relaxed, with the result that the climax, when it comes, is almost more than we can bear. The movement of the Choephoroi is different. It depends on repeated contrasts of mood, in which the Chorus play the leading part. When Elektra is at a loss, the Chorus dictate a prayer for vengeance. When Orestes is embracing his sister after years of absence, the Chorus remind him of his patrimony. When Orestes and Elektra are weeping beside the tomb, the Chorus are crying out for blood. When Orestes and Elektra are bent on vengeance without mercy, the Chorus are weeping for the Curse of Atreus. That is the first movement of the play. After that the tempo is relaxed, then gathers pace again; and in the last scene of all, when victory is swept away in horror and despair, the Chorus turn in rapid succession from rejoicing to dismay, from dismay to half-convinced assurance and desperate consolation. This ever-shifting interplay of conflicting moods is like an elaborate piece of counterpoint, in which two themes, continually varied, are played in two long crescendos one against the other.

The theme of the trilogy—the murder of Agamemnon and its consequences—is treated in the third play in such a way as to become much more than that. Its significance is steadily extended and enriched until the vicissitudes of the House of Atreus appear in retrospect as the battle-ground of human progress. The fate of Orestes concerns us still, but with it is now bound up the future of humanity at large. The issue is not merely whether the matricide is to be absolved, but whether mankind is to succeed in its struggle towards a new social order.

Before proceeding further, it will be as well to guard against possible misunderstanding by some general remarks on the nature of primitive symbolism. For, though Æschylus belongs to a period in which the development of scientific thought was already considerable, he has chosen to express himself through the more primitive medium of mythology. Objectively regarded, myths are symbols of reality. They are the forms in which reality presents itself to the primitive mind. It follows that to the primitive mind, as distinct from ours, the symbol and the reality are indistinguishable—they are one and the same thing.

Take the evolution of the goddess Athena. The city of Athens
derives its name from entities called "athenas"—evidently sacred objects (possibly birds) or persons disguised to represent those objects, which eventually crystallised into the anthropomorphic abstraction Athena.\textsuperscript{11} According to an Attic tradition, Erichthonios, the ancestor of the royal clan of the Erechtheidai, was born from the seed which Athena brushed from her person to the ground after Hephaistos had attempted to ravish her.\textsuperscript{12} There can be little doubt that what this means is that Athena was originally regarded as the mother of Erichthonios, who was naturally fatherless, because his clan was matrilineal, and that the intervention of Hephaistos (assisted by the popular etymology of Erichthonios from \textit{éris}, "strife," and \textit{chthón}, "ground") is a derivative element introduced after the adoption of patrilineal descent had rendered the lack of paternity unintelligible. In another tradition, when Athena and Poseidon disputed the possession of the Akropolis, Athena was supported by the women and Poseidon by the men.\textsuperscript{13} Here again the matrilineal function of the goddess is unmistakable. Later, when matrilineal descent had disappeared, Athena became a virgin goddess, affiliated to Zeus by a nativity myth which is clearly a symbol of re-birth or adoption, and endowed with attributes as masculine as her sex, determined by her origin, permitted. The same process can be traced in the history of Artemis, who began as a matrilineal mother-goddess with attributes derived from the totemic hunting clan, and ended as the chaste virgin huntress described by Homer.

The question is, how did these developments present themselves to the mind of Æschylus? It is, of course, obvious that Æschylus did not think in terms of social anthropology. At the same time he must have been conscious in some form of the antecedents of his contemporary Athena, because, as has just been pointed out, those antecedents were embodied symbolically in a series of Attic myths. The answer is therefore that his consciousness of these developments took precisely the form in which he expresses it. The degree of objectivity he displays in expounding the underlying significance of the myths is the measure of the extent to which he had emancipated himself from primitive modes of thought. Nevertheless, in analysing his mythological symbolism, it is for us, not only legitimate,
but absolutely necessary to treat it scientifically, because that is the only way in which it can be rendered intelligible to minds which have almost entirely outgrown that mode of thinking.

The parties to the dispute over the fate of Orestes are Apollo and the Erinyes. Apollo is the Interpreter of Zeus (17–19)—that was traditional; and he claims that his testimony is incontrovertible, because it comes from Zeus (619–21). The doctrine of Delphic infallibility was familiar at Athens in the fifth century, but it was resisted by the more advanced democrats, who saw that it was used to support an attitude to contemporary society which they regarded as reactionary. Therefore, as spectators at the City Dionysia, Athenian citizens would be prepared to see the doctrine vindicated and they would be equally prepared to see it challenged. Actually, in the play, Apollo’s claim is ultimately endorsed by Athena, but in circumstances redounding to her credit rather than his, and only after his whole position has been challenged by the Erinyes.

If Apollo appeals to Zeus, his opponents appeal to the Moirai, whose ministers they are (392–6); in particular, they have been entrusted with the task of punishing those guilty of shedding kindred blood (335–9). They contend, therefore, that in opposing them, Apollo is destroying the authority of the Moirai (172–3), who are older than Zeus; and they recall his conduct on another occasion, when he cheated the Moirai of a life which was their due (730–1). Thus, behind the feud between Apollo and the Erinyes there lies a deeper discord. Zeus and the Moirai are at variance. It was pointed out in an earlier chapter that the cult-epithet moiragètes or ‘leader of the Moirai,’ applied to Zeus at Olympia and to Apollo at Delphi, corresponded to the subordination of tribal rights to the authority of the state (pp. 53–4). And that is how the feud between the Erinyes and Apollo is treated by Aeschylus—as a symbol of the conflict between tribal custom in respect of homicide and the reorganisation of the law of homicide effected under the rule of the aristocracy; only, the solution of the conflict is presented characteristically, not as the submission of one party to the other, but as the reconciliation of the two. At the end of the trilogy the Erinyes will be reinvested,
in the new circumstances created by Athena, with the ancient privileges which Apollo has sought to override.

The issue is therefore this. The Erinyes stand for the tribal order of society, in which kinship, traced through the mother, had been a closer bond than marriage and the murder of a kinsman had been punished instantaneously and absolutely by the outlawry of the murderer. Their attitude on these points, as we shall see shortly, is stated explicitly. Apollo, on the other hand, whom the Athenians worshipped as “paternal” (*patrêios*), proclaims the sanctity of marriage and the precedence of the male. And the issue turns on the fate of Orestes. The dilemma in which he has been placed reflects the struggle of divided loyalties characteristic of the period in which descent was being shifted for the sake of the accompanying succession and inheritance from the mother’s to the father’s side, and his acquittal will mark the inauguration of the new order which is to culminate in democracy.

In persecuting Orestes for the murder of his mother, the Erinyes are performing the function of the ancestral curse, which, as explained in Chapter II, has its roots in the life of the primitive clan; but, in keeping with the parallel with mystical religion which runs right through the trilogy, this function is described in terms of the role assigned to these deities as “angels of torment” in the Eleusinian and Orphic Hades. They are daughters of Night and ministers of the supreme judge of the dead, who allots to each soul its *móira* or portion of felicity or chastisement. They threaten their victim in language which reminds us of the mystical Eurynomos, an infernal demon “with blue-black skin, like the flies that settle on meat, showing his teeth, and seated on the outspread hide of a vulture,” which devoured the flesh of the dead, leaving nothing but the bones. The place where they propose to work their will on him is one (389–90)—

> From whence the gods are barred
> By dark corruption foul, region of rugged ways—

like the Eleusinian and Orphic wilderness of mire in which the soul of the sinner strays and perishes. And there he shall
“make a feast for fiends” (302), abandoned by all and knowing not “where in the bosom joy resides”—the joy of the initiates in Elysium. In the same way, the long and circuitous journey which Orestes undertakes on his way to Athens after his purification at Delphi corresponds to the wanderings of the soul in search of salvation. As Tierney has pointed out, purification does not “immediately confer the longed-for salvation; it merely gives, both to the mystic and to Orestes, knowledge of the right way which leads to the judgment-seat, and the assurance of a favourable judgment.” And consequently, by the time he is brought to trial, the Court of the Areopagus has become surrounded with all the grandeur and terror of the judgment seat of Minos, at which the Erinyes stood waiting impatiently to carry off the lost soul as soon as it had been condemned. Further, just as the Orphic was taught to declare his purity as his claim to deliverance or salvation—“From the pure come I, pure Queen of the Dead”—so, on his arrival at the shrine of Athena, Orestes declares (276–98):

Taught in the school of suffering, I have learnt
The times and seasons when it is right to keep
Silence and when to break it; and in this matter
A wise instructor has charged me to speak.
The blood upon my hands has sunk to sleep,
The matricidal stain is washed away . . .
And now with lips made pure and reverent
I call to my defence this country's Queen . . .
O may she come—far off she still can hear—
And from these miseries deliver me!

And, finally, after the trial is over, he is readmitted to the phratry (659) and so becomes “once more an Argive” (760). His purification is vindicated as a regeneration. He has died and is born again.

The opening scene is laid before the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Having finished her prayers, the Priestess enters the temple, and immediately afterwards we hear a cry of horror. Though its meaning is as yet unknown to us, it falls on the ear like a note of destiny, startling and yet familiar. The three
prologues of the trilogy have been designed according to a common plan.

Half-paralysed with fear, the Priestess returns and describes what she has seen. Then the interior of the temple is revealed in a tableau—Orestes clinging to the sanctuary, the Erinyes asleep on the thrones, and standing over them the commanding figure of Apollo. The god assures his suppliant that he will keep faith with him (645, cf. 232-4) and instructs him to go to Athens. Escorted by Hermes, the guide of souls, the pilgrim sets out on his journey. Apollo remains, a silent witness to what follows.

The ghost of the murdered mother appears. She picks her steps among the prostrate Erinyes, recalling them with bitter reproaches to their forgotten purpose. This is the woman who dreamt of victory at the fall of Troy, and of retribution at the coming of Orestes; now, as her avenging spirits dream of her, they wake with whimpering cries and creep into the sunlight, only to find that their quarry has escaped. Then they catch sight of Apollo, and point accusing fingers at the thief. In a speech of violent denunciation, he commands them to depart. His attitude is too passionate to be final, and in contrast their own is studied in its restraint: they do not pronounce, they reason with him. And their reasoning is consistent. They are persecuting Orestes in virtue of the powers assigned to them (208-10); they did not persecute Clytemnestra because the blood she shed was not a kinsman’s (211-12); and they have no concern with the sanctity of wedlock. Apollo’s reply, on the other hand, is not consistent, being an attempt at compromise between two incompatible principles. He uses the law of retribution to condemn Clytemnestra (203), the law of purification to protect Orestes (205): but, if Clytemnestra forfeited her life by murdering her husband, then by murdering his mother Orestes has forfeited his own. Apollo’s attitude is transitional. He has challenged the old order, but it is not for him to construct the new (224).

The scene changes, and we find ourselves at a shrine of Athena in the city of Athens. During the interval Orestes has travelled far and wide (75-7) and now he claims that his penance is complete and seeks refuge with the goddess who is to decide his fate.
The Erinyes, however, are still upon his trail. They gather round him and begin to dance and sing their binding-song which is to bind him like the souls of the damned in unbreakable bonds (332–4):

Hymn of hell to harp untuned,
Chant to bind the soul in chains,
Spell to parch the flesh to dust.

We remember the vision of Kasandra (Ag. 1185–9):

On yonder housetop ever abides a choir
Of minstrels unmelodious, singing of ill;
And deeply drunk, to fortify their spirit,
In human blood, those revellers still abide,
Whom none can banish, Furies congenital.

And the premonition of the Argive Elders (Ag. 980–2):

Still I hear a strain of stringless music,
Dissonant dirge of the Furies, a chant uninstructed
Quired in this trembling breast.

And the Watchman’s cry (Ag. 22–4):

Hail, lamp of joy, whose gleam turns night to day,
Hail, radiant sign of dances numberless
In Argos for our happy state!

Apart from the refrains, which form the magical element in the chant, the Erinyes expound once more the authority on which their powers rest. The decrees of everlasting Moira (335–6) enjoined upon them when they first came into being (348) the task of exacting vengeance from those who have shed the blood of kith and kin (356–7). Orestes is prostrate with terror and fatigue, like a hare (327) that cowards motionless while the hounds close in for the kill.

To the poets of the democracy, Athena, the daughter whom Zeus loved best, and born of the father that begot her, was greater than Apollo. She was the divine projection of their ideals—bravery in battle, which had enabled them to defeat the Persians; skill in the arts of peace, which had made their
city the most brilliant in Greece; and above all that sense of moderation and restraint (*sophrosyne*) which corresponded exactly to the aspirations of the middle class as embodied in the constitution established after the overthrow of the tyranny. She was pre-eminently a mediator and a peacemaker, endowed with the gift of clear, persuasive speech, which, in a city where the extension of the franchise had made the art of public speaking a dominant feature of social life, appeared as a vital condition of human civilisation. As Isokrates said:  

> It is by the power of persuading one another that we have raised ourselves above the level of the beasts, founded cities, laid down laws, and discovered arts.

And again:

> Finding the Greeks living without laws in scattered communities, oppressed by tyrants or perishing in anarchy, our city delivered them from these evils, either by taking them under her protection or by offering herself as an example. So much is clear from the fact that those who preferred the earliest charges of homicide, desiring to compose their differences by reason instead of violence, tried their cases according to Athenian law.

This, of course, is a conscious allusion to the trial of Orestes, and shows how the work of Æschylus had served to mould Attic tradition. It is in this spirit that Athena now addresses herself to the task of leading mankind from barbarism to civilisation. And she accomplishes her purpose by persuading the agents of the Moirai to accept freely and without compulsion the will of Zeus.

She confronts them with serene and majestical reserve, very different from the passionate indignation of Apollo. She listens to their statement with courteous deference. Only when they venture to argue their case does she adopt a stern tone, rejecting the suggestion that the case can be decided by appeal to the primitive ordeal by oath (432–5). The Erinyes accept the rebuke, and offer to submit to her decision (437–8). With the same impartiality, she then turns to Orestes, who declares that he has sought her sanctuary as one already purified, and he too
beseeches her to judge (471–2). By consent of both parties the
decision now rests with her, but she immediately declines it.
The issue is too grave for mortal judgment, too fraught with
passion for her own. The suppliant has a claim on her protec-
tion; yet, if his pursuers are frustrated, they will vent their
displeasure on her people (485–91):

But be it so; since it is come to this, 
Judges I will appoint for homicide,
A court set up in perpetuity.
Meanwhile do you call proofs and witnesses
As sworn supports of Justice; then, having chosen
The best of all my people, I shall come
To pass true judgment on the present cause.

In these words she forecasts the institution of the Court of the
Areopagus, which is to be the symbol of the new order. And
of that order one feature is already clear. Hitherto the homicide
has been punished summarily; henceforward he is to be tried
before a jury of his fellow men.

The task of these judges will, of course, be to try the case of
Orestes; but Athena seems to have suggested that she hopes to
find in them a means of solving the divine dispute as well—that
the foundation of the new Court will have the effect of concili-
ating the Erinyes. We look to the sequel to see how this can be.

The origin of the Council of the Areopagus was the subject
of diverse traditions, from which Æschylus has selected those
which best serve his purpose.\(^\text{17}\) The Court was founded by
Athena for the object of trying Orestes, his accusers were the
Erinyes, and his judges a committee elected by lot from the
Athenian people. The Athenians claimed that their city was
the first to establish laws; that of their laws those relating to
homicide were the oldest and best; and that of all their legal
institutions the Court of the Areopagus was the most venerable,
distinctive and august. It was the “overseer of all things” and
“guardian of the laws”; it had in its keeping “the secret deposi-
tions wherein lay the salvation of the city”; it was charged to
uphold sobriety and good conduct, on the principle that good
government depends, not on a multiplicity of legal enactments,
but on the maintenance of justice within the hearts of men; it
was grave, severe, and incorruptible; and in a later generation Isokrates counts it as one of the virtues of his forefathers that they had been slow to tamper with their ancestral institutions, deterred by their respect for the Council of the Areopagus.

Such was the tradition associated with the Court which is now to be established. It is clearly a conservative tradition, and it is reproduced point by point in the play. The Erinyes contend (520–34):

Times there be when fear is well;  
Yea, it must continually  
Watch within the soul enthroned.  
Needful too straits to teach humility.  
Who of those that never nursed  
Healthy dread within the heart,  
Be they men or peoples, shall  
Show to Justice reverence?  
Choose a life despot-free,  
Yet restrained by rule of law. Thus and thus  
God doth administer, yet he appointeth the mean as the master in all things.

After this profession of faith from the Erinyes, Athena has little difficulty in showing that her new Court is exactly designed to achieve their aims, which therefore will not, as they imagine, be jeopardised by the acquittal of Orestes. She is giving her direction to the judges before they record their votes (684–713):

People of Athens, hear my ordinance  
At this first trial of bloodshed. Evermore  
This great tribunal shall abide in power  
Among the sons of Aigeus. . . .  

Here Reverence  
And inbred Fear, enthroned among my people,  
Shall hold their hands from evil night and day,  
Only let them not tamper with their laws. . . .  
I bid my people honour and uphold  
The mean between the despot and the slave,  
And not to banish terror utterly,  
For what man shall be upright without fear?  
And if you honour this high ordinance,  
Then shall you have for land and commonweal
A stronghold of salvation...
I establish
This great tribunal to protect my people,
Grave, quick to anger, incorruptible,
And ever vigilant over those that sleep.

It is highly significant that Æschylus should have defined his attitude to the Court in these terms only a few months after it had been deprived of all its specific functions excepting its jurisdiction in cases of homicide—a reform which excited the greatest opposition among conservatives, so great that its sponsor, Ephialtes, was assassinated shortly afterwards. Since Athena founds the Court for the express purpose of trying the homicide Orestes, and since in her introductory reference to its members she describes them as "judges of homicide" (486), it may be inferred that Æschylus acquiesced retrospectively in the curtailment of its powers; but his insistence on the respect due to it and more particularly on the principle that the deterrent effect of laws is an essential aspect of the mean, which, as we have seen, is the basic doctrine of democracy, shows plainly that, at least at the end of his life, he was opposed to the advanced policy of the radical democrats.

We have seen that Athena meets the contention of the Erinyes, that the acquittal of the matricide will result in anarchy and lawlessness, by investing the Court with such a character that, so far from being in danger, their aims are identified with hers and so safe for ever. She has cut the ground from under their feet, and all that remains for her to do is to invite them to accept the divine presidency of the new Court. As we discern her ulterior purpose, a new prospect opens before us, leading to the conclusion of the trilogy. But for the present we are preoccupied with the trial of Orestes.

Athena has returned, accompanied by her chosen judges, probably ten or twelve in number, and followed by the citizens of Athens, who are eager to witness the first trial at law in the history of man; and presently Apollo appears to give evidence for the accused.

In accordance with the actual procedure of the Court, the Erinyes begin by addressing to Orestes three questions—
whether he did what he is accused of doing, how, and why. This means that the judges are going to consider, not merely the act itself, but the circumstances and the motive. The automatic adjustments characteristic of primitive morality are to be superseded by the power of discrimination.

The examination advances rapidly to the point where the controversy was suspended earlier in the play (607–8; cf. 211–12); then, after a false step (609) which will be retrieved later by Apollo, Orestes turns to his protector, beseeching him to pronounce whether his act was *just* (614–16). Apollo, whose role in relation to Orestes is that of an *exegetés* (612), a priest appointed at Athens for supervising the purification of homicides, comes forward for his second encounter with the Erinyes and declares in bold and ringing tones that it was *just* (617–18). He soon finds, however, that to defend this plea against the sharp wits of his opponents is not an easy matter. His first attempt, an appeal to the authority of Zeus, is abortive, because appeals to authority are useless when there is a conflict of authority; and so we are brought back to the dilemma with which the controversy began—Orestes has avenged his father by dishonouring his mother (625–7; cf. 202–3). Apollo makes a second attempt. He contends that, since the murder of Agamemnon was a crime, the execution of the murderess was not. This is a plea of justifiable homicide, seeking to discriminate between acts similar in effect but different in motive; but the Erinyes reply with the caustic comment that such a plea comes ill from the spokesman of Zeus, who bound in chains his own father Kronos (643–5). Apollo indignantly retorts that chains can be loosed, whereas blood once shed is irrecoverable; but this, as the Erinyes are quick to point out, is the very offence of which Orestes is guilty.

By this time it is plain that no progress can be made until a solution has been found for the dilemma with which we have been confronted from the outset. To which parent does the son owe the prior duty? The Erinyes champion the mother; Apollo, who has already urged that the tie between mother and son is no more sacred than the tie between husband and wife, now goes further and declares that the child is more closely related to the father than to the mother (660–4). This
argument is not an improvisation: it is the Pythagorean doctrine of paternity. And in this issue, now at last clearly stated, lies the crux of the whole matter.

Why then does Athena give her casting vote to Orestes? Because she gives precedence to the male over the female, to the husband over the wife (737–43):

The final judgment is a task for me;
So for Orestes shall this vote be added.
No mother gave me birth, and in all things
Save marriage I, my father's child indeed,
With all my heart commend the masculine.
Wherefore I shall not hold of higher worth
A woman who was killed because she killed
Her wedded lord and master of her home.

The reason could not have been more clearly stated, and it touches the crucial point at issue. On the question of paternity Athena endorses the attitude of Apollo, thus laying down the cardinal principle of the Attic law of inheritance, in which not only was the liberty of the wife narrowly circumscribed in the interests of the husband but, so far as the transmission of property was concerned, the mother was not reckoned among the kinsfolk at all. And if we ask why the dramatist has made the outcome of the trial turn on the social relations of the sexes, the answer is that he regarded the subordination of woman, quite correctly, as an indispensable condition of democracy. Just as Aristophanes and Plato perceived that the abolition of private property would involve the emancipation of woman, so Æschylus perceived that the subjection of woman was a necessary consequence of the development of private property. 18

Not only is the plain interpretation of Athena's words demanded by the nature of the issue in which the trial has culminated, but it brings the trial to its full and proper conclusion. Those critics who have been puzzled by a decision so out of keeping with our ideas of the administration of the law forget that, at the time when this crime was committed, there were no laws, only divine sanctions diverse and incompatible, and Athena's decision constitutes a ruling on the very point at which they were in conflict. So much for the past, but the future
will be different. Such a case as this can never arise again, because henceforward the criminal will be tried before a court of justice. The reign of law has begun. As we followed the fortunes of Orestes, we were in effect watching the growth of law through successive stages of social evolution. Regarded originally as a tort to be redressed by the kinsmen of the victim, and subsequently as a pollution to be expiated by the prescriptions of the aristocratic priesthood, the offence of homicide is now a crime to be submitted to the judgment of a legally appointed committee of the people. The conflict between tribal custom and aristocratic privilege has been resolved in democracy. So too the principle of male precedence, now formally ratified as the basis of democracy, is accompanied by the declaration that the wealth of the community is now equitably distributed (997). In the dispute between the Erinyes and Apollo over the fate of Orestes, and in the feud between Zeus and the Moirai, who are now to be reconciled by Athena, we see as it were mirrored in heaven the terrestrial process that began with the primitive tribe and ended with the emergence of a state in which the common people had recovered in a new form the equality denied to them during the rule of the aristocracy.

To all those critics who have assumed that the question at issue is simply a moral one, the ground on which Athena bases her decision has been a stumbling-block. It would have been easy for the dramatist to make her say that she is going to vote for Orestes out of compassion or humanity (philanthropia), because that was one of her traditional qualities;¹⁹ but he has chosen not to base her decision on these grounds, and that makes the grounds on which he does base it all the more significant. And it may well be asked whether there is even an initial plausibility in the assumption which these critics have accepted. Is a man justified in avenging his father by killing his mother at the command of God? If the trilogy had been made to turn on that sterile speculation, they would have been hardly less perplexed than they are now. Æschylus was not interested in the solution of an insoluble conundrum.

The significance of the acquittal is not primarily moral at all but social, and it provides the answer to a question which
has been prominent in our minds from the beginning of the trilogy. What is Justice? Is it the rule of the vendetta? Is it the law of blood for blood? Does it permit of absolution? Does it lie in the act or in the motive? All these considerations have been suggested, and therefore we are impelled to look for the poet’s final answer.

To Plato, who regarded the material world as an unreal image of the ideal and sought to stabilise human society on the basis of the exclusive domination of a leisured class, the idea of justice was something absolute and immutable which expressed itself politically in the doctrine that “the cobbler must stick to his cobbling.” “When,” he declared, “each class in the state fulfils the function assigned to it, and minds its own business, this is what makes the state just—this is justice.” Such was the idealist conception; but the materialists took an entirely different view, which may be illustrated from Epicurus, who was strenuously opposed to the whole system of class-domination embodied in the city-state of his time:

There never has been an absolute justice, only an agreement reached in social intercourse, differing from place to place and from time to time, for preventing the injury of one man by another. . . . All those elements in what is recognised at law as just possess that character in so far as they are proved by the necessities of social intercourse to be expedient, whether they are the same for everyone or not; and if a law turns out to be incompatible with the expediencies of social intercourse, it ceases to be just. And should the expediency expressed in the law correspond only for a time with that conception, nevertheless for that time it is just, so long as we do not trouble ourselves with empty phrases but look simply at the facts.

The notion that justice is relative can be traced in the democratic thought of the fifth century. Thus, justice was defined by Thrasymachos as “the strong man’s interest,” and, though this view was grossly misrepresented by Plato in his Republic, it is quite clear that what Thrasymachos meant is that justice is the interest of the ruling class. It will be observed that all these thinkers, including Plato, regarded justice as a matter of
social relations, and that Plato's absolute conception corresponds to his own position as a member of a class whose power he wished to see perpetuated.

What, then, was the position of Æschylus? He was an early Pythagorean, a moderate democrat. Plato, too, was deeply influenced by Pythagoreanism, but the Pythagoreans of his day, at least in Grecce proper, had gone right over to the reaction—the usual fate of moderate progressives when the class struggle has progressed beyond the point at which it serves their interests. In the middle of the fifth century the issues on which Athenian democracy was to split were still embryonic. Therefore, as a Pythagorean, Æschylus was nearer to Hippokrrates than to Plato, and, steeped though he was in the mystical traditions of Eleusis, he was not a mystic in his attitude to society, because he had no need to seek refuge from a reality in which his aspirations had been fulfilled. Accordingly, asked to define his idea of justice, he would, it may be suspected, have replied in one word—democracy. That answer is implicit in his treatment of the story of Orestes. The matricide is acquitted by an appeal to historical expediency, and the trilogy ends with the ratification of a new social contract, which is just because it is democratic.

Orestes has been acquitted, but the divine antagonism has still to be resolved. The nature of the settlement proposed by Athena has already been indicated, but we have still to see how she will work it out.

Just as the Erinyes stand for the blood feud (the rule of tribal society) and Athena for trial by jury (the rule of democracy), so Apollo stands for the practice of purification, the origin of which has been explained in Chapter V. Apollo, therefore, represents in this trilogy the rule of the landed aristocracy, intermediate between the primitive tribe and the democratic state of contemporary Athens. After the overthrow of the tyranny, the punishment of homicide had passed into popular control along with the archonship, from which the Court of the Areopagus was recruited; but the practice of purification persisted, and the exogetai who performed it continued to be drawn from the ranks of the Eupatridai. The old nobility, to which, we remember, Æschylus himself belonged, retained its
ritual office side by side with the popularly elected officials who had taken over the administration of the law, and, moreover, election to the office of exegetes continued to be subject to the ratification of the Delphic Oracle. Thus, in the democracy established by Athena, Apollo will remain in control of the exegetai. That is his part in the new order.

At the Court of the Areopagus both prosecutor and defendant bound themselves to tell the truth by an oath in which, as the penalty of perjury, they invoked destruction on themselves, their houses and their families; and this oath was taken in the name of the Semnai, a trinity of female divinities worshipped in a cave on the slopes of the Areopagus as the presiding deities of the Court. The origin of the Semnai has never been fully investigated; but it seems clear that, like the Horai, the Charites, the Eumenides of Argos, and the Erinyes themselves, they were descended from matrilineal ancestral spirits of the same type as the Moirai, whose origin we investigated in Chapter III.Æschylus himself was evidently conscious to some extent of these affinities, for what he does is to make Athena persuade the Erinyes to identify themselves with these Semnai, thus accepting the presidency of the Court, and in their new guise they will still be required to visit the perjurer with the penalties which have been theirs to inflict since the beginning of the world (933–8). That is their part in the new order, which is not new in the sense that it supersedes the old, but in the sense that in it the conflicts of the old are blended and reconciled—the fusion of opposites in the mean.

The significance of this solution is so clear that it may reasonably be supposed that the dramatist himself was directly conscious of its social and political implications as distinct from the symbolical form in which it is cast. There is only one point at which there is any serious discrepancy between his exposition and the reality. In historical fact, the Court of the Areopagus, which he has presented as being established by Athena at the inauguration of democracy, was an ancient institution going back to the primitive Attic monarchy. It was the council of chiefs founded according to Attic tradition in the reign of Theseus. From a historical point of view there is undoubtedly a confusion here, but it is one which is easy to accept for the
purposes of imaginative drama, and moreover it is readily explained by the fifth-century tradition, to which we referred in a previous chapter (p. 75), that the founder of Athenian democracy was Theseus. That the dramatist has been influenced by this tradition appears from his description of the women and children who take part in the procession at the end of the trilogy as "the eye of the land of Theseus" (1025–6). This incidental discrepancy does little to detract from the profound historical insight of the Oresteia, in which not only is social evolution conceived as an organic process, a progressive conflict of cumulative tensions which subsequently merge in a new unity, but some of the primary characteristics of ancient society are clearly apprehended.

At first the Erinyes are blinded by passion to the advantages of Athena's offer. But Athena is unrivalled in her power of persuasion (797–9):

Let me persuade you from this passionate grief.
You are not vanquished; the issue of the trial
Has been determined by an equal vote.

Unmoved, the Erinyes repeat their maledictions. Still serene, Athena repeats her invitation (835–6):

Calm the black humours of embittered rage,
Reside with me, and share my majesty.

Menaces give place to impotent despair, and Athena speaks again (886–92):

Nay, if Persuasion's holy majesty . . .
Is aught to thee, why then, reside with me . . .
Since it is in thy power to own this soil
Justly attended with the highest honours.

This is the spirit which tempted Agamemnon to commit the crime which we have seen visited on him and his children; which tempted Paris to plunge the world in war; which was embodied in Helen and again in Clytemnestra, and was summoned to the support of Orestes when he plotted to kill his mother. Now the same spirit, embodied in Athena, brings the sufferings of three generations to an end (971–6):

UA
To the eye of Persuasion I give all praise,
That with favour she looked on the breath of my lips
As I strove to appease these powers that once
Were averted in anger; but Zeus who is lord
Of the eloquent word hath prevailed, and at last
In contention for blessings we conquer.

Versed from time immemorial only in the language of malediction, the Erinyes are at first at a loss for words to express their change of heart, and so these “singers of ill” are taught a new song (904–7):

A song of faultless victory: from earth and sea
From skies above may gentle breezes blow
And, breathing sunshine, float from shore to shore.

Quick to learn, the converts call down a shower of blessings on the people whom they have threatened to destroy. They pray that the people of Attica may be blessed by sun and earth, in allusion to the present reconciliation between the upper and nether powers; that the spring blossoms may be protected from the storms, in allusion to the “Spirits who hush the Winds” (Heudanemoi) worshipped on the slopes of the Akropolis; that flocks and herds may multiply by the grace of the goat-god Pan, whose shrine may still be seen on the same hillside, just above the theatre where the drama was performed; that the precious metals of the earth may be brought to light, in allusion to the silver mines of Laurion; that husband and home may be found for each of the daughters of Athens, and that her sons, free from the curse of civil strife,²⁸ may be brought up in amity and goodwill, the whole community being cemented by ties as close as those which had formerly united fellow members of the clan.

Their curses have melted into blessings; Athena has prevailed. But having prevailed, she introduces a note of warning, reminding her people that these divinities are still to be feared by the perjurer (936–8):

He is led unto these to be judged, and the still
Stroke of perdition
In the dust shall stifle his proud boast.
When the Erinyes threatened, Athena sought to assuage; now, when the Erinyes bless, Athena warns. It is like a duet in which, after the bass has taken up the theme of the treble, the treble imitates the bass.

Since the beginning of the century, there had grown up in the city and its environs, attracted by the opportunities of trade, a class of resident aliens (*métoikoi*) whom it was the policy of the government to encourage, although as foreigners they were excluded from civic rights and from the public ceremonies of the state religion. Once a year, however, at the national festival of the Panathenaia, these aliens were not only permitted to take part, but were accorded special marks of honour. The climax of the festival came on the night of the anniversary of Athena’s birth, when a robe of saffron, woven by the women of the city, was carried up to the Akropolis in a torchlight procession, led by a band of *éphēboi* chosen for the occasion and attended with cries of “Alleluia!” by all the citizens, men and women, old and young, and there hung on the statue of Athena Polias, the goddess of the city-state. In this procession, to mark the purpose of the festival, which was to proclaim peace and good will to all who dwelt under the goddess’s protection, the resident aliens were clothed in robes of crimson and attended by a special escort.

The Erinyes have consented to become co-residents with Athena, partakers and joint owners of the soil, and accordingly they now assume the title of *métoikoi* (1012, 1019), accepting the goodwill of the citizens and offering their own. The dominant mood of the Panathenaic festival was rejoicing—not the wild transport of the Bacchants, but deep, restrained, almost solemn joy, the prize of grief and suffering; and accordingly the Erinyes sing (997–1001):

Joy to you, joy of your justly appointed riches,
Joy to all the people, blest
With the Virgin’s love, who sits
Next beside her Father’s throne.
Wisdom ye have learned at last.

At this point a company of women enters the orchestra, carrying lighted torches and crimson robes. Meanwhile Athena returns the greeting (1004–10):
Joy to you likewise! Walking before you,
To the chambers appointed I show you the way,
Led by the sacred lights of the escort.
Come with me, come, and let solemn oblations
Speed you in joy to your homes in the earth.

The Erinyes repeat their greeting, and again Athena thanks them (1022–32):

I thank you for these words of benison,
And now with flames of torchlit splendour bright
Escort you to your subterranean home,
Attended by the wardens of my shrine,
And justly so; for meet it is that all
The eye of Theseus’ people should come forth,
This noble company of comely maids
And women wed and honourable in years.
Adorn them well in robes of crimson dye,
And let these blazing torches lead the way,
So that the goodwill of these residents
Be proved in manly prowess of your sons.

At this point the band of young men takes its place at the head of the procession. The Erinyes put on their new robes; and in the light of the torches black gives place to crimson. This blaze of light and this feast of colour are both fitting symbols to mark the close of a spectacle in which again and again lights have been lit only to be quenched in darkness and in which we have twice gazed in horror on displays of bloodstained purple.

The procession begins to move away, and the women of the escort invite the Erinyes to accompany them (1041–4):

Gracious and kindly of heart to our people,
Hither, O holy ones, hither in gladness,
Follow the lamps that illumine the way.
O sing at the end, Alleluia!

This “Alleluia!” first raised by Clytemnestra in answer to the Watchman, heard by Kasandra from the Erinyes on the house-top, raised again by Clytemnestra over her husband’s dead body and by the friends of Orestes over her own—now, as it is heard for the last time, it signifies that the spirit of man has
passed through suffering into true and lasting joy; and in the
closing words of the trilogy we are reminded of the new
harmony in heaven in virtue of which these changes on earth
have been effected—Zeus and Moira are reconciled.

By his introduction of the Panathenaic procession, the poet
has brought his story out of the darkness of antiquity into the
brilliant light of the Athens of his day. It began in the remote
and barbarous past, it ends here and now. It is as though at the
close of the trilogy he invited his audience to rise from their
seats and carry on the drama from the point where he has left it.

Of all the features of the Oresteia, the most conspicuous is this
organic union between the drama and the community out of
which it had emerged and for which it was performed—this
perfect harmony between poetry and life. In this respect it is
almost unique. The audience of the Globe Theatre which wit-
nessed Shakespeare’s plays was a cross-section of the com-
community, ranging from the Court to the proletariat, but the
audience at the City Dionysia was more than that—it was the
community itself, assembled for the performance of a collective
ritual act. The great plays of Shakespeare were not immediately
and consciously related to the social movement of his time; in
the Oresteia the citizens of Athens witnessed the history of their
civilisation, culminating in a festival in which all of them
annually took part. The only thing in my experience which
seems to me comparable is what I saw one evening a few years
ago at a dramatic festival in Moscow. It was also a festival of
youth. On our way through the streets, our car was held up by
thronges of children in pageant costume who greeted us with
songs and peals of laughter and pelted the car with flowers.
When we got to the Red Square, we found ourselves marooned
in a sea of colour as thousands of children from all parts of the
city assembled for the pageant. Eventually we reached the
Bolshoi Theatre, where we saw the first performance of a new
opera, the theme of which was inspired by the emancipation of
woman consequent on the abolition of private ownership, and
all parts of the auditorium, including the old Imperial Box,
were packed out with an alert and critical audience of work-
people. It was then that I realised for the first time the nature
of the inspiration behind the Oresteia.
XVI

EARLIER PLAYS

The myth of Io has been discussed in a former chapter, where it was suggested that the extension of the heroine's wanderings to Egypt was a consequence of her identification with the Egyptian Isis (p. 146). How and when this feature of the myth was developed we do not know. It may have originated in the mystical traditions of Demeter, which, both at Argos and at Eleusis, show signs of Egyptian influence; or it may have been introduced by the early Pythagoreans, in whose mystical teaching the same influence can be traced. Its effect was to bring the myth of Io into relation with another—the story of the daughters of Danaos—with which it had no original connection.

Danaos and Aigyptos were brothers, descended from Epaphos, the son whom Io had born to Zeus in Egypt. Danaos had fifty daughters and Aigyptos had fifty sons. The sons of Aigyptos sought their cousins in marriage, but the daughters of Danaos refused and fled overseas to Argos, pursued by their unwelcome suitors. Commending themselves to the people of Argos by their claim to descent from Io, they at first found protection from their pursuers, but eventually they were forced to marry them. In revenge, at their father's command, they murdered their husbands on the wedding night—all except one, Hypermnestra, who by sparing hers became the ancestress of a famous line of kings. According to one tradition, Hypermnestra was brought to trial for having disobeyed her father and acquitted. According to another, the father himself was prosecuted by Aigyptos, who came from Egypt for the purpose, and the feud was resolved through the mediation of Lynkeus, who had married Hypermnestra. It was said that Danaos made the hitherto barren soil of Argos "well-watered"—that is, it may be presumed, he introduced the practice of irrigation. One of his daughters, Amymone, gave her name to a stream in the
marshes of Lerna, where Herakles, the most famous of the
descendants of Io, slew the Lernean hydra; and the Danaides
are said to have expiated their crime in Hades by eternally
drawing water in leaking pitchers.¹

The murder of the sons of Aigeptos by their brides seems to
rest on a confusion of traditions. It was the custom at Argos,
as at Sparta, for the bride to dress in men’s clothes, and at the
Argive festival of the Hybristika the men used to dress as
women and the women as men. As Halliday has shown,² the
sexual interchange of clothes is especially associated with
initiation, marriage and mourning; and therefore it is to be
interpreted as symbolising the change of identity which is
necessary in order that the individual may be born again. But
this is hardly sufficient to explain why the Danaides were so
unwomanly as to murder their husbands. It was said that the
women of Argos had once taken up arms and vanquished a
force of Spartan invaders in a battle mentioned in a Delphic
oracle beginning with the words, “When the female shall
conquer the male”;³ and if this is a folk-tale, as it appears to be,
rather than a historical tradition, it may have some bearing on
the myth, because there are indications—not very clear, it is
true—that the Danaides were regarded as female warriors.⁴
More to the point, however, is the legend of the women of
Lemnos.⁵ When the Argonauts landed on that island, they
found it “ruled by women” under Queen Hypsipyle, because a
short time previously all the women of the island, with the
exception of Hypsipyle, who spared her father Thoas, had
murdered their fathers and their husbands. This myth was
interpreted by Bachofen as pointing to some form of matri-
archy, and the crime of the Lemnian women closely resembles
that of the Danaides. It would, however, be unwise to press
the details further, and perhaps the most we can say is that
both legends sprang out of changes in the social status of
women. The question that immediately concerns us is how the
story of the Danaides was interpreted by Æschylus, and here
we are on firmer ground.

The tetralogy which he devoted to this theme began with
the Suppliant. The other two tragedies were the Aigeptioi and
the Danaides. The satyr play was the Amymone.
Accompanied by their father, the Danaides (who form the Chorus) have landed in Argos, and after a prayer to Zeus, the god of suppliants and strangers, they proclaim the Argive origin of their ancestress Io, and implore the gods to overwhelm their pursuers with thunder and lightning before they can bring their ship to harbour. In the stásimon which follows, this prayer is repeated in an intensified form. They call upon Epaphos, the “calf-man” born of Io, and the inscrutable power of Zeus to punish the insolence of their suitors, declaring that, should Zeus fail them, they will appeal to the other Zeus, the Zeus of the Dead—in other words, kill themselves. Meanwhile Danaos has descried a company of Argives approaching and instructs his daughters to take their stand as suppliants at the altars. He declares that in seeking this forced match their cousins are sinners, and reminds them that the sinner has to render an account on the day of judgment to Zeus of the Dead.

Interrogated by the King of Argos, the suppliants reveal their descent from Io, thus claiming kin with the Argive people, and explain why they are in flight. They appeal to him for protection, even though it may mean war, because justice is on their side, and to this appeal they add the threat that, if justice is denied to them, they will hang themselves at the altars. Faced with this choice between war and pollution, the King reserves his decision until he has had an opportunity of consulting his people.

Again the Danaides appeal to Zeus, reminding him at length of the wanderings of Io and their consummation in the birth of Epaphos. It is evidently their purpose to persuade Zeus by this means to bring their own wanderings to an equally happy end, but they overlook the deeper significance of the parallel, which is that Io’s sufferings concluded in a forced union with her lover.

Danaos returns, announcing that an assembly of the people has decided to grant the suppliants protection. The resolution was passed by a formal show of hands, and it is couched in legal terms designed to recall the specific conditions on which rights of residence were granted to aliens in contemporary Athens. The Danaides call down blessings on their benefactors, but through their rejoicing there runs a suggestion of
strife to come, and they conclude by recalling that it is the duty of children to honour their parents—an allusion to the command which they will receive in the sequel from their father.

At this point Danaos catches sight of the pursuing ship approaching harbour, and hurries off to the city for assistance. His daughters are in despair. "Left alone," they cry, "woman is nothing—there is no fight in her." In the sequel that proverb will be belied. While they are praying for death rather than marriage, a Herald appears from the sons of Aigyptos and begins to drag them off by the hair. He is interrupted by the reappearance of the King, who meets his claim to rightful possession of the fugitives by pointing out that he is guilty of sacrilege and has failed to observe the legal formalities incumbent in such circumstances on a foreigner. The Herald retires, threatening war. The suppliants again bless their saviour and are reminded by their father of the need to conduct themselves with womanly decorum in their new home. As they move away, their rejoicings are mingled with misgivings that the marriage they have averted may be forced on them after all, and their final prayer is set to a rhythm which has acquired a dramatic significance from its association in earlier passages of the play with the idea that such a marriage would be worse than death. From this and other indications it is evident that they have not succeeded in winning the will of Zeus to their side."

—Would that truly the purpose of Zeus . . .
—Who can untangle his path out of the maze of the thicket?
Dark is it everywhere,
Even thrown against Night's blackness, dark to the mortal seeker.
Though it fall to the ground seven times,
Yet shall it rise up again, should Zeus will to accomplish.
Hard to search is his mind,
Darkness-wrapt his unknown, winding paths in the trackless forest.

Why are the Danaides opposed to marriage with their cousins? It is not merely that their suitors are proud and violent. These qualities have been manifested only in consequence
of their refusal, and it must be remembered that the contrast in this play between the righteousness of the women and the wickedness of the men is to be followed in the next with an act of even more violent retaliation. The objection of the Danaides is of a more concrete nature: it is that the match is unlawful, unholy—what we should call incestuous. The answer to our question is therefore likely to be found in the history of Greek marriage. Now, in Attic law, not only was there no bar to the marriage of first cousins, but in certain circumstances, which have been explained in Chapter XII, it was positively enjoined. If a daughter inherited, as she did in default of sons, she was claimed in marriage by her father’s next-of-kin—his brothers or their sons; and there was nothing to prevent the father from bestowing his presumptive heiress in this way before he died. Consequently, the match proposed by the sons of Aigyptos is already permissible and proper, and, as soon as Danaos dies, it will become a legal claim. In fleeing from Egypt to Argos, the daughters of Danaos are plainly seeking to evade their obligations. That is the light in which the dispute would inevitably have been regarded by a contemporary audience; and, moreover, it is clear that the dramatist has been at pains to present it in that light, for one of the most striking features of the play is its wealth of allusions to the procedure and phraseology of contemporary Attic law.8

The King himself is dissatisfied with the grounds on which the suppliants reject the match.9 “If,” he argues, “the sons of Aigyptos are your masters by the law of the land, claiming to be your next-of-kin, who would wish to oppose them?” This passage, with its unmistakable reference to the Attic law of the heiress, places the dramatist’s intention beyond question. It also suggests that a similar law was believed to exist in Egypt.

One of the characteristics of Egyptian marriage was the extensive practice of endogamy, especially in the royal family.10 Many instances are recorded, from this and earlier periods, of marriage with a sister or a brother’s daughter. Further, it is agreed by Egyptologists that this practice arose from the desire to retain succession or inheritance, both of which were partly transmitted through women, in the male line. And this, as we have seen, is the motive underlying the Attic law of the heiress.
It would, of course, be a mistake to infer, as Ridgeway has done, that the dispute in the *Suppliants* has anything to do with the conflict between matrilineal and patrilineal inheritance. Of that, in this play, there is no trace. Nevertheless, the analogy which *Æschylus* has suggested between Athenian and Egyptian practice in this matter is sound, because in the special circumstances of the heiress Attic law prescribed marriages of the same type, and for the same reason, as the Egyptian. The heiress must marry her father's next-of-kin.

The story of the Danaides was told again by *Æschylus* in the *Prometheus Bound*, where he says that they sought refuge at Argos "fleeing from kindred marriage with cousins." Now, these are precisely the grounds on which, in the *Suppliants*, the sons of Aigytos justify the marriage—they claim the daughters of Danaos as theirs by right because they are their cousins. It is clear, therefore, that the women reject the match for the very reason that the men demand it—because they are of the same kin. The issue turns on marriage within the kin.

All that is necessary to complete our argument is to show that the same point is made with equal clarity by the Danaides themselves. The difficulty here is that the text of the play is very corrupt; but, with the passages just quoted to guide us, this difficulty can be overcome.

In their appeal to Zeus at the beginning of the play the Danaides declare that they have fled from Egypt "in abhorrence of sinful wedlock of near kindred with the folly-prating sons of Aigytos." That is how Headlam restored the passage, as against Wilamowitz, who took it to mean that the Danaides reject the match "because they were born to shun men"; and Headlam's interpretation is supported by the almost identical expression in the *Prometheus*, which Wilamowitz ignores.

The King is interrogating the fugitives. "What," he asks, "is your request of me?" "That I may be saved from bondage to the sons of Aigytos." Why the Danaides regard marriage with their cousins as tantamount to bondage will appear in due course. "Is it because you hate them, or do you mean it is unholy?"

The crux lies in the answer to this question, and unfortunately the text is again corrupt. The choice lies between two
interpretations. The first is this: "Who would object to masters that they loved?" The second is this: "Who would buy a kinsman to be her master?" Against the first it may be urged that it implies that the objection to the match is not that it is unholy, but merely that the suitors are personally unacceptable, and this view is contradicted by other passages in the play. Moreover, as we shall see immediately, it does not provide a satisfactory starting-point for the King's next remark. I am convinced that the second interpretation is correct. The Danaides hate the marriage *because* it is unholy, and it is unholy because, for the sake of the accompanying inheritance, the sons of Aigyptos are seeking to marry within the kin. In confirmation of this view, it may be added that exactly the same point is made by Euripides in a passage where Medea, who has been deserted by Jason, gives the woman's attitude to the inferior status of the wife: "We have to buy husbands with money and accept them as masters of our bodies." They take our money, and we become their slaves.

Why, then, is marriage within the kin equivalent to bondage for the woman? This point is explained by the Danaides in answer to the King's next remark. "And yet," he says, "by this means mortal wealth is multiplied." Exactly: the way to accumulate wealth is to keep it "in the family," and that can only be done by keeping the heiress "in the family." This remark of the King's goes straight to the heart of the matter, and shows that Æschylus understood correctly the economic basis of the Attic law of inheritance. The Danaides cannot deny the force of this contention, but what they do is to point out its effect on the position of the woman: "Yes, and when things go badly, divorce is easy!" Under the rule of exogamy, when husband and wife had necessarily belonged to different clans, the wife could appeal, in case of conjugal difficulties, to her kinsmen for protection; but, when the woman marries a member of her own clan, her kinsmen are his and will take his side against her.

The reason why this interpretation, which in the main is Ridgeway's, has not found general acceptance lies in misapprehension regarding the nature of Æschylean art. Those critics who judge Greek poetry from the standpoint of our own, which
for the most part holds aloof from social problems, because the social system under which we live is one we are all consciously or unconsciously ashamed of, are not unnaturally disconcerted to find a poet of acknowledged greatness devoting his art to the exposition of a theme so apparently unpoetical as the status of women in contemporary society; but the fault lies in themselves. To Æschylus, social struggle was the means of human progress, and one of the forms which that struggle assumed—the conflict between the sexes—was, as he apprehended, an essential feature of the transition from barbarism to civilisation. Nor is that all. For him and his contemporaries it was still a living issue. If that had not been so, Euripides would not have written the Medea nor Aristophanes the Lysistrata. As a matter of legislation, the issue had been decided by the laws of Solon, but there must have been many contemporaries of Æschylus whose grandfathers had known Solon; and when we turn to other Greek states, less advanced than Athens, we find that this very issue—the law of the heiress—was still being fought out. Discussing the causes of political disturbances, Aristotle writes:18

And in general disputes among the nobility often embroil the whole state, as at Hestiaia after the Persian Wars, when two brothers quarrelled about the division of their patrimony, the one espousing the popular cause, because his brother had failed to produce a clear statement of his father’s wealth, while the other, being rich, sided with the party of the rich. . . . At Mytilene, a quarrel about heiresses led to a series of calamities, including the war with Athens. A wealthy citizen, Timophanes, had left two daughters, whom Doxandros tried but failed to obtain in marriage for his sons, and being thus thrust aside he fomented a civil war and incited the Athenians, whose official representative he was. At Phokis, it was a quarrel about heiresses between Mnasæas, the father of Mnason, and Euthykrates, the son of Onomarchos, that started the Sacred War.

Having grasped the social nature of the issue, we may recognise without danger of misunderstanding its moral aspect. On this point, D. S. Robertson writes:19
What did Æschylus mean by the trilogy as a whole? He must have raised some moral problem which he felt to be fundamental, and I cannot believe, with Ridgeway, that this was the question of exogamy. So far as I can follow the thought of the Suppliantes (and I claim no novelty for my view), the real issue seems to be the right of women to refuse to be forced into marriage. The Danaids’ hatred of marriage is indeed meant to be fanatical . . . but fundamentally they are justified. The crime of the sons of Aigyptos is their determination to force themselves on unwilling brides.

If that was the crime of the sons of Aigyptos, it was a crime enjoined in democratic Athens by an express provision of the law and committed regularly by the dramatist’s contemporaries in the happy belief that by so doing they were serving simultaneously the gods, the state and their own interests. Robertson has not thought out the implications of his argument, and it is instructive to observe that this interpretation of the play, which is still the most generally accepted, breaks down on a point of the same nature as the conventional interpretation of the Oresteia (p. 289). In both cases the moral issue has been isolated from its social context. The influence of private property on the morals of the proprietors raises issues which contemporary critics are instinctively reluctant to explore, and so they “cannot believe” it is fundamental. To Æschylus, however, living in the heyday of ancient democracy, the subjection of women was not only just, but preferable to the liberty which they had formerly enjoyed. In all stages of society the prevailing code of morals is at once a reflection and a justification of the established social order. The reason why the Egyptians regarded marriage with one’s sister as right and proper is simply that in Egypt private ownership had developed in such a way as to make such marriages expedient; and in the case of Æschylus the social basis of his moral judgments is exceptionally clear, because he himself was conscious of it. The work of such a poet necessarily presents difficulties to those who have not analysed their own relation to contemporary society.

The extant evidence is insufficient to indicate more than the outlines of the remainder of the trilogy; but, if our interpretation of the first play is correct, the conclusion to which the
drama is tending is already fairly clear. The murder of the bridegrooms probably took place in the second play, and the trial in the third. A few lines from a speech by Aphrodite in the *Danaides* have been preserved:  

The pure Sky yearns with love to wound the Earth,  
The loving Earth yearns likewise to be wed,  
And from the heavenly bridegroom showers descend  
Upon the bride, who brings forth for mankind  
The grazing cattle and Demeter’s corn,  
With precious moisture ripening the fruits  
To autumn fulness. In this I too have part.

These words were evidently spoken by the goddess of love in vindication of Hypermnestra, who, we are told in the *Prometheus*, was moved by love to spare her husband.  

Aphrodite is to Hypermnestra what Apollo is to Orestes. The daughter who chose to cleave to her husband rather than obey her father is justified at law, and in this way the institution of matrimony, involving the subordination of the woman to the man, is formally established.

It follows that the defendant at the trial must have been Hypermnestra and not Danaos. This does not mean, as Robertson supposes, that Æschylus regarded her sisters as either obviously guiltless or obviously unpardonable. The struggle between the Danaides and their suitors was not a conflict between right and wrong, but between two rights, one old and the other new. The acquittal of Hypermnestra does, of course, condemn her sisters by implication, and that, in Robertson’s opinion, would be “a lame conclusion.”  

But, in the first place, we cannot be sure that it was the conclusion, because the insistence in the first play on the idea of the judgment of the dead suggests the possibility that the trilogy concluded with a reference to the fate of the Danaides in the other world. And, in any case, the important thing is not the condemnation of the others, who acted, like the Erinyes, on a principle which has only now been superseded, but the acquittal of Hypermnestra, who is vindicated, like Orestes, by an appeal to historical expediency.

We saw that at the end of the *Oresteia* the old order
represented by the Erinyes was not simply abolished, but adapted and merged into the new, and that by this means Athena secured their goodwill. Now, according to Herodotus, the Danaides brought to Greece from Egypt a mystical cult of Demeter. After the Dorian invasion, this cult disappeared from most parts of the Peloponnese, but it survived in Arcadia, and also at Athens, where it formed the basis of the festival of the Thesmophoria, which was reserved for women. Attention was first called to this evidence over a century ago, but the editors of Æschylus have ignored it, and the credit for reasserting its importance belongs to Robertson, who rightly observes that “on the analogy of the Eumenides we might expect to find the final solution symbolised by Æschylus in the foundation of some religious institution safeguarding the dignity of women.” Accordingly, he suggests that this trilogy ended with the institution of the Thesmophoria, just as the Oresteia ended with the institution of the Court of the Areopagus. There can be little doubt that this view is correct. The women were reconciled to their changed status by the foundation of a festival in which they enjoyed exclusive rights. It is, moreover, not improbable that, as an epithet of Demeter, the word thesmophóros refers to the institution of marriage. This is disputed, although, as Robertson points out, the epithet was certainly interpreted in that way by Latin writers. However that may be, the festival had another significance which Æschylus would not have overlooked. It was essentially, as Jane Harrison has shown, an act of agrarian magic, and in Attic tradition it was Demeter who, by means of her mysteries, had introduced the art of agriculture. We have already remarked that in the Argive tradition the Danaides were associated with the introduction of irrigation, and therefore, if this trilogy concluded with the foundation of the Thesmophoria, we may be sure that Æschylus took the opportunity to stress what was in fact an achievement of the female sex as well as a historic landmark in the material progress of mankind.

We see therefore that from the outset of his career Æschylus was concerned with the evolutionary process which had transformed the primitive Attica of tradition into contemporary Athens, and already revealed an attitude to the problem which
we have identified as characteristic of his own position in the
world he was endeavouring to explain.

The "Persians" was the second tragedy in a tetralogy of which
the first was the "Phineus" and the third the "Glaukos Potnies",
followed by a satyr play called the "Prometheus Pyrkaeus". These
titles show that, whether or not there was any homogeneity
in the treatment, there was no continuity of plot. Each play
dealt with a different theme. This therefore is the earliest
known example of a disconnected tetralogy.

It was produced in 472 B.C.—the year before the banish-
ment of Themistokles. Four years earlier, probably with
Themistokles as his chorégos, Phrynichos had produced a tragedy
called the "Phoinissai" on the subject of the victory at Salamis.
It is therefore significant that, when Æschylus expounded the
same theme in his "Persians", his chorégos was Perikles of the
Alkmaionidai, the future leader of Athenian democracy. At
this time Perikles was a young man, not much more than
twenty, and a supporter of Kimon, whose naval operations in
Ionia were laying the foundations of the Athenian Empire. It
may be inferred that Æschylus too supported the policy of
Kimon, and this harmonises with the other evidence that he
was a moderate democrat.

The play opens with a long passage from the Chorus of
Persian Elders, who, like the old men in the "Agamemnon", have
been left at home, awaiting news of the war. The flower of
Asiatic manhood, drawn from all the fabulously wealthy cities
of the East, is gone. This word, insistently repeated, carries in
Greek the ominous implication that the strength and opulence
of Asia is gone, never to return. The old men are anxious, and
the wives and mothers of the Persian capital are counting the
days. News has already reached them of the passage of the
Hellespont—how the young king Xerxes forced the sea-god to
do his bidding by lashing pontoons across the narrow waters.
The might of Persia has been hitherto invincible, but never
before has it faced the perils of the sea: can it be that jealous
gods are luring it to destruction? These are the forebodings
that make many a bride bathe her deserted bed in tears.

The King's mother, Atossa, at the threshold of the palace,
reveals that her sleep has been disturbed by a dream which
seems to signify that, while her son has mastered Ionia, Greece will throw off the yoke. In reply to her anxious questions the Elders tell her that Athens lies far away in the sunset, and that the Athenians, who serve no despot, have already proved their fighting spirit. These replies bring no comfort to the mother of an absent son.

A breathless messenger brings news from Salamis. The Elders break into lamentation as they hear of the disaster which will make the hated name of Athens memorable for ever. Then the Queen, who has controlled her grief, asks the names of the survivors and the fallen. Xerxes lives, but Artembares and Dadakes and Tenagon—one by one, the Messenger names all the king’s vassals who have died a brave man’s death in battle. The city of Athens has been sacked, but the men of Athens live. The disaster began when an avenging demon in the guise of a Greek deluded Xerxes into believing that the enemy was about to take to flight (p. 228). After the description of the battle, which is, of course, as it is claimed to be, an eyewitness’s account, the Queen cries out against the fiend which enticed the fleet to its destruction, and to crown her grief she hears how the retreating army has been decimated by cold and famine.

The Elders continue their lamentation, contrasting the young king’s fatal impetuosity with the wisdom of his father, and, when the Queen returns with offerings for her husband’s tomb, they take on the character of the Persian Magi, chanting a necromantic invocation, in response to which the ghost of Darius rises from the earth to ask what calamity it is that has disturbed his rest. The Queen repeats for him the news of Salamis, and after condemning the harnessing of the Hellespont as an act of pride inviting the jealousy of Heaven, he declares that Salamis is not the end, predicting the rout of the Persian army in the ensuing year. When he has gone, the Elders sing a hymn in praise of the dead king who raised Persia to greatness and extended her empire from sea to sea but wisely refrained from attempting more. At the end of the hymn Xerxes himself appears, uncontrolled in his grief, dishevelled, his robes torn, and the play concludes with an Oriental dirge.
The central theme of the play, apart from the patriotic sentiment which animates the whole, is the idea that wealth breeds pride, which is punished by the gods. This, as we have seen, is the old aristocratic tradition, which Æschylus has systematised and elaborated, developing its latent implications and enriching the imagery associated with it, but substantially he has added nothing new. Consequently, in intellectual content this play is the poorest of the seven. It is an eloquent homily on a rather tedious text.

Even from a more narrowly dramatic point of view, it is not altogether a success. It begins with a dynamic opening which makes a magnificent prelude to the entry of Atossa and by the same impetus carries us to the exultant rhetoric of the Messenger’s report. All this is very like the opening of the Agamemnon. But it is not followed up. Atossa, on whom our attention has been fixed, recedes before the figure of Darius, and he in turn gives place to Xerxes. The appearance of Darius is theatrically effective, but he does little more than reinforce a lesson we have already learnt, and by this time the rhetoric is becoming monotonous. It is difficult for us to take much interest in the humiliated Xerxes, and in the concluding dirge even the diction flags, sinking to the level of mere ritual. The trouble is that the dramatist has chosen a theme whose conclusion is necessarily unconstructive. To make up for this deficiency, he has appealed insistently to the nationalist feelings of his audience, and in this he was evidently successful, because he won the prize; but we are left with the impression that he was not at home in the disconnected tetralogy, and for my own part I would willingly have exchanged the Persians for the lost sequel of the Suppliants or the Prometheus.

The Seven against Thebes, produced five years later, was preceded by the Laios and the Oedipus, and followed by the Sphinx. Unfortunately, it is doubtful whether the form in which we have it is intact. Most students of Æschylus are agreed that the concluding scene between the Herald and Antigone is spurious, being added at a time when the work of Sophokles and Euripides on the same theme had made it difficult to ignore the fate of Antigone, as Æschylus had done; and it is
at least probable that this spurious conclusion has ousted something else.

Laos was King of Thebes, and he received an oracle from Delphi commanding him “to save the state by dying without offspring.” The terms of the oracle are recalled explicitly in the surviving play. They imply that the welfare of the community is dependent on the conduct of the king who rules it—a primitive notion which has been discussed in connection with the magical functions of the early kingship (p. 117). They also imply a conflict between the interests of the state and those of the ruling dynasty. As King of Thebes, Laos should have died childless, but by so doing he would have failed to fulfil his obligations as the leader of his clan. Accordingly, “prevailed upon by the folly of his kinsmen,” he became by Jocasta the father of a son, Oedipus. After the child was born, the parents took fright and exposed it; but Oedipus grew up unknown to them. Returning to Thebes as a young man ignorant of his parentage, he fell in with his father on the road from Thebes to Delphi, quarrelled with him, and killed him. Then, having read the riddle of the Sphynx, he was acclaimed King in place of Laos and married the widowed Queen. Some time later the royal pair discovered their true relationship. In Sophokles, the discovery follows from a public pestilence consequent on the double crime which Oedipus has committed; and if, as seems likely, Æschylus used the same tradition, it provided a manifestation of the working of the oracle and of the principle that the welfare of the people was vested in the King’s person. After the discovery, Jocasta hanged herself. Oedipus put out his eyes, and was held a prisoner by his sons, Eteokles and Polyneikes, in the palace dungeon. One day, at table, Oedipus was served by his sons with a haunch instead of the shoulder, which was the royal geras or portion; and, enraged by this affront, he cursed them, praying that they should divide their paternal heritage by the sword. After his death, the brothers quarrelled over the succession, and Polyneikes fled to Argos, whence shortly afterwards, like the tyrant Hippias, he returned to recover his patrimony by force of foreign arms. It is at this point that the surviving play begins.

Eteokles regards himself as the pilot of the state. This idea
of the ship of state, which recurs throughout the play, is intended to imply that the ship will weather the storm so long as the captain keeps his head. Having been informed of the approach of the invaders from Argos, Eteokles summons the people to the defence of their native land, and, after hearing a scout’s report of the enemy’s plan of attack, he prays to the gods for victory:30

O Zeus, and Earth, O gods who guard this city,
And thou, Erinys, my father’s mighty Curse,
Vouchsafe that this my people, Greek in speech,
Be not uprooted from their hearths and homes
Nor bent beneath the yoke of slavery!

The Erinys is here regarded as the King’s ancestral spirit, and the allusion to the people of Thebes as Greek in speech (in fact, of course, the enemy was the same) means that we are to regard the expedition against Thebes in the light of the Persian invasion.

After the King has hurried off to supervise the defences, the orchestra is filled with a chorus of panic-stricken women, terrified by the thought that the gods have deserted the city. Harassed, but without losing his presence of mind, the King returns to restore order. Rebuking them sharply for their lack of confidence, he prays sarcastically that never in good fortune or in bad may he consort with woman—a point which is important for the sequel, because it implies that he is unmarried.31 The frightened women explain that their ears are filled with the din of passing chariots, and the King retorts:32

What of it? When did a seaman ever save
His ship from foundering in the hurricane
By scuttling from the helm into the prow?

Having succeeded at last to some extent in calming them, he returns to his task of organising the defence. There are seven gates to the city, and he will appoint seven champions, including himself, to man them. Meanwhile the women address a hymn to the gods, imploring them not to forsake their worshippers and still harping on the horrors that are enacted in a conquered city. In this, too, the dramatist is
evidently appealing to memories of the Persian occupation.

So far the King’s conduct of affairs has been admirable. His military preparations are well in hand, and, though the indiscipline of the non-combatants has threatened to hamper his plans, he has kept his head. We are almost lulled into forgetting that this capable leader is under a curse. The Erinys is asleep.

The attack is now imminent. The enemy champions are taking up their positions, one at each gate, and as they do so they are described in detail from a point of vantage by a scout in order that for each of the assailants the King may appoint a defender. In contrast to the enemy champions, who are loud in their boasts, defying God and man alike, the King replies by asserting his confidence in the justice of his cause.

Five of the gates have now been disposed of. The sixth is being attacked by the prophet Amphiaraos, who has denounced Polyneikes for taking up arms against his country and foresees his own death on the disastrous expedition in which he has participated against his will and judgment. Eteokles replies:

Alas, what evil augury in mortal life
Unites a righteous man with the ungodly!
Of all things worst, no matter what the task,
Is wicked fellowship. It bears no fruit—
A crop of madness harvested in death . . .
Maybe he will not move to the assault,
Not lacking courage or a manly spirit,
But knowing that he goes to meet his death,
If the oracles of Apollo are fulfilled,
Who speaks to the purpose or else holds his peace

As the enemy champions are named one by one, followed by the names of their opponents, we realise with growing horror that the two brothers have independently reserved the seventh gate for themselves. Eteokles alone is in the dark, and, when he perceives the truth, the ancestral curse is once more awake in him, confounding his sense of right and wrong:

O lamentable race of Œdipus,
Infatuate, abominable, abhorred,
At last it is fulfilled, our father’s curse!
The name of Justice, which Polyneikes has emblazoned on his shield, is flung back in his teeth.  

I place my trust in justice, and I myself  
Shall fight him—what antagonist so just?  
King against king and brother against brother.

It is now the women’s turn to plead for reason, and they plead in vain. Eteokles has gone mad.  

The Curse of Ædipus has broken out.  
Too true those visions that foretold by night  
How we should share our father’s heritage!

While the battle is being fought, the Chorus review the whole history of the curse from the time when Apollo spoke to Laios down to the present moment, and then a Messenger brings news of victory:

The state is saved, but Earth has drunk the blood  
Of royal brothers, slain by each other’s hand.

Eteokles and Polyneikes have died without offspring. The ancestral spirit of the royal dynasty has now been laid to rest, because the dynasty itself is extinct. The oracle given to Laios has been fulfilled.

In seeking to interpret the general significance of the conclusion, we are hampered by the presence of contradictions due to interpolation of the text, and the spurious elements are not always easy to delimit. It seems clear, however, that, as Æschylus wrote it, the end of the story was marked by a striking deviation from the epic tradition, which he has closely followed hitherto. In that tradition, both brothers had sons, and the son of Polyneikes avenged his father by a second expedition against the city, which resulted in its destruction. By bringing the story to an end with the death of the two brothers, he has reduced its compass from four generations to three, thus adapting it to the form of the trilogy; and by the same means he has produced a conclusion, in which, while the clan has perished, the state survives, thus developing the full
implications of the oracle. The Theban kings were under an ancestral curse which brought successive calamities on the people as well as on themselves, and therefore it is necessary that the primitive system of kinship, which the ancestral curse implies, should be superseded by the higher organisation of the state, in which the clans lose their identity in common citizenship. Owing to the condition of the text, this interpretation is necessarily conjectural and probably incomplete, but, if it is substantially correct, it means that Æschylus was already moving towards the general theory of the origin of the state which he formulated nine years later in the Oresteia.
XVII

PROMETHEIA

PROMETHEUS, it was once said, is the patron saint of the proletariat.

It was Prometheus who bestowed on man the gift of fire, which he had brought down from the sun stored in a fennel stalk. That is the primitive nucleus of the myth, which can be traced in this or similar forms all over the world. It is a genuine folk-memory of the earliest and one of the most revolutionary steps in the advancement of material technique. Its significance in this respect has been well described by Gordon Childe.¹

In the comparatively short evolutionary history documented by fossil remains, man has not improved his inherited equipment by bodily changes detectable in his skeleton. Yet he has been able to adjust himself to a greater range of environments than almost any other creature, to multiply infinitely faster than any other near relative among the higher mammals, and to beat the polar bear, the hare, the hawk, and the tiger at their special tricks. Through his control of fire and the skill to make clothes and houses, man can, and does, live and thrive from the Arctic Circle to the Equator. In the trains and cars he builds, man can outstrip the fleetest hare or ostrich. In aeroplanes he can mount higher than the eagle, and with telescopes see farther than the hawk. With firearms he can lay low animals that a tiger dare not tackle. But fire, clothes, houses, trains, aeroplanes, telescopes and guns are not, we must repeat, part of man’s body. He can leave them and lay them aside at will. They are not inherited in the biological sense, but the skill needed for their production and use is part of our social heritage, the result of a tradition accumulated over many generations, and transmitted, not in the blood, but through speech and writing.

In the myth of Prometheus, the first of these technical advances became a symbol for the rest. Fire stands for the
material basis of civilisation. That is the one constant element in the myth. The others vary, because this myth has a history of its own, being continuously reinterpreted and adapted to new developments in the process of which it is a symbol. The higher stages of that process were conditional, as we have seen, on the division of society into economically unequal classes—into those that performed the actual labour of production and those that enjoyed the wealth and leisure thus produced. This division created, among the rulers, the need to justify their privileged position, and, among the ruled, a sense of frustration springing from the perception that their own wealth and leisure had not kept pace with the increasing productivity of their work. The primitive form of the myth, which simply registered the pride of the community in the success of its collective struggle against its material environment, was no longer adequate, because out of the struggle between man and Nature had now emerged the struggle between man and man. Accordingly, it was complicated and elaborated.

The peasants of Hesiod were hungry and oppressed. Why were they condemned to toil so hard and enjoy so little? Because man had sinned against his masters. Once the human race had lived in happiness without sickness or labour or the need to win their bread in the sweat of their brows. That was the Reign of Kronos, when the untilled earth had brought forth of itself abundance of good things, which all men enjoyed in common; and in those days, of course, they had possessed the gift of fire. This happy state of things was brought to an end through the culpability of Prometheus, who, at a banquet of the gods, tried to cheat Zeus of the special portion which was his due. In punishment for this offence Zeus deprived man of fire. Prometheus replied by stealing it from heaven and restoring it to man. Zeus then impaled him on a rock, where he was tormented by an eagle, which visited him daily to devour his liver, until he was released by Herakles. Meanwhile, the human race remained in possession of the gift of fire, but to it was added another gift—Pandora and her box, which, when the lid was removed, let loose over the world labour, sorrow, sickness and a multitude of plagues. And so, Hesiod tells his listeners, had it not been for Prometheus, who provoked the gods into
withholding from men their means of living, "you would have been able to do easily in a day enough work to keep you for a year, to hang up your rudder in the chimney corner, and let your fields run to waste.”

Thus, for the peasants of Hesiod, Prometheus, the pioneer in man's conquest of nature, had been degraded to the level of a common malefactor. Material progress has been complicated by the class struggle in such a way that for them, instead of enlarging, it has diminished the sum of human happiness. Such was the form which the myth had assumed under the aristocracy. But that form was not final any more than the aristocracy itself.

The story of Prometheus is not mentioned in the Homeric poems, nor, so far as we know, was it treated in choral lyric. It was not the sort of story to appeal to members of the aristocracy. In our records, its next exponent after Hesiod is Æschylus himself; but, while his version was doubtless to a large extent his own creation, it contains certain structural features which clearly have their roots in the mystical teaching of the Orphics. At the beginning of the trilogy, Prometheus describes himself as banished from the company of the gods and as about to endure an agony that will last thousands of years; throughout the first play his torments are described with reference to the idea of Ananke or Necessity; at the end of it he is hurled down into Hades, whence, at the opening of the second, he has been brought up again to earth; and, finally, after his penance has lasted for a total period of 30,000 years, he is readmitted to Olympus. This is the Orphic Wheel of Necessity—the cycle that leads the soul from divinity to birth and death and thence back to divinity. In the words of Empedokles:

There is an oracle of Necessity, an ordinance of the gods, ancient, eternal and sealed by broad oaths, that whenever one of the daimones, whose portion is length of days, has sinfully stained his hands with blood or followed strife or forsworn himself, he shall be banished from the abodes of the blessed for thrice ten thousand seasons, being born throughout the time in all manner of mortal shapes, exchanging one toilsome path for another. . . . One of these am I now, an exile
and a wanderer from the gods, because I put my trust in insensate strife.

Alas, unhappy race of men, bitterly unblest, such are the groans and struggles from which ye have been born!

But at the last they appear among mankind as prophets, poets, physicians and princes; and thence they arise as gods, exalted in honour, sharing with the other gods a common hearth and table, free from the miseries of mortality, without part therein, untroubled.

Set against this background, the sufferings of the Æschylean Prometheus appear as the sufferings of man himself, cast down from heaven into misery and death but destined to rise again.

The cults of Prometheus were few and insignificant. At Athens, he was worshipped in the Academy together with Athena and Hephaistos, who were also closely associated with the handicrafts that man had learnt from his control of fire. All three were honoured with torch races, run by the épheboi from some point outside the city to one of the altars within it with the object of renewing the sacred fire. In origin, these races were probably ordeals of initiation, like the foot-races at Olympia.

Prometheus was delivered by Herakles, a figure far more prominent both in myth and cult, and far too complex to be discussed in detail here. He was a son of Zeus by Alkmene, a descendant of Io, and he was sent into the world to clear it of primeval monsters for the benefit of man. The last of his labours was a descent into Hades, for which he prepared himself by initiation at Eleusis, and after it he ascended into heaven and received in marriage Hera’s daughter, Hebe. Here, too, we can discern traces of the mystical sequence of strife, death, and deification.

Turning to the *Prometheus Bound*, the first question that we ask ourselves is, where does the poet intend our sympathies to lie as between the two antagonists? It is a vital question, because the answer to it necessarily reveals so much both in the poet and his critics. If modern readers of the play have given sharply divergent answers to this question, it is not, as we shall see, because there is any ambiguity in the play itself, but because, on an issue so crucial as that of rebellion against the
established order, they have been forced to disclose their own attitude to contemporary society. Thus, Mahaffy expressed himself as follows:

Despotic sovereignty was the Greek’s ideal for himself, and most nations have thought it not only reconcilable with, but conformable to, the dignity of the great Father who rules the world. No Athenian, however he sympathised with Prometheus, would think of blaming him for asserting his power and crushing all resistance to his will.

What Mahaffy has done is to shut his eyes to the democratic tradition and to present as the Greek’s ideal for himself Mahaffy’s ideal for himself—the ideal of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, as formulated by another member of the same class, Edmund Burke:

Good order is the foundation of all good things. To be enabled to acquire, the people, without being servile, must be tractable and obedient. The magistrate must have his reverence, the laws their authority. The body of the people must not find the principles of natural subordination by art rooted out of their minds. They must respect that property of which they cannot partake. They must labour to obtain what by labour can be obtained; and, when they find, as they commonly do, the success disproportioned to the endeavour, they must be taught their consolation in the final proportions of eternal justice.

I still remember my dismay, when, after reading the play for the first time at school, I was asked to accept Mahaffy’s view, and the comfort I derived from Shelley’s reassuring words: “But in truth I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind.” Later we shall examine Shelley’s treatment of the myth, and see where and why it differed from the Æschylean; but, so far as the first play of the trilogy is concerned, Shelley’s intuition was sound—there Zeus is the “oppressor of mankind” and their champion’s “perfidious adversary.” And the reason why Shelley came nearer to the truth than classical scholars, who have studied the evidence far more closely than he did, is
that Shelley was, like Æschylus himself, what they never were—a revolutionary poet.

Zeus is a tyrant and his rule is a tyranny. We learn this from his own ministers, who are proud of it (10); from Prometheus, who denounces it (238, 321, 373, 762, 782, 941, 974, 988–90, 1028); from the Ocean Nymphs, who deplore it (201); and from the God of Ocean, who is resigned to it (326). The fact is incontestable, and the only question is how the dramatist intended his audience to interpret it.

The history of the tyranny at Athens has been reviewed in an earlier chapter, where we saw how the progressive character of its opening phase became obscured in retrospect by the reactionary tendencies which it subsequently developed (p. 93). We also saw that, when the Athenians had to face a Persian landing at Marathon, the exiled Hippias was on the Persian side; and, even after the Persian menace had been removed, Athenian democrats found it necessary to remain constantly on their guard against the danger that some influential aristocrat, a Miltiades or an Alkibiades, might make a bid for the position which Hippias had lost. The result was that, in the fifth century at Athens, there grew up a traditional conception of the tyrant, endowed with all the qualities which the people had experienced in Hippias; and eventually, owing partly to similar experiences elsewhere and partly to the dominant influence exercised by Attic writers in the development of thought, this tradition became fixed.9 Thus, Herodotus describes the tyrant as irresponsible, with a dangerous tendency towards pride, suspicions of his best citizens, and, above all, violent, a ravisher of women. Similar arguments are repeated by Theseus in his dispute with the herald from Argos in the Suppliants of Euripides. The tyrant is a law to himself; he cuts off his leading citizens as he might the tallest ears of corn (in accordance with the advice which, so Herodotus tells us, was actually given by one tyrant to another); and, lastly, parents cannot safeguard their daughters from his violence.

The tragedians were naturally quick to turn this tradition to dramatic advantage. In the Antigone, for example, the heroine bitterly declares that one of the privileges of the tyranny is to do and say what it likes; and in the Persians Atossa raises her
defeated son above the reach of popular reproach with the
significant reminder that he is not responsible to his people. In
the Ædipus Tyrannus, as Sheppard has shown, the character of
the king is thrown into ominous relief by a number of such
allusions, which, though for the most part implicit, were readily
appreciated by an audience made familiar with such technique
by Æschylus.

The ministers whom Zeus has appointed to escort Prometheus
to his place of confinement are Might and Violence, the one
signifying his power, the other the method by which he exer-
cises it. He is described as harsh (202, 340), as irresponsible
(340), as unconstitutional, acknowledging no laws but his own,
a law to himself (159, 419, 202–3); he is suspicious of his
friends—a feature described expressly as characteristic of the
tyrant (240–1); implacable and impervious to persuasion (34,
199–201, 349); and, above all, in his treatment of Io, he reveals
his violence (761–3). The brutality of this episode is not, as in
the Suppliant, veiled in lyric poetry; on the contrary, the poet
seems to be at pains to fill his audience, like his own Oceanids,
with abhorrence. Zeus tried first persuasion and then threats
to bend the unhappy girl to his will. This is the method
Prometheus expected of him, and it is typical of the tyrant.
Hence there can be no question where the sympathies of an
Athenian audience must have lain—or, indeed, of any popular
audience—when Prometheus breaks off his prediction of Io’s
future agonies with the impassioned cry (761):

Is it not plain to you
That the tyrant of the gods is violent
In all his ways alike?

In view of this evidence, it is fairly clear that those critics who
can pass judgment against the hero who has dared to rebel
against this heartless despotism have been influenced by factors
independent of the dramatist’s intention.

The characterisation of Prometheus is more complex. In the
opening scene, the sinister figure of Violence eyes the prisoner
in silence. Might assails him with insults as he spurs Hephaistos
to the task of binding him, but does not address him directly
till he flings at him his parting taunt (82–7). Hephaistos alone
is filled with compassion. He recognises his crime, by which indeed, as god of fire, he has been particularly affected; yet he forgets his own loss in sympathy for the sufferer. Prometheus is silent.

The compassion of Hephaistos is that of kin for kin (14, 39). The same feeling prompts the visit of the Ocean Nymphs (130–1) and is professed by their father Ocean (305–6), who counsels moderation, but with an underlying subservience to authority that marks him as a type of the trimmer or con-
former; and Prometheus dismisses him with politely veiled contempt. The Ocean Nymphs have said nothing in the presence of their father, but after his departure they are forced to confess that with them, too, sympathy is tempered with disapproval. So far the indignation of Prometheus has been controlled; but during his discourse with Io we feel the anger rising in him, and, when his enemy’s victim is carried away in a sudden agony of pain, the reaction is immediate. The Nymphs, horrified and terrified, bow down in helpless sub-
mission. Prometheus, on the other hand, hurls at his antagonist a speech of reckless denunciation and defiance. Yet he does not forfeit our sympathy, because this change of attitude corresponds to our own reaction to the brutality of Zeus manifested in the spectacle of Io. The Nymphs remonstrate, but he is deaf to their appeals. Hermes arrives with a peremptory demand that he shall reveal the secret with which he threatens his master’s supremacy; yet even Hermes, when he perceives the prisoner’s state of mind, joins with the Nymphs in a sincere attempt to reason with him. But Prometheus, who received the insults of Might in silence, himself assails Hermes with insults; and in dramatic fulfilment of his own prayer (161–8, 1083–6) he is cast into the pit of Tartarus. The ambivalent effect of the last scene on the audience is faithfully reflected in the attitude of the Chorus, who, while disapproving as strongly as Hermes of the prisoner’s lack of restraint, nevertheless refuse to desert him.

Thus, the play ends in a deadlock. The ruler of the gods is a tyrant, the champion of mankind has been reproved by his own friends for exceeding the bounds of moderation. The wrath of Zeus is a disease, and the unrestraint of Prometheus is a disease. This metaphor, which is of course intended to suggest the hope
of a cure to come, recurs again and again throughout the play. The world is out of joint, and only a change in both antagonists can set it right.

While insisting on the tyrannical nature of the rule of Zeus, Aeschylus is careful to impress on us at the outset, and to remind us repeatedly, that his power is new. He is displaying the world not as it is now but as it was in the beginning. In the course of 30,000 years, taught by experience, the adversaries will be reconciled. So we are told, early in the play, by Prometheus himself, whose vision is as yet unclouded by passion (206–8). Later, forgetting his own prophecy, he can foresee nothing in store for his enemy but destruction (939–59); but the truth re-emerges in his final altercation with Hermes (1011–14). Reminded of his lost bliss, Prometheus inadvertently utters a cry of grief—“Ah me!”—of which Hermes is quick to take advantage:

“Ah me!”—that is a cry unknown to Zeus.

At the mention of his enemy, Prometheus recovers himself:

All things are being taught by ageing Time.

But again Hermes is ready with his retort:

Yes, you have yet to learn where wisdom lies.

With this allusion to the doctrine of wisdom through suffering, the scattered hints of an impending change in both antagonists are significantly brought together at the end of the play.

It is clear, therefore, that in the sequel both antagonists will learn by experience; but of course that is very far from saying that Prometheus ought not to have done what he has done. It is true that, when they hear of his theft of fire, the Oceanids exclaim, shocked by his audacity, that he has sinned; but, if so, it is a sin which has saved humanity from annihilation, and, if any further doubt remain as to the dramatist’s attitude on this point, it is dispelled by the hero’s narration of the consequences of his sin for the destiny of man (458–522):

No more of that, for it is known to you,
But listen to the sufferings of mankind,
In whom, once speechless, senseless, like a child,
I planted mind and the gift of understanding...
At first, with eyes to see, they saw in vain,
With ears to hear, they heard not, groping through
Their lives at random, like figures in a dream,
All in a blind confusion, without the skill
To carve in wood or build against the sun
Houses of brick, but sheltering like ants
In sun-forsaken subterranean caverns,
With no sure sign of approaching winter's frosts,
No herald of spring-blossoms or the ripe
Fruits of the harvest, labouring without wit
In all their works, till I instructed them
In the mysterious courses of the stars,
In the art of number, a most excellent
Invention, in the written alphabet,
The Muses' mother, the world's memorial.
And I first tamed the wild beasts of the field,
Enslaved in pack and harness, to relieve
The human labourer of his heaviest loads,
And yoked in chariots, quick to obey the rein,
Proud, prancing ornaments of high estate,
And I it was contrived the mariner's car
On hempen wing riding the trackless ocean...
Nay, hear the rest, and you shall marvel more
At the resource of my imagination.
Of all the chief was this—when men fell sick,
They knew no remedy, no shredded herb,
No draught to drink or ointment—in default
Of physic their strength was wasting, until I
Discovered gently tempered medicines
To shield them from all manner of disease...
All this I gave, and more—beneath the earth,
Long-buried benefits of humanity,
Iron and bronze, silver and gold, who else
Can claim to have discovered these but I?
None, I know well, unless an idle chatterer.
In these few words learn briefly my whole story:
Prometheus founded all the arts of man.

All this, as the details of the passage show, belongs to the tradition of the Pythagoreans—the same tradition which we
have illustrated from Hippokrates’ account of the origin of medicine (p. 218); and the striking thing about it is its bold materialism. This combination of materialism with mysticism, which we have already noticed in the work of Æschylus, was evidently characteristic of the early Pythagoreans. We find it again in Empedokles, whose preoccupation with the revival of magical practices and beliefs did not prevent him from making solid contributions to science. How the Pythagoreans reconciled these two sides to their teaching, we do not know; but it seems clear that, while the first was derived from the Orphic movement, of which their own was an offshoot, they owed the second to their political activity in the initial stage of the democratic revolution; and from them it was transmitted through Hippokrates and the sophists to Demokritos and Epicurus.

The mythical form in which Æschylus has clothed this tradition does not disguise its essential significance—on the contrary, the myth itself has been reinterpreted so as to throw into relief the underlying doctrine that progress is the outcome of conflict. If Prometheus has erred, it is because es irit der Mensch solang er strebt. The champions of a new order offend inevitably against the old. If Prometheus has to suffer, it is because man himself has suffered in the course of his advancement. Without suffering he would have lacked the stimulus to invention. The truth which both Æschylus and Hippokrates, in different ways, were seeking to express was one that had been grasped in practice by primitive man from the earliest stages of his history and was eventually formulated by Epicurus in the words:10

Human nature was taught much by the sheer force of circumstances, and these lessons were taken over by human reason, refined and supplemented.

The view of human progress expressed by Æschylus is therefore not far removed from the position of modern dialectical materialism:11

Until we acquire knowledge of the laws of nature, which exist and act independently of our mind, we are slaves of “blind necessity.” When we acquire knowledge of them, we acquire mastery of nature.
Intelligence, the gift of Prometheus, had made man free, because it had enabled him to comprehend, and so to control, the laws of nature. Freedom consists in the understanding of necessity.

The *Prometheus* contains very little action; yet it is intensely dramatic. Technically, it is the most accomplished of the extant plays, and shows that by the end of his life Æschylus had become an absolute master of his craft. It is therefore worth examining in some detail from this point of view.

The play contains three marked pauses. The first is at the end of the *párodos* (208) after Prometheus' first prediction of the future, which carries us, without revealing the intermediate steps, to the ultimate reconciliation, and at the same time lets fall the first allusion to his secret. The second comes at the end of the second episode (541), where he declines to reveal this secret, which, we are now told, is to be the means of his deliverance. And the third comes at the end of the next episode (912), after he has predicted the actual coming of his deliverer. These pauses divide the play into four movements. In the first, Prometheus is nailed to the rock; in the second he relates the past history of gods and men; in the third he predicts the future; in the fourth he is cast into Tartarus.

Each of these movements has an internal structure of its own. Each falls into three parts, except the third, which falls into two such sets of three. Further, in each set of three, there is an organic relation between the first and third parts, the second being in the nature of a digression or development. Thus, in the first movement, Prometheus is punished by his enemies; he delivers his soliloquy; and he is visited by his friends, the Ocean Nymphs. In the second, he relates the story of the war among the gods and his own services to Zeus; he is interrupted by the visit of the God of Ocean; and he proceeds to relate his services to man. In the first part of the third movement, Io appears and entreats him to reveal her future; at the request of the Oceanids she tells the story of her past; and then, after predicting her wanderings as far as the borders of Asia, Prometheus hints at the fall of Zeus and his own deliverance. In the second part, he continues his prophecy as far as her destination in Egypt; then, in proof of his veracity, he reverts to her past (thus completing
her own account); and, finally, he predicts her ultimate fate and the coming of his deliverer. In the fourth movement, he alludes once again, more openly, to his secret, which, he now declares, will effect his enemy’s downfall; the emissary of Zeus seeks in vain to extort his secret from him; and Prometheus is cast into Tartarus.

Now turn to the choral odes, which are integral links in this development. In the párodos, the Oceanids offer the sympathy of the gods (169–70): Prometheus goes on to relate his services to the gods. In the first stásimon (413–51) they sing of the compassion of mankind: Prometheus relates his services to humanity. In the second stásimon (413–51) they sing of the helplessness of man and contrast his present state with the happiness of his wedding day: Io appears, helpless mortal persecuted by a brutal suitor (765–6). The theme of the third stásimon (913–38) is wisdom; and this prepares us for the final scene, in which they join with Hermes in an appeal to the sufferer to follow the course of wisdom.

Thus, the subject of the first movement is the binding of Prometheus—the present; of the second, the history of the past; of the third, the destiny of Io and the birth of Herakles—the future; and the fourth movement, with its increase of the penalty, balances the first. Yet, throughout the play, these threads of present, past and future are interwoven with such skill that at each turning-point our attention is thrown with increasing emphasis on the future. The opening speech of Might ends with a declaration that Prometheus must be taught by suffering to accept the tyranny of Zeus (10–11) while the speech of Hephaistos which follows ends with a suggestion that the tyrant himself, in course of time, will change his ways (35); and both these themes will be developed in the párodos (180–201). In the middle of his task Hephaistos utters the impassioned cry, “Alas, Prometheus! it is for you I weep” (66). The retort of Might comes at the close of the scene, where our attention is redirected to the future (85–7):

Your name is false, Prometheus, God of Foresight!
Now you need all your foresight for yourself
To shuffle off this piece of craftsmanship!
And again this parting insult will be answered at the end of the first movement, where we are permitted a glimpse of the final reconciliation, welcomed by both antagonists (202–8).

We are brought back abruptly to the past (209). At the request of the Nymphs, who entreat him to "reveal all things," Prometheus reluctantly begins his exposition. Later, shocked by his audacity, the Nymphs are anxious to change the subject (277–8); but now it is Prometheus who insists on continuing, urging them to listen to his revelation of the future (288–9). Then comes the interlude—the visit of the God of Ocean. After his departure the exposition is resumed, leading to the end of the second movement, where, eagerly questioned about the secret to which he alluded at the end of the first, Prometheus draws back, refusing to disclose it (538–41):

No, think of other things. This is no time
To speak of that. That is my secret, which
Must be kept closely veiled. By guarding that,
From agony and shame I shall escape!

To resume, we have seen that the opening speeches of the play ended by directing our attention to the future, thus anticipating the close of the binding scene and the climax at the end of the first movement, the last speech of the párodoς. The second movement began by taking us back into the past; but at the end of the first of its three parts and still more intently at the end of the third we looked once again to the future. Then comes the Io scene, so divided as to throw the future into still greater prominence: future, past, future; future, past, future. Hence the tremendous effect, like a goal to which the whole exposition has been straining, of the prophecy of the coming of Herakles (897–9), which, again, is abruptly broken off, and then crowned at the opening of the last movement (939–59) by the completion of that other motive, the fatal secret, which marked the culmination of the first movement and again of the second. The narrations and predictions of Prometheus have been handled with such artistic mastery of the material as to concentrate at the end of the play our whole attention on the sequel.
That sequel has been lost, but some important fragments of the second play, the *Prometheus Unbound*, have survived.

The play began with the entry of the Chorus of Titans. Many thousands of years have elapsed, giving time for many changes, on earth and in heaven. Prometheus is still chained to his rock, but he has been restored from Tartarus to the light of day. The Titans describe their voyage from the banks of Ocean, where the Sun waters his horses after their day’s labour, to the borders of Europe and Asia. They are brothers of Prometheus—bound to him therefore by ties closer than those which wrung compassion from Hephaistos and brought the God of Ocean and his daughters to his solitary rock. In the war against Kronos they had sided with the old order, and for this offence Zeus cast them, with Kronos, into Tartarus. They have now been released; and Kronos, too, we may presume, in accordance with the tradition, has been removed to his new home in the Islands of the Blest. Zeus has learnt to temper his power with mercy. No doubt the Titans recount these events to their brother. They can hardly fail to make a deep impression on him; but, as at the beginning of the first play, Prometheus is silent.

His opening words have survived in a Latin translation by Cicero. He appeals to them to bear witness to his agony. Pierced by cruel bonds and tormented by the eagle whose coming Hermes had predicted, he longs for the death which is denied to him. The speech is as notable for the speaker’s absorption in physical pain as his speeches in the first play are notable for his indifference to it. There is not a word of his deliverer, not a word of his secret. And he longs to die. In the first play, which represented a time when the will of Zeus had been weaker than the Moirai (531–4), he had dared Zeus to do his worst, defiantly declaring that he was fated not to die (1086). Now he laments that he is being kept alive by the will of Zeus himself. The implication is that during the interval Zeus and the Moirai have come together. The old and the new are being reconciled.

The ensuing scenes must have acquainted the audience with the changes that have taken place in the interval between the two plays; but it is likely that on this occasion the narrator is
not Prometheus himself, who is hardly in a position to know what has happened, but the Titans, who, we may suppose, relate for their brother’s benefit both the advances which Zeus has made in the consolidation of his power and the mercy he has begun to extend to his former enemies. In the first play we learnt that, but for the intervention of Prometheus, Zeus would have destroyed the human race; but we may be certain that any such intention has been abandoned, because, as we shall see, the greatest of his sons is shortly to be sent down to earth for the improvement of their lot. Thus, if Prometheus remains obdurate, his motive can no longer be fear for the future of mankind: it can only be resentment for past wrongs. And if the Titans proceed to advise their brother to prepare the way for his own release by surrendering the secret which Zeus demands of him, appealing, like the God of Ocean, for wisdom and restraint (325–6), their advice, unlike his, will not be ignoble: they will urge him to submit to his old enemy, not merely because he rules the world, but because he now rules it well. Nor can Prometheus reply, as he did to the Oceanids, that advice comes ill from those who are not themselves in trouble (279–81), because his brothers’ sufferings have been hardly less terrible than his own. Yet, in view of further evidence, we must, I think, assume that Prometheus rejects their appeal. He cannot yet bring himself, by revealing his secret before his release, to “unsay his high language.”

In the Medicean manuscript of Æschylos, the list of dramatis personæ prefixed to the Prometheus Bound includes the names of Ge, the Goddess of Earth, and Herakles. As it is known that Herakles appeared in the Prometheus Unbound, it is generally agreed that both names have been inserted by mistake from another list, which gave the characters of the second play or of the two plays together.

The Goddess of Earth was traditionally regarded as the most ancient and in some ways the most august of the divinities of Greece—the origin of all things into which all things return, and the fountain of all wisdom, from whom all prophets, divine and human, drew their inspiration. And she was the mother of Prometheus. It was to her that he appealed in his opening soliloquy and again at the end of the first play to bear witness
to his wrongs. From her he learnt the destined course of the war in heaven, and at her advice he took the part of Zeus. It was she who foretold to him the coming of his deliverer, and it was she who imparted to him his secret.

It has already been noted how in the first play both Hephaistos and the God of Ocean stressed their kinship with the prisoner, and how at the beginning of the second he is visited by still closer kinsmen, the sons of Earth. Their visit is followed by a visit from the Goddess of Earth herself, which will thus mark the culmination of a motive introduced at the beginning of the trilogy. And we may infer that her purpose is similar to theirs—to offer him her sympathy, and at the same time to urge upon him the wisdom of submission. The voice of his mother is now added to the entreaties of the rest of his kin, beseeching him to soften his obduracy and remove the bar to his deliverance.

His secret is this. If Zeus unites with Thetis, she will bear him a son who will overthrow him. Now, in the tradition recorded by later writers, Zeus was actually in pursuit of Thetis when the revelation of the secret deterred him. Thus, the situation is highly dramatic. Prometheus has only to hold out a little longer, and the downfall of his enemy is assured. On the other hand, his mother pleads with him to submit, before it is too late, not merely in order to effect his own release, but to prevent the fall of Zeus, who, no longer the vindictive tyrant who sought the extinction of the human race, has already, in the birth of Herakles, taken them under his care. Prometheus is asked, not to quail before his adversary, but to sacrifice his pride for the sake of that very race for which he has already sacrificed far more.

With regard to the actual manner of the revelation, it should be observed that, since the Goddess of Earth is as well acquainted with the secret as Prometheus himself, all she requires is his permission to divulge it. There is no need for it to pass his lips. And, further, if she is intent on such a mission, she will take advantage of the occasion to urge Zeus to deliver Prometheus in return for his own deliverance. And what more influential mediator could be found than the goddess who is the author of the being of Zeus himself, as of all created beings,
who helped him to his supremacy, who is, moreover, the personification of Right?

It is at this point, I believe, that Prometheus yields: but one further agony awaits him. After his mother's departure, he hears a rush of wings. We remember the alarm in which he awaited the coming of the Ocean Nymphs, and how they hastened to reassure him. This time his fears are well-founded. The eagle is returning to its feast. Prometheus bends his gaze in the direction from which it is approaching. From the opposite direction appears a warrior, armed with bow and spear and clad in the famous lion skin. He draws his bow and, with a prayer to Apollo, whose gift it is, he shoots the eagle down. Recognising his deliverer, Prometheus greets him as "a hated father's son beloved," and we may suppose that he followed up this greeting with an appeal to Herakles to release him from bondage in accordance with his destiny. Herakles, however, who has now learnt who the sufferer is, may well be reluctant to assist his father's inveterate enemy. Prometheus will then explain that he has already removed the main obstacle to their reconciliation, and will doubtless recall the services which he rendered many centuries before to his ancestress on that very spot. Moreover, he can direct him on his travels and foretell what the future holds in store for him when his labours are at an end. He is now eager to let flow the fount of prophecy, which he unsealed so reluctantly to Io, if only his own request is granted in return. Herakles "pities the suppliant." Prometheus is to predict his future, and in return Herakles will release him. An arrangement of this kind, parallel to the bargain struck by Prometheus with Io and the Oceanids (804–11), would enable the dramatist to reserve the climax of the actual release for the end of the scene.

The surviving fragments suffice to show that, just as the wanderings of Io covered the eastern and southern limits of the world, so those of Herakles will extend to the north and west. The two prophecies are complementary, embracing the whole surface of the earth. In particular, we know from other sources that it was Prometheus who directed Herakles to the Garden of the Hesperides and instructed him how to get the Golden Apples with the help of Atlas, to whom we were
introduced in the first play. We also know that in the second
the dramatist explained the origin of the constellation called the
Kneeling Herakles. During his fight with the Ligurians on his
way to the Hesperides, the hero’s weapons gave out and he
was forced to his knees. This means that Prometheus predicted
that, in memory of this encounter, the image of Herakles, like
that of other departed heroes, would be set after his death
among the stars. That being so, the prophecy can hardly have
ended with the quest of the Golden Apples, or even with the
last of the hero’s labours, the descent into Hades, without some
allusion to his final destiny—his ascent into Heaven. It must
have been carried to its proper conclusion in the deification of
the hero, in harmony with the prediction to Io, which con-
cluded with his birth.

Prometheus has now fulfilled his part of the agreement; it
remains for Herakles to fulfil his. The hero mounts the rock
and shatters the handiwork of Hephaistos.

We still await the result of Earth’s mission to Zeus, and we
also remember that at the close of the first play Zeus declared
through the medium of his emissary, that the sufferings of
Prometheus could not end until he had found another god to
surrender his immortality in his stead (1058–61). It is pos-
sible, therefore, that Hermes reappears. He announces first of
all that the mediation of Earth has been successful. With the
revelation of the secret the cause of offence has been removed,
although, for reasons which will appear immediately, it is
probable that the formal reconciliation has still to be effected.
Further, it is possible that Zeus transfers part of his displeasure
to his son, who, as predicted of him, has delivered the prisoner
without the Father’s consent (797). Herakles is said to have
bound himself with olive—probably in allusion to the olive
planted by Athena in the Academy at Athens; and the motive
for this act appears to have been his desire to avert his father’s
anger by binding himself vicariously on the prisoner’s behalf.
This point is dramatically important, because it provides a
starting-point for the third play. In the regular manner of the
trilogy, one difficulty is solved by the creation of another.
Finally, the prisoner must find a substitute. At this point
Herakles comes forward and explains that he has accidentally
wounded the Centaur, Cheiron, who, suffering incurable pain, longs to die, but cannot: let him, therefore, relinquish his immortality in place of Prometheus. His offer accepted, Herakles departs, with the blessings of all present, to fulfil the remainder of his historic destiny.

If we consider the situation in which the dramatist has left us, we see that, just as in the first play the prophecy to Io raised an expectation which has only been satisfied by its fulfilment in the second—namely, the coming of Herakles—the prophecy to Herakles has now raised an expectation no less far-reaching, his deification; and our minds will not be at rest until we are assured that this, too, has been realised. It is therefore difficult to resist the conclusion that the plot of the third play was concerned, not merely with the readmission of Prometheus to Olympus, but with the future of Herakles. The destinies of the two heroes have become interlocked, and at the close of the second play our interest has been transferred in some measure to the latter.

Before leaving the Prometheus Unbound, let us compare its structure, so far as it can be recovered, with that of the Prometheus Bound. The silence of Prometheus at the opening of the first play is balanced by his silence at the opening of the second; the visit of the God of Ocean in the first by the visit of the Goddess of Earth in the second; the Daughters of Ocean, the chorus of the first play, by the Sons of Earth, the chorus of the second; the wanderings of Io in the east and south by the wanderings of her descendant in the north and west; the prophecy of the birth of the great benefactor of mankind by the prophecy of his deification. Thus, it appears that the two plays were constructed with that organic symmetry which the study of his other work has led us to expect.

The third play was entitled Prometheus the Fire-bearer. This epithet probably refers to the torch which Pausanias saw (mistaking it for a sceptre) in the right hand of the archaic image of Prometheus in the Academy, where, as already noted, the god was worshipped as one of the three divinities who had taught man the use of fire and were honoured with annual torch races.

We have already made some progress with the conclusion
of the trilogy. In the first place, Prometheus is a suppliant, seeking readmission to Olympus. In the Oresteia, the suppliant was saved by the intervention of Athena, the goddess of wisdom and patroness of the city which claimed to uphold that virtue among men. The same goddess had an ancient connection with Prometheus. We are told that Prometheus assisted at her birth, when she sprang fully armed from the head of Zeus, and that the two collaborated in the creation of mankind. But above all Prometheus was granted a place in the Academy—an honour which he could not have won without the goddess’s consent. Of the three fire gods, we made the acquaintance of the two elder at the opening of the trilogy, and I believe, therefore, that in the conclusion we were introduced to the youngest and greatest of the three. It is she who reconciles Prometheus with her father and invests him with the human honours that are his due.

Before his descent into Hades, Herakles visited Eleusis with the intention of becoming an initiate, but he was unable to behold the mysteries until he had been cleansed of the blood of the Centaurs: accordingly, he was purified at Agra and then initiated. We are also told that the Lesser Mysteries of Agra were founded by Demeter for the express purpose of purifying Herakles after the slaughter of the Centaurs. These traditions, preserved by Apollodorus and Diodorus, relate to Æschylus’s birthplace. They must have been known to him, and it is extremely probable that they were derived by the later writers from him. It appears, therefore, that here again the poet was working with an ulterior purpose—namely, the inception at the end of the trilogy of another and far more important feature of Athenian ritual, the Lesser Mysteries of Demeter.

The agony of Io was due in part to the jealousy of Hera, and her descendant suffered much from the same cause. Ultimately, however, when Herakles was admitted to Olympus, he was reconciled with Hera and received in marriage her own daughter, Hebe, the goddess of eternal youth. Furthermore, if the marriage of Herakles and Hebe signifies the reconciliation of Hera with the House of Io, it signifies just as clearly her reconciliation with her lord. Her hostility to Io and Herakles was prompted by conjugal jealousy, of which Zeus was the
guilty cause. In the first play we saw Zeus heartlessly pursuing a mortal girl; in the second we saw him in pursuit of Thetis; but in the third, when he joins with Hera in blessing the union of their son and daughter, the two stand together as guardians of the sanctity of marriage, thus marking a further step in the advancement of humanity.

In the beginning, Zeus crucified Prometheus for the salvation of mankind. In the course of time, which taught wisdom to them both, Prometheus saved Zeus from destruction and was himself saved by the son of Zeus, who, under his father’s guidance, carried on the work of Prometheus, clearing the path of human progress; and the divine feud was eventually resolved by Athena, who completed her father’s purpose by her patronage of the city which stands at the summit of human civilisation. Hence, at the close of the trilogy, these three—Prometheus, Herakles, Athena—appear together as representatives of the inception, development and consummation of the idea of God, and as the founder, promoter and perfecter of the destiny of man.

If this view of the trilogy is essentially correct, it means that, for all the profound differences in their interpretation of the myth, Æschylus was continuing the work which Hesiod had begun. The story of Prometheus has now been infused with an intellectual content far beyond the compass of the tale told by the rude peasants of Boiotia; but the advance which the new interpretation marks over Hesiod, no less than his advance on the primitive nucleus of the myth, has only been rendered possible by the underlying advancement of society itself. As the material basis of human life is extended and enriched, there emanates from it an ever-growing profundity and fertility of thought; but, since the material process is continuous, the new being at first secreted within the old, intellectual progress takes the form of incessant adaptations of traditional ideas. Of this truth the legend of Prometheus is a clear example. The work of Æschylus on this subject was so widely known and admired that it might well have fixed the tradition, if anything could have fixed it; but this tradition was no more capable of rest than the world it so vividly reflected. It is therefore interesting to see how the story of Prometheus was subsequently interpreted.
And first I shall unfold from the beginning
The early origin of the life of man.
There was an age long since when mortals dwelt
Like beasts in mountain caverns and ravines
That seldom saw the sunshine, for as yet
They had no vaulted houses and no towns
With walls of stone securely fortified,
No ploughshares to cut deep into the sod
And make it mother corn, no blade of iron
To tend row upon row the blossoming vine.
The earth was still a virgin without child,
And men fed on each other’s flesh, for then
The place of Law was lowly and Violence
Was throned on high at the right hand of Zeus.
But when at last Time, who brings all to birth,
Transformed the manner of our mortal life,
Whether through the contrivance of Prometheus,
Or through Necessity, or whether long
Practice had learned from Nature’s own instruction,
Then men discovered how to bring to fruit
Demeter’s gift, discovered too the draught
Of Dionysus, then, furrowing the soil
With teams of oxen, raising roofs above
Their heads, and founding cities, they
Forsook the beasts and became civilised.

This passage provides just the link in the development of the tradition that our argument has led us to expect. On the one hand, the mythical integument has been shed, the surviving vestiges being no more than poetical embellishments; and one of them, the allusion to Violence, is clearly a conscious reminiscence of the Prometheus Bound, showing that the writer has correctly interpreted the intention of Æschylus in introducing Might and Violence as ministers of the god who was in the beginning “a law to himself.” On the other hand, the mention of Necessity points just as clearly to the fourth-century materialists. The tradition has been stated in a form which would have been equally acceptable to Æschylus and to Epicurus.
Our next evidence is another dramatic fragment—from a play by Plato’s uncle, Kritias:13

There was a time when human life was ruled
By force, being brutal and disorderly,
When there was no reward for righteousness
And wickedness went unpunished. Then, I think,
Men laid down laws as penalties to make
Justice supreme and insolence her slave;
But even then, although the laws restrained
Mankind from deeds of open violence,
They still did wrong in secret, until some
Shrewd and far-sighted thinker had the wit
To invent gods, that all who did or said
Or even imagined evil might be afraid;
And so he introduced the Deity,
Teaching men faith in an eternal spirit
Who sees and hears with his intelligence
And pays close heed to all men say and do.

Here we find ourselves in a different atmosphere. Kritias was one of the Thirty Tyrants who instituted a reign of terror at Athens in the closing years of the Peloponnesian War (404 B.C.). As an active and class-conscious counter-revolutionary, he openly avows the repressive function of “law and order” and recognises with cynical frankness the value of religion as a means of keeping the masses in ignorance and subjection. This analysis of the idea of God, which, if we look to the essence rather than the manner in which it is expressed, is sound, would perhaps have shocked Æschylus; yet his own master Pythagoras is reported to have declared that, realising the need for justice, men had assigned the same function to Themis in Heaven, Dike in Hell, and Nomos on earth, in order that those who committed the sin of disobedience might appear as offenders against the whole structure of the universe;14 and Æschylus himself had taught that God, as well as man, was a product of evolution, the two processes being closely parallel. Further, when we hear that the function of the law is to intimidate, we are reminded of the words which Æschylus put into the mouth of Athena when she instituted the reign of law in the
Oresteia—"What man shall be upright without fear?" The later work of Æschylus has brought us to a point in the history of Athens at which the isonomía of the middle-class supporters of Kleisthenes is being revealed with increasing clarity as an instrument to be used by that class for the enforced maintenance of its own privileged position.

Returning to Prometheus, the story of his services to man is told again by Plato in a new version which he puts into the mouth of Protagoras in the dialogue of that name.\(^{15}\) It seems to me that this version owes more to Plato himself than to Protagoras, but, without entering into that question, we may agree with Burnet that it is the work of "a strong believer in organised society." It may be summarised as follows.

Living creatures were made by the gods out of earth and fire. After they had been created, Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus (a foil to the god of Foresight, ignored by Æschylus but going back to Hesiod) bestowed on them their appropriate faculties, giving them hoofs or wings or underground dwellings, so that each species might have the means of self-defence; wrapping them in furs and skins for shelter against the cold; ordaining that some should be the natural prey of others and at the same time ensuring their survival by making them exceptionally prolific. All this was done by Epimetheus under his brother's direction, but at the end of his task he found that he had inadvertently bestowed all the available faculties on the animals, leaving none for man. Faced with this difficulty, Prometheus gave men fire, which he stole from its owners, Hephaistos and Athena, and he was subsequently prosecuted for theft. Being akin to the divine, men were distinguished from the other animals by their innate belief in God and by their faculty of speech. They began to make clothes and shoes, to build houses and till the soil, and eventually, for protection against the animals, they founded cities. Unfortunately, however, after gathering together in cities, citizen began to prey on citizen; and so, fearing that the race might perish, Zeus commanded Hermes to confer on them the gifts of shame and justice. Asked whether these were to be bestowed indiscriminately or assigned to selected individuals like the specialists in the handicrafts, Zeus replied, "Let them be given to all in
common, and give them too a law from me that any man who cannot partake of shame and justice shall be put to death as an infection in the body politic."

The author of this interpretation is at one with Kritias in his attitude to justice and the law, but shows superior insight in acknowledging that strife between man and man—the class struggle—only began with the inauguration of city life; and he discreetly places man's belief in God far back in the very origins of his existence. In contrast to Æschylus, the divine government of the world is fixed and stable, and the credit for human progress is transferred from Prometheus, whose part is subordinate, to an all-wise, omnipotent and unchanging Zeus.

Let us now see how these things appeared to the lower orders. Philemon was a comic dramatist of the fourth century, and, like the majority of comic dramatists at that time, he was a resident alien, not an Athenian citizen. It was Philemon who said:

The slave has human flesh the same as ours.
Indeed, in Nature all men were born free.

And this is what he said of the gifts of Prometheus which had raised man above the level of the beasts:

Thrice blest and happy are the beasts that have
No reason in these things, no questioning,
Nor other harmful superfluities—
Their law is their own nature; but the life
Of man is more than he can bear—he is
The slave of fancies, he has invented laws.

A similar view was expounded at length by Diogenes the Cynic, a popular philosopher whose social outlook is indicated by his condemnation of the lectures given by Plato to rich young men in the Academy as "a waste of time," and by a remark he is said to have made in Megara, where he saw sheep protected from the weather by leather jackets, while the backs of the children were bare—"It is better," he said, "to be a Megarian's ram than his son."
Diogenes declared that it was luxury that had made human life more miserable than that of the animals. The animals drink water, eat grass, go about naked for the most part all the year round, never enter a house or make use of fire, and so, unless they are slaughtered, they live out the term of years that Nature has appointed for them in health and strength without any need for medicines or physicians. Men, on the other hand, are so attached to life and so ingenious in prolonging it that most of them never reach old age and live burdened with diseases too numerous to mention. It is not enough for them that the earth furnishes them with natural medicines—they must have surgery and cautery as well. . . . As soon as they came together in cities, they began to commit the most terrible crimes against one another, as though that were what they had come together for. Accordingly, he understood the story of how Prometheus was punished by Zeus for the discovery of fire to mean that this was the origin and starting-point of human luxury and fastidiousness; for Zeus, he declared, did not hate mankind nor would he have grudged them anything that was for their good.  

Prometheus has now become an upstart justly punished for the gift of what is regarded, not as a blessing, but as a curse. Diogenes’s view of the corrupting effects of civilised life brings us back to Hesiod—it is the fable of the successive ages of man, each more degenerate than the last, in a new form; and it shows that in his day the struggle between rich and poor in the decaying city-state had bitten into human consciousness as deeply as the old struggle between the landowner and the serf.

It would be an interesting and profitable task to pursue the history of this myth in its successive reinterpretations through the Middle Ages down to our own day; but for the present it must suffice to conclude the subject with some remarks on what Shelley made of it.

Gilbert Murray, who believes that “the strong tradition in the higher kind of Greek poetry, as in good poetry almost everywhere, was to avoid all the disturbing irrelevances of contemporary life,” and can see “no evidence of any political allusions” in the Oresteia, remarks that “it is surprising that out of material so undramatic as a mere contest between pure