

STUDIES IN GREEK TRAGEDY

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Studies in Greek tragedy by Louise E. Matthaei

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BY

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FOUNDED ON LECTURES GIVEN TO SIX STUDENTS
OF NEWNHAM COLLEGE

Cambridge
at the University Press
1918

TO
MY MOTHER AND MY SISTER MARIE

BY
J. M. W. T. S.

PREFACE

THESE essays are not bound together by any single thesis which can be stated in so many words; I have simply taken four plays which interested me and tried to show by analysing them what are the qualities which make the Tragic Spirit. Though the plays analysed have been selected somewhat at haphazard, there are definite general principles which underlie them, and, indeed, every true example of the tragic art.

Every true tragedy turns on a *conflict*, whether it be a merely personal rivalry between one man and another, or a conflict on a grander scale, a struggle between opposing principles. Greek tragedy must always be peculiarly arresting, because the Greek tragedians combined in a curiously subtle way a conflict of persons with a conflict of principles. They present situations in which there is a tremendous conflict of personality and at the same time a much vaster conflict of principle. In each case I have devoted myself to analysing this conflict of principle, and I have mostly left to the reader's own insight the estimation of the rival characters.

These conflicts of principle or of hostile forces are clear, though they are not obvious; I believe them to be there, in each case essentially as I have analysed them, though I do not insist that the authors themselves consciously set out to describe them. They may

perhaps have not been conscious of analysing great generalities at all, being far more intimately concerned with the persons of their plays and with the individual struggle than with a systematic and deliberate philosophy of tragedy. Indeed, in the essay on the *Prometheus* of Aeschylus, I have possibly gone too far in describing the issue as almost abstract, and have to some extent lost sight of the magnificent conception of Prometheus as a character, in my zeal for symbolising him and Zeus as philosophic concepts. In the plays of Euripides, I feel more sure that my analysis reflects the spirit of the dramatist; for Euripides' intelligence was mordantly critical, acutely analytic, and apt to look behind and beyond the personal and the present to see in the most curious, and even in the most unpromising, material exactly what great principles were involved¹.

Euripides, indeed, was a much more self-conscious artist than either Aeschylus or Sophocles. His plays give the impression of tearing away a series of veils and of discovering the characters to us and to themselves. The result is often a tragic disaster, a tragic disaster, however, which, inasmuch as it is philosophically necessary, is worth the price in emotion which we must pay for it. Truth is worth a thousand tragic disasters.

This brings me to another point: whatever the issue of the conflict, *tragedy must pursue truth* at

¹ One is reminded of Ibsen and other modern "problem" writers, with this difference apparent, that in Ibsen the conflict of ideas seems to have been the first conception in the dramatist's mind and to have evolved the characters, as puppet-exponents of the conflict, while in the Greek dramas the conflict of ideas only underlies the more personal and obvious aspect of the plot.

whatever price. This is the chief idea in one of the Euripidean plays I have analysed, the *Ion*. In the *Ion* there is a strong contrast between the first half of the play, where the characters live in a world of seeming harmony which is quite unreal, and the second half, where they break through that falsity and seek truth in a terrible struggle. The other plays also show that the end of tragedy is the pursuit of truth, though they do not all do so in an equal degree.

Further, *tragedy is the concern of everyone*. Tragedy is the representation of conflict, and in conflict we are all involved: it has us in its grip. The essentials of these conflicts have not altered since the days of the Greeks, and never will. The ideal tragedy is not less real than life. Life, indeed, is real; now the ideal tragedy represents life in no mechanical way, but analyses it as would a critic; nor is the critic's office exhausted in the mere passing of verdicts; tragedy judges life, but slowly, profoundly and with sympathy, as a *friend* would judge.

In the *Hecuba* the tragic conflict lies between the ordered life of the community, represented by Odysseus, Agamemnon and the Greek host, and the personal claims of an individual, Hecuba. Sacrifice is often demanded from an individual by the community. Such demands are generally held to be not only moral, but noble and inspiring; they may, however, be exorbitant. Euripides has taken such a case, when the Greek host demands the sacrifice of Polyxena's life.

In the *Hippolytus* we have a subtle and powerful analysis of austerity in conflict with the natural desire