THE IDLE ACTOR IN AESCHYLUS, A DISSERTATION

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The idle actor in Aeschylus, A Dissertation by Frank W. Dignan

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FRANK W. DIGNAN

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A DISSERTATION

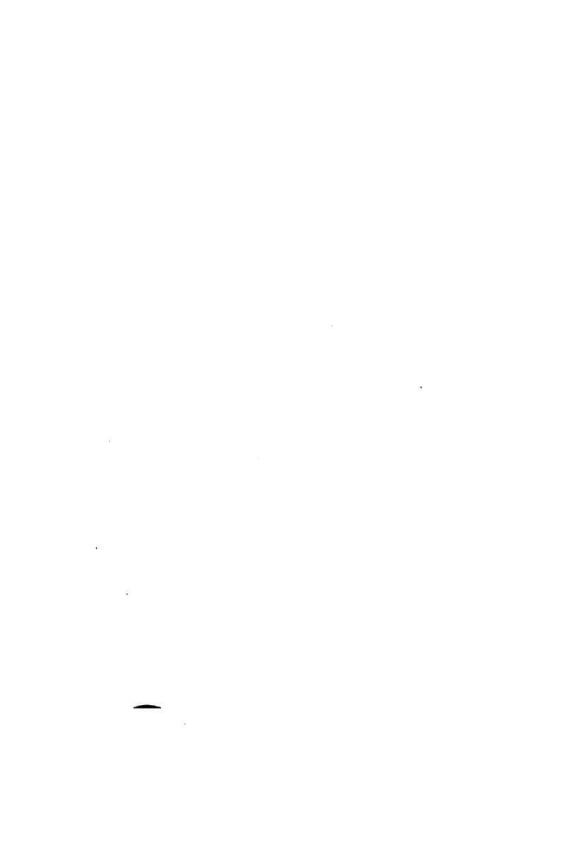
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS
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by FRANK W. DIGNAN

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THE IDLE ACTOR IN ÆSCHYLUS

The famous scene in the Frogs of Aristophanes, in which Æschylus and Euripides ridicule each other's methods, has been made the subject of many dissertations; but one point—really the central point in the new poet's arraignment of the old—has not yet been investigated with the care which it seems to deserve. Æschylus is charged in general with bombast and in particular with aiming at the statuesque effect of a silent actor. Achilles and Niobe, says Euripides, sit silent through a large part of the play, in order to give an exaggerated effect to their words when they do speak, and these cases are taken as typical of Æschylus's method as contrasted with that of Euripides. Such a charge seems reasonable enough at first sight in view of Æschylus's elevated and somewhat pompous tone, and accordingly the critics, ancient and modern, have accepted the allegation as substantially true.

It seems time, however, now that our understanding of the material conditions and the course of development of early tragedy has been greatly enlarged, to reconsider the matter. May it not be that the fault in Æschylus's technique, if it really exists, is due to material limitations and to the restraints of tradition? This is the question which I shall attempt to answer in the following study. The material at hand is, of course, far from complete, but some light should be thrown on the matter by the consideration of the evidence as to the lost plays referred to by Aristophanes, by the examination of the plays still extant, and by a comparison with the work of Sophocles and Euripides.

It will be well to have before us the text of the passage in the Frogs:

ΕΥ. τοῦτον δὲ πρῶτ' ἐλέγξω,
ως ἢν ἀλαζῶν καὶ φέναξ, οἶοις τε τοὺς θεατὰς
ἐξηκάτα, μώρους λαβῶν παρὰ Φρυνίχω τραφέντας.
πρώτιστα μὲν γὰρ ἔνα τιν' ἀν καθῦσεν ἐγκαλιήμας,
'Αχιλλία τιν' ἢ Νιόβην, τὸ πρόσωπον οὐχὶ δεικνύς,
πρόσχημα τῆς τραγφδίας, γρίζοντας οὐδὲ τουτί.
ΔΙ. μὰ τὸν Δί' οὐ δῆθ'.
ΕΥ. ὁ δὲ χορός γ' ῆρειδεν ὁρμαθοὺς ἀν
μελῶν ἐφεξῆς τέτταρας ξυνεχῶς ἀν οἱ δὶ ἔσίγων.
ΔΙ. ἐγῶ δὶ ἔχαιρον τῆ στωπῆ, καί με τοῦτ' ἔτερπεν
οὐχ ῆττον ἢ νῦν οἱ λαλοῦντες.