be followed, and which he follows in justifying Aeschylus' claim to the realization of this fusion of vision and wisdom. He says:

Primary criticism of a poem consists of two judgments.
First: we allow the poem, on an uncritical first hearing to work its will on us; and we then decide

19 Hetherington, Ibid., p. 71. "Sapientia," he explains, "is to be thought an intellectual habitus of which the 'intuitus' is the actuation. Beauty, the object of such insight, is defined as 'pax formae'."
20 Ibid., p. 75.
21 Ibid., p. 73.
whether its effect is such as would proceed from an intuitional vision. Second, we judge the content of our experience in the light of wisdom... The literary critic is in the same position as a theologian who, having felt the unction and fervor of a spiritual treatise, decides it is the sort of thing a true mystic might write, and then proceeds to a study of the work in the light of dogmatic truth... Great poetry, which alone we are considering is not limited from without by rules and precepts; neither is it a free effusion of lyricism; but it is limited by the wisdom of the poet, and is bright with the joy of immediate insight.22

Following out this method, Father Hetherington confirms and explains what so many critics would like to have done; namely, the grandeur of Aeschylus.

He begins with the supposition that "a study of the poetry of his plays will yield their full meaning,"23 and certainly his results make good his claim. His conclusion is, as he remarks, almost identical with that of Owen's and may be expressed thus in Owen's words which we quoted above.

Appreciation of the drama (as we understand the word) in the work of Aeschylus takes us but a little way towards understanding what he is about. The point is not that his plays are undramatic, but that we have to learn his dramatic language before we can hear his drama. And this means something more than becoming familiar with his theatrical conventions as such; it means adjusting our minds to a fundamentally different dramatic mode.24

Both agree that the poet's language is the important thing, but by 'dramatic language' Father Hetherington means 'poetic expression,' and his conclusions

22 Ibid., p. 73.
23 Ibid., p. 51.
24 Owen, Tragedy and the First Tragedian, p. 500.
are based on the aesthetical unity of the plays. Owen's theory of interpretation, however, is based on the belief that the function of the choral recitals was and remained a religious ritual, and thus proceeds from historical fact. Yet, as Father Hetherington remarks concerning the Oresteia, both theories have much in common, and, in fact, a study of the trilogy according to the method he has suggested leads one to adopt Owen's view of Aeschylean tragedy.25

As for Owen's view, we cannot do better than let him explain it in his own words:

Two things, as it seems to me, were chiefly instrumental in determining the general shape of his (Aeschylus') tragic plot -- viz., the function of the form with which he was dealing, and his individual interpretation of the significance of that function. The upshot is that he tackles the primary problem of man's place in the universe.26

The story was not the thing in Aeschylean Tragedy; the form into which it was cast furnished the essentials of the plot. This form was in origin a religious ritual performed by a choir with a religious purpose. That is, the technique was, at bottom, a functional technique; it was a way of getting into touch with spiritual powers, and its object was to effect by ritual the welfare of the community. This original purpose has determined the shape in which Aeschylus presented his stories. The Athenian choir had its place as a choir within the story, and exercised

26 Owen, Tragedy and the First Tragedian, pp. 499-500.
therein its ritual functions, the effect of which comprised...the chief dramatic interest. 27

The incidents that occur are not the action, they are the occasion for it; that is, they do little more than punctuate the ceremony with the events that mark its progress towards the consummation of its purpose and direct the special character of the Chorus's successive efforts. Because the Chorus, in virtue of its sacred office, forms a link between earth and heaven, we see in what happens as a result of their rite the purpose of heaven being wrought out through the given human circumstances. For that is how Aeschylus had dramatized the rite. His Choruses sing their hymns with a view to the immediate dramatic situation, and because of their limited knowledge and narrow vision, may win an apparent success or may inadvertently help to bring to pass unforeseen and undesired results, but the poet takes advantage of the spectator's knowledge of the outcome to make him feel another greater purpose running through and guiding their utterances to foreshadow and fashion the far-off divine event which, when it comes, reveals the whole as a designed harmony. The object of the original ceremony being to win the aid and favour of heaven for the welfare of the community, Aeschylus has made Tragedy the dramatic spectacle of the ultimate establishment of man's welfare out of the evils that surround him; he shows the slow shaping of many sorrowful and terrible events to a prosperous and beneficent issue. 28

This is but a sketchy account of his theory, but I think it gives us enough to grasp the main outline. It is most interesting and explains all that hitherto has not been explained in Aeschylus's plays. This is what

28 Ibid., pp. 505-506.
makes it so attractive, and because it is founded on historical fact, it also
appears very plausible. Whether it is the correct or even the complete ex-
planation will, it seems, always remain an unsolved question. Our knowledge
of the facts is too meagre. Yet, it cannot be denied that Professor Owen
has made a major contribution to a confusion-riddled field — Aeschylean
criticism.

Professor Kitto's approach is different from the two former, but it is
equally basic and legitimate. He outlines his method in the preface of his
book, and a few excerpts will make it clear:

Criticism is of two kinds: the critic may tell the
reader what he so beautifully thinks about it all,
or he may try to explain the form in which the
literature is written. This book attempts the
latter task.29

I make one basic assumption of which nothing that
I have read in or about Greek Tragedy has caused
me to doubt the soundness. It is that the Greek
dramatist was first and last an artist, and must
be criticized as such.30

But the material will not explain the form of the
work. There is something deeper that does this,
something apprehensive, not dogmatic, something
as intuitive as that, whatever it is, that moves
a composer or painter to activity. Aeschylus,
Sophocles, and Euripides each have a different
fashion of tragic thought; this it is that explains
the drama.31

29 Kitto, p. v.
30 Ibid., p. v.
31 Ibid., p. vi.
If we can grope our way to the fundamental tragic conception of each play or group of plays, we can hope to explain their form and style. If not, we expose ourselves to the temptation of thinking that changes of form and style were sought for their own sake (which may be true of us but was not true of the Greeks), or of again falling back on the unreal figment, 'the form of Greek Tragedy', something which evolves historically and takes the individual plays with it. For us, there is no such thing as 'the form of Greek Tragedy'. The historian looking at Greek Tragedy from the outside, can use this conception, but our business is with individual plays, each a work of art and therefore unique, each obeying only the laws of its own being. There were limits fixed by the conditions of performance (practically the same for Euripides as for Aeschylus); within these wide limits the form of a play is determined only by its own vital idea -- that is, if it is a living work of art, and not an animal 'after Landseer'.

These authors are practically the only three who have given us criticisms and interpretations of Aeschylus which are at all satisfactory and which do justice to this great dramatic poet. It is a sad commentary on Aeschylean criticism, but that it is a fact, it will be hard to deny. We think we have pointed out the heart of the difficulty, and the results of the efforts of the three authors quoted above justify our claim. Each sought to interpret the plays independently of the views of Aristotle. Each chose a legitimate approach and yet arrived at many similar conclusions. These conclusions, since they are the results of independent experiments, have the weight of a

32 Ibid., p. vi.
strong inductive argument for their validity, besides the suasive argument that we have given above.

Moreover, since one of the points that these three authors have agreed upon, both as a supposition and demonstrated conclusion in their work, is the fact that there is very little relation between Aeschylus and Aristotle, we submit this evidence as a confirmation of the conclusion of our investigation; namely, that the plays of Aeschylus do not conform to Aristotle's theory of tragedy.
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The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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