SOPHOCLES

THE TRAGEDIES

EXTENDED ANNOTATED EDITION

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admin@jazzybee-verlag.de

The Genius Of Sophocles

By Richard Claverhouse Jebb

The most brilliantly joyous of all comedies were brought out in a city vexed during the years that gave them birth by every kind of misery in turn; by want and pestilence, by faction and the mutual distrust of citizens, by defeat on land and sea, by the sense of abasement and the presage of ruin. During more than twenty years of war Aristophanes was the best public teacher of Athens; but there were times when distraction was more needed than advice. One of the best of his plays belongs to the number of those which were meant simply to amuse the town at a time when it would have been useless to lash it. The comedy of the "Frogs" came out in a season of gloomy suspense—just after Athens had made a last effort in equipping a fleet, and was waiting for decisive news from the seat of war; in January of 405 B.C., eight months before Ægospotami and about fifteen months before the taking of Athens by Lysander. A succession of disasters and seditions had worn out the political life of the city; patriotic satire could no longer find scope in public affairs, for there were no longer any vital

forces which it could either stimulate or combat. Nor could the jaded minds of men at such a time easily rise into a region of pure fancy, as when nine years before, on the eve of the last crisis in the war, Aristophanes had helped them to forget scandals of impiety and misgovernment on a voyage to his city in the clouds. What remained was to seek comfort or amusement in the past; and since the political past could give neither, then in the literary past—in the glories, fading now like other glories, of art and poetry.

It was now just fifty years since the death of Æschylus. It was only a few months since news had come from Macedonia of the death of Euripides. More lately still, at the end of the year before, Sophocles had closed a life blessed from its beginning by the gods and now happy in its limit; for, as in his boyhood he had led the pæan after Salamis, so he died too soon to hear the dirge of Imperial Athens—the cry, raised in the Peiræus and caught up from point to point through the line of the Long Walls, which carried up from the harbour to the town the news of the overthrow on the Hellespont.

With the death of Euripides and the death of Sophocles so recent, and no man living who seemed able to replace them, it might well seem to an Athenian that the series of the tragic masters was closed. In the "Frogs" Aristophanes supposes Dionysus, the god of dramatic inspiration, going down to the shades, to bring back to Athens, beggared of poets and unable to live without them, the best poet that could be found below. It is hard to imagine anything more pathetic than an Athenian audience listening, at just that time, to that comedy in the theatre of Dionysus; in view of the sea over which their empire was even then on its last trial; surrounded by the monuments of an empire over art which had already declined—in the building, at once theatre and temple, which the imagination of the poets

lately dead had long peopled with the divine or heroic shapes known to them and their fathers, but in which, they might well forebode, the living inspiration of the god would never be so shown forth again.

The interest of the comedy does not depend, however, merely on its character of epilogue to a school of tragic drama so masterly, of so short an actual life, of so perpetual an influence; it takes another kind of interest from the justness of its implicit criticism; the criticism of a man whose wit would not have borne the test of centuries and the harder test of translation, if he had not joined to a quick fancy the qualities which make a first-rate critic.

When Dionysus reaches the lower world, an uproar is being raised among the dead. It has been the custom that the throne of Tragedy, next to Pluto's own, shall be held by a laureate for the time being, subject to removal on the coming of a better. For some time Æschylus has held the place of honour. Euripides, however, has just come down; the newer graces of his style, which he lost no time in showing off, have taken the crowd; and their applause has moved him to claim the tragic throne. Æschylus refuses to yield. As the only way of settling the dispute, scales are brought; the weightiest things which the rivals can offer are compared; and at last the balance inclines for Æschylus. But where, in the meantime, is Sophocles? He, too, is in the world of the dead, having come down just after Euripides. "Did he" (asked Xanthias, the slave of Dionysus) "lay no claim to the chair?" "No, indeed, not he," answers Æacus: "No—he kissed Æschylus as soon as he came down, and shook hands with him; and Æschylus yielded the throne to him. But just now he meant, Cleidemides said, to hold himself in reserve, and, if Æschylus won, to stay quiet; if not, he said he would try a bout with *Euripides*."

It is in this placing of Sophocles relatively to the disputants, even more than in the account of the contest, that Aristophanes has shown his appreciativeness. While he seems to aim merely at marking by a passing touch the good-humoured courtesy of Sophocles, he has, with the happiness of a real critic, pointed out his place as a poet. The behaviour of Sophocles in the "Frogs" just answers to his place in the literary history of his age. This place is fixed chiefly by the fact that Sophocles was a poet who did not seek to be a prophet; who was before all things an artist; and who, living in the quiet essence of art, represented the mind of his day less by bringing into relief any set tendencies than by seizing in its highest unity the total spirit of the world in which he lived and of the legendary world in which his fancy moved, and bringing the conflicts of this twofold world into obedience, as far as possible, to the first law of his own nature—harmony. The workings of this instinct of harmony will be best seen, first, by viewing Sophocles as a poet in two broad aspects—in regard to his treatment of the heroic legends and in his relation to the social ideas of the age of Pericles; next, by considering two of his special qualities—the quality which has been called his irony, and his art of drawing character.

The national religion of Greece was based upon genealogy. It carried back the mind by an unbroken ascent from living men to heroes or half-gods who had been their forefathers in the flesh, and thence to gods from whom these heroes had sprung. The strength of a chain is the strength of its weakest part; enfeeblement of belief in the heroes implied enfeeblement of belief in the gods. The decreasing vividness of faith in the heroes is the index of failing life in the Greek national religion.

At the beginning of the fifth century before Christ this belief in the heroes was real and living. The Persian Wars were wars of race, the first general conflict of Hellene with barbarian; and it was natural that in such a conflict the Greek mind should turn with longing and trust towards those kindred heroes of immortal blood who long ago had borne arms for Achaia against Asia. It was told how, on the day of Marathon, the Athenian ranks had been cheered by the sudden presence among them of Theseus; while through the press of battle two other combatants had been seen to pass in more than earthly strength, the hero Echetlus and he who had given his name to the field. Just before the fight at Salamis a Greek ship was sent with offerings to the tombs of the Æacidae in Ægina; and when the pæan sounded and the fleets closed, the form of a colossal warrior was seen to move over the battle, and the Greeks knew that the greatest of the Æacid line, the Telamonian Ajax, was with them that day, as he had been with their fathers at Troy.

But from the moment when the united Greek effort against Persia was over, the old belief which it had made to start up in a last glow began to die out. The causes of this decline were chiefly three. First, the division of once-united Greece into two camps—the Athenian and the Spartan,—a division which tended to weaken all sentiments based on the idea of a common blood; and the belief in the heroes as an order was one of these sentiments. Secondly, the advance of democracy, which tended to create a jealous feeling and a sarcastic tone in regard to the claims of the old families; chief among which claims was that of kinship with the gods through the heroes. Thirdly, the birth of an historical sense. Before the Persian crisis history had been represented among the Greeks only by local or family traditions. The Wars of Liberation had given to Herodotus the first genuinely historical inspiration felt by a Greek. These wars

showed him that there was a corporate life, higher than that of the city, of which the story might be told; and they offered to him as a subject the drama of the collision between East and West. With him, the spirit of history was born into Greece; and his work, called after the nine Muses, was indeed the first utterance of Clio. The historical spirit was the form in which the general scepticism of the age acted on the belief in the heroic legends. For Herodotus himself, the heroes are still godlike. But for Thucydides, towards the end of the century, the genuine hero-ship of Agamemnon and Pelops is no more; he criticises their probable resources and motives as he might have discussed the conduct or the income of a contemporary. They are real to him; but they are real as men; and, for that very reason, unreal as claimants of a half-divine character.

The great cycles of heroic legends furnished the principal subjects of Attic tragedy. Three distinct methods of treating these legends appear in Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

The spirit of Æschylus is in all things more Hellenic than Athenian. The Pan-hellenic heroism of which in the struggle with Persia he had himself been a witness and a part is the very inspiration of his poetry. For him those heroes who were the common pride of the Greek race are true demigods. In his dramas they stand as close to the gods as in the Iliad; and more than in the Iliad do they tower above men. With him their distinctive attribute is majesty; a majesty rather Titanic than in the proper Greek sense heroic. What, it may be asked, is the basis of this Titanic majesty? It would be easy to say that the effect is wrought partly by pomp and weight of language, partly by vagueness of outline. But the essential reason appears to be another. The central idea of Greek tragedy is the conflict

between free-will and fate. In Æschylus this conflict takes its simplest and therefore grandest form. No subtle contrivance, no complexity of purposes, breaks the direct shock of the collision between man and destiny. Agamemnon before the Fury of his house is even as Prometheus facing Zeus.

In thus imagining the heroes as distinctly superhuman, and as claiming the sympathy of men rather by a bare grandeur of agony than by any closely-understood affinity of experience, Æschylus was striving to sustain a belief which had not gone out of his age, but which was dying. In his mid-career, about ten years before his Oresteia, the so-called relics of Theseus found at Scyros were brought to Athens by Cimon and laid in a shrine specially built for them. The distinctly religious enthusiasm then shown implies the old faith. It is hard to suppose that a like incident could have brought out a like public feeling even thirty years later.

Euripides, towards the end of the century, stood in nearly the same relation to his contemporaries as that of Æschylus to his at the beginning: that is, he was in general agreement with their beliefs, but held to some things from which they were going further and further away. The national religion was now all but dead. By the side of philosophic scepticism had come up the spurious scepticism which teachers of rhetoric had made popular. The devotional need, so far as it was felt, was usually satisfied by rituals or mysteries brought in from abroad; the old creed was not often attacked, but there was a tacit understanding among "able" men that it was to be taken allegorically; and a dim, silently spreading sense of this had further weakened its hold upon the people. What, then, was a tragic poet to do? The drama was an act of worship; the consecrated mythology must still supply the greatest

number of its subjects. Euripides solved the problem partly by realism, partly by antiquarianism. He presented the hero as a man, reflecting the mind as well as speaking the dialect of the day; and he made the legend, where he could, illustrate local Attic tradition. The reason why this treatment failed, so far as it failed, has not always been accurately stated. Euripides has sometimes been judged as if his poetical fault had been in bringing down half-gods to the level of men and surrounding them with mean and ludicrous troubles. Probably this notion has been strengthened by the scene in the "Acharnians" (the really pointed criticisms of Aristophanes upon Euripides are to be found elsewhere), in which the needy citizen calls on Euripides and begs for some of the rags in which he has been wont to clothe his heroes; and the tragic poet tells his servant to look for the rags of Telephus between those of Thyestes and those of Ino. But the very strength of Euripides lay in a deep and tender compassion for human suffering: if he had done nothing worse to his heroes than to give them rags and crutches, his power could have kept for them at least the sympathy due to the sordid miseries of men; he would only have substituted a severely human for an ideal pathos. His real fault lay in the admission of sophistic debate. A drama cannot be an artistic whole in which the powers supposed to control the issues of the action represent a given theory of moral government, while the agents are from time to time employing the resources of rhetorical logic to prove that this theory is either false or doubtful.

Between these two contrasted conceptions—the austere transcendentalism of Æschylus and the sophistic realism of Euripides—stands the conception of Sophocles. But Sophocles is far nearer to Æschylus than to Euripides; since Sophocles and Æschylus have this affinity, that the art of both is ideal. The heroic form is in outline almost the

same for Sophocles as for Æschylus; but meanwhile there has passed over it such a change as came over the statue on which the sculptor gazed until the stone began to kindle with the glow of a responsive life, and what just now was a blank faultlessness of beauty became loveliness warmed by a human soul. Sophocles lived in the ancestral legends of Greece otherwise than Æschylus lived in them. Æschylus felt the grandeur and the terror of their broadest aspects, their interpretation of the strongest human impulses, their commentary on problems of destiny: Sophocles dwelt on their details with the intent, calm joy of artistic meditation; believing their divineness; finding in them a typical reconciliation of forces which in real life are never absolutely reconciled—a concord such as the musical instinct of his nature assured him must be the ultimate law; recognizing in them, too, scope for the free exercise of imagination in moral analysis, without breaking the bounds of reverence; for, while these legends express the conflict between necessity and free-will, they leave shadowy all that conflict within the man himself which may precede the determination of the will.

The heroic persons of the Sophoclean drama are at once human and ideal. They are made human by the distinct and continuous portrayal of their chief feelings, impulses, and motives. Their ideality is preserved chiefly in two ways. First, the poet avoids too minute a moral analysis; and so each character, while its main tendencies are exhibited, still remains generic, a type rather than a portrait. Secondly—and this is of higher moment—the persons of the drama are ever under the directly manifested, immediately felt control of the gods and of fate. There is, indeed, no collision of forces so abrupt as in Æschylus; since the ampler unfolding of character serves to foreshow, and sometimes to delay, the catastrophe. On the other hand, there is no trace of that competition between free thought

and the principle of authority which is often so jarring in the plots of Euripides. In the dramas of Sophocles there is perfect unity of moral government; and the development of human motives, while it heightens the interest of the action, serves to illustrate the power of the gods.

The method by which Sophocles thus combines humanity with idealism may be seen in the cases of Ajax, of Œdipus, and of Heracles.

Ajax had been deprived of the arms of Achilles by the award of the Atreidæ. The goddess Athene, whom he had angered by arrogance, had seized the opportunity of his disappointment and rage to strike him with madness. In this frenzy he had fallen upon the flocks and herds of the Greek army on the plain of Troy, and had butchered or tortured them, thinking that he was wreaking vengeance on his enemies. When he comes to his senses, he is overpowered by a sense of his disgrace, and destroys himself.

The central person of this drama becomes human in the hands of Sophocles by the natural delineation of his anguish on the return to sanity. Ajax feels the new shame added to his repulse as any man of honour would feel it. At the same time he stands above men. An ideal or heroic character is lent to him, partly by the grandeur with which two feelings—remorse, and the sense that his dishonour must be effaced by death—absolutely predominate over all other emotions, as over pity for Tecmessa and his son; chiefly by his terrible nearness to Athene, as one whom with her own voice she had once urged to battle, promising her aid—when, face to face with her, he vaunted his independence of her, and provoked her anger;—then, as the blinded victim whom she, his pretended ally, had stung into

the senseless slaughter—lastly, as the conscious, broken-hearted sufferer of her chastisement.

In the farewell of Ajax to Tecmessa and the seamen who had come with him from Salamis to Troy—a farewell really final, but disguised as temporary under a sustained (though possibly unconscious) irony—the human and the heroic elements are thus blended:—

"All things the long and countless years first draw from darkness, then bury from light; and nothing is past hope, but there is confusion even for the dreadful oath and for the stubborn will. For even I, I once so wondrous firm, like iron in the dipping felt my keen edge dulled by yon woman's words; and I have ruth to leave her a widow with my foes, and the boy an orphan. But I will go to the sea-waters and the meadows by the shore, that in the purging of my stains I may flee the heavy anger of the goddess....Henceforth I shall know how to yield to the gods and learn to revere the Atreidæ: they are rulers, so we must submit. Of course, dread things and things most potent bow to office. Thus it is that the snow-strewn winters give place to fruitful summer; and thus Night's weary round makes room for Day with her white horses to kindle light; and the breath of dreadful winds at last gives slumber to the groaning sea; and, like the rest, almighty Sleep looses whom he has bound, nor holds with an eternal grasp. And *we*, shall we not learn discretion? I chiefly, for I have newly learned that our enemy is to be hated but so far as one who will hereafter be a friend; and towards a friend I would wish so far to show aid and service as knowing that he will not always abide. For to most men the haven of friendship is false. But all this will be well.—Woman, go thou within, and pray to the gods that in all fulness the desires of my heart may be fulfilled. And do ye, friends, honour my wishes even as she does, and bid Teucer, when

he come, have care for me and good-will to you as well. For I will go whither I must pass,—but do ye what I bid; and perchance, perchance, though now I suffer, ye will hear that I have found rest."

The story of Œdipus is more complex; alternations of alarm and relief, of confidence and despair, attend the gradual unravelling of his history; the miseries which crowd upon him at the last discovery seem to exhaust the possibilities of sorrow. A character so variously tried is necessarily laid open; and Œdipus is perhaps the best known to us of all the persons of Sophocles. Antigone, Electra, Philoctetes are not less human; but no such glare of lightning flashes in the depths of their natures. At the opening of the play how perfect an embodiment of assured greatness is Œdipus the King, bending with stately tenderness to the trouble of the Theban folk:—

"O my children, latest-born to Cadmus who was of old, why bow ye to me thus beseeching knees, with the wreathed bough of the suppliant in your hands, while the city reeks with incense, rings with prayers for health and cries of woe? I deemed it unmeet, my children, to learn of these things from the mouth of others, and am come here myself, I, whom all men call Œdipus the famous."

And how thoroughly answering to this is the tone in which the priest, the leader of the suppliants, tells the trouble and the faith of Thebes:—

"A blight is on it in the fruit-guarding blossoms of the land, in the herds among the pastures, in the barren pangs of women; and withal that fiery god, the dreadful Plague, has swooped on us, and ravages the town; by whom the house of Cadmus is made waste, but dark Hades rich in groans and tears.

"It is not that we deem thee ranked with gods that I and these children are suppliants at thy hearth; but as deeming thee first of men, not only in life's common chances, but when men have to do with the immortals; thou who earnest to the town of Cadmus and didst rid us of the tax that we paid to the hard songstress,—and this, though thou knewest nothing from us that could help thee, nor hadst been schooled; no, with a god's aid, as we say and deem, didst thou uplift our life.

"And now, Œdipus, name glorious in all eyes, we beseech thee, all we suppliants, to find for us some succour; whether thou wottest of it by the whisper of a god, or knowest it in the power of man."

Then comes the oracle, announcing that the land is thus plagued because it harbours the unknown murderer of Laius; the pity of Œdipus is quickened into a fiery zeal for discovery and atonement; and he appeals to the prophet Teiresias:—

"Teiresias, whose soul grasps all things, the lore that may be told and the unspeakable, the secrets of heaven and the low things of the earth,—thou feelest, though thou canst not see, what a plague doth haunt our state,—from which, great prophet, we find in thee our protector and only saviour. Now, Phœbus—if perchance thou knowest it not from the messengers—sent answer to our question that the only riddance from this pest which could come to us was if we should learn aright the slayers of Laius, and slay them, or send them into exile from our land. Do thou, then, grudge neither voice of birds nor any other way of seer-lore that thou hast, but save thyself and the state and me, and take away all the taint of the dead. For in thee is our hope;

and a man's noblest task is to help others by his best means and powers."

Teiresias is silent: the taunts of Œdipus at last sting him into uttering his secret—*Œdipus* is the murderer: and thenceforward, through indignation, scorn, agonized suspense, the human passion mounts until it bursts forth in the last storm.

And now the human element of the history has been worked out. Œdipus has passed to the limit of earthly anguish; and, as if with his self-inflicted blindness had come clearer spiritual sight, he begins to feel a presentiment of some further, peculiar doom. "Suffer me to dwell on the hills," he asks of Creon, "that there I may die. And yet thus much I know, that neither sickness nor aught else shall destroy me; for I should never have been saved on the verge of death except for some *strange* ill." The second play of Sophocles—"Œdipus at Colonus"—has pervading it the calm of an assurance into which this first troubled foreboding has settled down: Œdipus, already in spirit separate from men, has found at Colonus the destined haven of his wanderings, and only awaits the summons out of life. At last from the darkness of the sacred cavern the voice long-waited for is heard,—"Œdipus, Œdipus, why do we tarry?" And the eye-witness of his passing says, "Not the fiery bolt of the god took him away, nor the tumult of sea-storm in that hour, but either a summoner from heaven, or the deep place of the dead opened to him in love, without a pang. For the man was ushered forth, not with groans nor in sickness or pain, but beyond all mortals, wondrously."

As Œdipus, first shown in the vividness of a tortured humanity, is then raised above men by keen spiritual anguish, so it is earthly passion and bodily suffering which

give a human interest to Heracles the very son of Zeus. He stands by the altar on Mount Cenæum, doing sacrifice to his Olympian Father for the taking of Œchalia; clad in the robe which his messenger, Lichas, has just brought him as the gift of Deianeira; the robe which she has secretly anointed with the blood of the Centaur Nessus, believing this to be a charm which shall win back to her the love of Heracles. What follows is thus told:—

"At first, hapless one, he prayed with cheerful heart, rejoicing in his comely garb. But when the flame of sacrifice began to blaze from the holy offerings and from the resinous wood, sweat broke out upon his flesh, and the tunic clung to his sides, and at every joint, close-glued as if by workman's hand; and there came a biting pain twitching at his bones; and then the venom as of a deadly, cruel adder began to eat him.

"Then it was that he cried out on the unhappy Lichas, in nowise guilty for *thy* crime, asking with what thoughts he brought this robe; and he, knowing nothing, hapless man, said that he had only brought thy gift, as he was charged. Then Heracles, as he heard it, and as a piercing spasm clutched his lungs, caught him by the foot, where the ankle hinges in the socket, and flung him at a rock washed on both sides by the sea; and Lichas has his white brain oozing through his hair, as the skull is cloven and the blood scattered therewith.

"But all the people lifted up a voice of anguish and of awe, since one was frenzied and the other slain; and no one dared to come before the man. For he was twitched to the ground and into the air, howling, shrieking; and the rocks rang around,—the steep Locrian headlands and Eubœa's capes. But when he was worn out with ofttimes throwing himself in his misery on the ground and often making loud

lament, while he reviled his ill-starred wedlock with thee and his marriage into the house of Œneus, saying how he had found in it the ruin of his life—then, out of the flame and smoke that beset him, he lifted his distorted eye and saw me in the great host, weeping; and he looked at me, and called me, 'Son, come here, do not flee my woe, even if thou must die with me—come, bear me out of the crowd, and set me, if thou canst, in a place where no man shall see me; or, if thou hast any pity, at least convey me with all speed out of this land, and let me not die on this spot.'"

Presently Heracles himself is brought before the eyes of the spectators. In the lamentation wrung from him by his torment two strains are clear above the rest, and each is a strain of thoroughly human anguish. He contrasts the strength in which, through life, he has been the champion of helpless men—"ofttimes on the sea and in all forests ridding them of plagues"—with his own helpless misery in this hour; and he contrasts the greatness of the work to which he had seemed called with the weakness of the agent who has arrested it:—

"Ah me, whose hands and shoulders have borne full many a fiery trial and evil to tell! But never yet hath the wife of Zeus or the hated Eurystheus laid on me aught so dreadful as this woven snare of the Furies, which the daughter of Œneus, falsely fair, hath fastened on my shoulders, and by which I perish. Glued to my sides, it has eaten away my flesh to the bone; it is ever with me, sucking the channels of my breath; already it has drained my vigorous blood, and in all my body I am marred, the thrall of these unutterable bonds. Not the warrior on the battle-field, not the giant's earthborn host, nor the might of wild beasts, nor Hellas, nor the land of the alien, nor all the lands that I have visited and purged, have done unto me thus; but a woman,

a weak woman, born not to the strength of man, alone, alone has struck me down without a sword.

"O King Hades, receive me!—Smite me, O flash of Zeus! O King, O Father, dash, hurl thy thunderbolt upon me! Again the pest eats me—it has blazed up, it has started into fury! O hands, hands, O shoulders and breast and trusty arms, ye, ye in this plight, are they who once tamed by force the haunter of Nemea, the scourge of herdsmen, the lion whom no man might approach or face—who tamed the hydra of Lerna and the host of monsters of double form, man joined to horse, with whom none might mingle, fierce, lawless, of surpassing might—tamed the Erymanthian beast and the three-headed dog of Hades underground, an appalling foe, offspring of the dread Echidna,—tamed the serpent who guards the golden apples in earth's utmost clime. And of other toils ten thousand I had taste, and no man got a trophy from my hands. But now with joint thus wrenched from joint, with frame torn to shreds, I have been wrecked by this blind curse—I, who am named son of noblest mother —I, who was called the offspring of starry Zeus!"

Anon he learns that the venom which is devouring him is the poisoned blood of his old enemy, the Centaur Nessus. That knowledge gives him at once the calm certainty of death; and now, in the nearness of the passage to his Father, there arises, triumphant over bodily torment, the innate, tranquil strength of his immortal origin. He sees in this last chapter of his earthly ordeal the foreordained purpose of Zeus:—

"It was foreshown to me by my Father of old that I should die by no creature that had the breath of life, but by one who was dead and a dweller in Hades. So this monster, the Centaur, even as the god's will had been foreshown, slew me, a living man, when he was dead."

He directs that he shall be carried to the top of Mount Œta, above Trachis, sacred to Zeus; that a funeral pyre shall there be raised, and he, while yet living, laid upon it; that so the flame which frees his spirit from the flesh may in the same moment bear it up to Zeus. No one of the sacred places of Greece was connected with a legend of such large meaning, with one which was so much a world-legend, as this mountain-summit looking over the waters of the Malian Gulf. As generation after generation came to the struggle with plagues against which there arose no new deliverer, weary eyes must often have been turned to the height on which the first champion of men had won his late release from the steadfast malignity of fate; where, in the words of the Chorus foreboding the return of Philoctetes to Trachis, "the great warrior, wrapt in heavenly fire, drew near to all the gods." It is Sophocles in the "Trachiniæ" who has given the noblest and the most complete expression to this legend; showing Heracles, first, as the son of Zeus suffering for men and sharing their pain; then, towards the end of his torments, as already god-like in the clear knowledge of his Father's will and of his own coming change to perfect godhead.

One aspect of the poetry of Sophocles has now been noticed; the character of the treatment applied by him to those legends which supplied the chief material of Greek tragedy. It has been pointed out that the heroes of Æschylus are essentially superhuman; that the heroes of Euripides are essentially human, and often of a low human type; that the heroes of Sophocles are at once human and superhuman: human generically, by the expression of certain general human qualities; superhuman, partly by the very strength in which these qualities are portrayed, partly by the direct relation of the persons with supernatural powers. It has been seen further that these three styles of

handling correspond with successive phases of contemporary belief; the tendency of Greek thought in the fifth century B.C. having been gradually to lower the ideal stature of the ancestral demigods.

But this change of feeling towards the myths is not the only change of which account has to be taken. The spirit of dramatic poetry was influenced, less directly, yet broadly, by the current of political change.

At the beginning of the fifth century B.C. Athens was a limited democracy; at the close of the century it was an absolute democracy. Three periods may be marked in the transition. The first includes the new growth of democracy at Athens, springing from the common effort against Persia — the reform of Aristeides and the reform of Pericles. Its net result was the formal maturing of the democracy by the removal of a few old limitations. The second period is one of rest. It covers those thirty years during which the recent abolition of conservative checks was compensated by the controlling power of Pericles, and there was "in name a democracy, but in fact government by the leading man." The third period, beginning at the death of Pericles, at last shows the mature democracy in its normal working. The platform for a leader of the people which Pericles had first set up remains; it is held by a series of men subservient to the people; and the result is the sovereignty of the ecclesia. Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides represent respectively the first, second, and third of these periods.

Æschylus, whose mind was heated to its highest glow by the common Greek effort against Persia and thenceforth kept the impress of that time, was through life democratic just so far as Athens was democratic at the end of the Persian Wars. On the one hand, he shared the sense of civic equality created by common labours and perils. On the

other hand, he held to the old religion of Greece and Athens, to the family traditions bound up with it and to the constitutional forms consecrated by both. His greatest trilogy, the Oresteia, marks the end of the first period just defined; and its third play, the "Eumenides," is a symbol of his political creed. On the one hand, it exalts Theseus, peculiarly the hero of the democracy; on the other, it protests against the withdrawal of a moral censorship from the Areiopagus.

Euripides, in the last third of the century, is a democrat living under a democracy which disappointed his theory. His constant praise of the farmer-class is meaning; he liked them because they were the citizens who had least to do with the violence of the ecclesia. It was the sense of this violence—the hopeless bane, as he thought it, of the democracy—which hindered him from having a thorough interest in the public affairs of the city and from drawing any vigorous or continuous life for his poetry from that source. It was natural that he should have been one of the literary men who towards the end of the war emigrated from Athens to Macedonia. The strain of social criticism, often rather querulous, which runs through his plays gives them, in one respect, a tone strange to Attic tragedy. An Athenian dramatist at the festivals was a citizen addressing fellow-citizens; not only a religious but a certain political sympathy was supposed to exist between them, Æschylus and Sophocles, in their different ways, both make this political sympathy felt as part of their inspiration; Euripides has little or nothing of it. He shares the pride of his fellow-citizens in the historical or legendary glories of the city; as for the present, he is a critic standing apart.

More thoroughly than Æschylus in the first period or Euripides in the third, is Sophocles a representative poet in the second period of the century. The years from about 460

to about 430 B.C. have been called the Age of Pericles. The chief external characteristic of the time so called is plain enough. It was the age of the best Athenian culture; a moment for Greece such as the Florentine renaissance was for Europe; the age especially of sculpture, of architecture, and of the most perfect dramatic poetry. But is there any general intellectual characteristic, any distinctive idea, which can be recognized as common to all the various efforts of that age? The distinctive idea of the Periclean age seems to have been that of Pericles himself; the desire to reconcile progress with tradition. Pericles looked forward and backward: forward, to the development of knowledge and art; backward, to the past from which Athens had derived an inheritance of moral and religious law. He had the force both to make his own idea the ruling idea in all the intellectual activity of his age, and to give to his age the political rest demanded for this task of harmonizing the spiritual past and future of a people. Thucydides—a trustworthy witness for the leading thoughts if not for the words of Pericles—makes him dwell on the way in which two contrasted elements had come to be tempered in the life of Athens. After describing the intellectual tolerance, the flexibility and gladness of Athenian social life, Pericles goes on: "Thus genial in our private intercourse, in public things we are kept from lawlessness mainly by fear, obedient to the magistrates of the time and to the laws—especially to those laws which are set for the help of the wronged, *and to those unwritten laws of which the sanction is a tacit shame*."

It is by this twofold characteristic—on the one hand, sympathy with progressive culture, on the other hand, reverence for immemorial, unwritten law—that Sophocles is the poet of the Periclean Age. There are two passages which, above all others in his plays, are expressive of these two feelings. One is a chorus in the "Antigone"; the other is

a chorus in the "Œdipus Tyrannus." One celebrates the inventiveness of man; the other insists upon his need for purity.

In the "Antigone" the Chorus exalts the might of the gods by measuring against it those human faculties which it alone can overcome:—

"Wonders are many, but nothing is more wonderful than Man; that power which walks the whitening sea before the stormy south, making a path amid engulfing surges; and Earth, the eldest of the gods, the immortal, the unwearied, doth it wear, turning the soil with the race of horses as the ploughs go to and fro from year to year.

"And the careless tribe of birds, the nations of the angry beasts, the deep sea's ocean-brood he snares in the meshes of his woven wiles, he leads captive, man excellent in wit. He conquers by his arts the beast that walks in the wilds of the hills, he tames the horse with shaggy mane, he puts its yoke on its neck, he tames the stubborn mountain-bull.

"And speech, and wind-swift thought, and all the moods that mould a state hath he taught himself; and how to flee the shafts of frost beneath the clear, unsheltering sky, and the arrows of the stormy rain.

"All-providing is he; unprovided he meets nothing that must come. Only from death shall he not win deliverance; yet from hard sicknesses hath he devised escapes.

"Cunning beyond fancy's dreams is that resourceful skill which brings him now to evil, anon to good. When he honours the laws of the land, proudly stands his city: no city hath he who in his rashness harbours sin. Never may

he share my hearth, never think my thoughts, who doth these things!"

In the "Œdipus Tyrannus" the Chorus is indirectly commenting on the scorn for oracles just expressed by locastê:—

"Mine be the lot to win a reverent purity in all words and deeds sanctioned by those laws of sublime range, brought forth in the wide, clear sky, whose birth is of Olympus alone; which no brood of mortal men begat; which forgetfulness shall never lay to sleep. Strong in these is the god, and grows not old.

"Insolence breeds the tyrant; Insolence, once blindly gorged with plenty, with things which are not fit or good, when it hath scaled the crowning height leaps on the abyss of doom, where it is served not by the service of the foot. But that rivalry which is good for the state I pray that the god may never quell: the god ever will I hold my champion.

"But whoso walks haughtily in deed or word, unterrified by Justice, revering not the shrines of gods, may an evil doom take him for his miserable pride, if he will not gain his gains fairly, if he will not keep himself from impieties, but must lay wanton hands on things inviolable.

"In such case, what man can boast any more that he shall ward the arrows of anger from his life? Nay, if such deeds are honoured, what have I more to do with dance and song?

"No more will I go, a worshipper, to the awful altar at Earth's centre, no more to Abæ's shrine or to Olympia, if these oracles fit not the issue so that all men shall point at them with the finger. Nay, King—if thou art rightly called—

Zeus, all-ruling, let it not escape thee and thy deathless power!"

We have now looked at a second general aspect of the poetry of Sophocles. As in his treatment of the heroic legends he interprets, but is above, the religious spirit of his age, so in his reconciliation of enterprise and reverence he gives an ideal embodiment to the social spirit of his age.

Æschylus is a democratic conservative; Euripides is the critic of a democracy which he found good in theory but practically vicious; Sophocles sets upon his work no properly political stamp, but rather the mark of a time of political rest and of manifold intellectual activity; an activity which took its special character from the idea of an elastic development reconciled with a restraining moral tradition.

As the general spirit of Sophocles is perhaps best seen in these two phases, so among the special qualities of his work there are two which may be taken as the most distinctive—his "irony," to give it the name which Bishop Thirlwall's Essay has made familiar; and his delineation of character.

The practical irony of drama depends on the principle that the dramatic poet stands aloof from the world which he creates. It is not for him to be an advocate or a partisan. He describes a contest of forces, and decides the issue as he conceives that it would be decided by the powers which control human life. The position of a judge in reference to two litigants, neither of whom has absolute right on his side, is analogous to the position of a dramatic poet in reference to his characters. Every dramatic poet is necessarily in some degree ironical. In speaking, then, of the dramatic irony of Sophocles it is not meant that this

quality is peculiar to him. It is only meant that in him this quality is especially noticeable and especially artistic.

Irony depends on a contrast; the irony of tragedy depends mainly on a contrast between the beliefs or purposes of men and those issues to which their actions are overruled by higher powers. Sophocles has the art of making this contrast, throughout the whole course of a drama, peculiarly suggestive and forcible. In his seven extant plays, the contrasts thus worked out have different degrees of complexity. The "Trachiniæ" and "Electra" may be taken as those in which the dramatic irony is simplest. In the "Trachiniæ" there is a twofold contrast of a direct kind: first, between the love of Deianeira for Heracles and the mortal agony into which she unwittingly throws him; then, between the meaning of the oracle (promising rest to Heracles), as understood by him and Deianeira, and its real import. In the "Electra" there is a particular and a general contrast, both direct; the sister is mourning the supposed death of her brother at the very moment when he is about to enter the house as an avenger; and the situation with which the play ends is the exact reversal of that with which it opened.

The "Ajax" and the two Œdipus plays, again, might be classed together in respect of dramatic irony; in each case suffering is inflicted by the gods, but through this the sufferer passes to a higher state. Athene, the pretended ally of Ajax, humbles him even to death; but this death is a complete atonement, and his immortal fame as a canonized hero begins from the burial with which the drama closes. In the "Œdipus Tyrannus" the primary contrast is between the seeming prosperity and the really miserable situation of the king. A secondary contrast runs through the whole process of inquiry which leads up to the final discovery. The truth is gradually evolved from those very incidents which display

or even exalt the confidence of Œdipus. In the "Œdipus at Colonus" this contrast is reversed. The Theban king is old, blind, poor, an outcast, a wanderer. But he has the inward sense of a strength which can no more be broken; of a vision clearer than that of the bodily eye; of a spiritual change which has made a sorrow a possession; of approach to final rest.

It is, however, in the two remaining plays, the "Antigone" and the "Philoctetes," that this irony of drama takes its most subtle and most artistic form. Antigone buries Polyneices against the law of the land; Creon dooms her to death, and thereby drives his own son to suicide. But the issue is not a simple conflict between state-law and religious duty. It is a conflict between state-law too harshly enforced and natural affection set above the laws. Creon is right in the letter and wrong in the spirit; Antigone is right in the spirit and wrong in the letter. Creon carries his point, but his victory becomes his misery; Antigone incurs death, but dies with her work done. In the "Philoctetes," again, there is an antithesis of a like kind. Philoctetes is injured and noble; Odysseus is dishonest but patriotic. Odysseus wishes to capture Philoctetes in the public interests of the army at Troy. He urges on Neoptolemus that the end sanctifies the means. Neoptolemus at first recoils; then consents; finally deserts the plot in a passion of generous pity for Philoctetes. The result is that Philoctetes is brought back to Troy, but by fair means. He eventually agrees to do that of which he had loathed the thought, and goes back to his hated enemies under circumstances which make that return the happiest event of his life. Odysseus, on the other hand, gains his end; but not by the means which he had proposed to himself. He carries Philoctetes back to Troy; but only after his stratagems have been foiled. Neoptolemus, meanwhile—true, after his first lapse, to honour—conquers without a change of front.

It is that same instinct of harmony which has already been seen to rule the work of Sophocles in its largest phases, which gives its motive and its delicate precision to his management of dramatic irony. He works out the contrasts of drama so clearly and with such fineness because he aims at showing how a beneficent power at last solves them; not, as in Æschylus, by victory over a supernatural evil power, nor, as in Euripides, by abrupt intervention; but through those natural workings of human character and action over which the gods watch.

The accurate delineation of human character has therefore a special importance for Sophocles. It has already been said that in the primary or heroic persons of the Sophoclean drama human character is delineated only broadly, with a deliberate avoidance of fine shading. It is therefore in the secondary or subordinate persons of the drama that we must look for the more delicate touches of ethical portraiture.

Sophocles shows his psychological skill especially in two ways: in following the process by which a sensitive and generous nature passes from one phase of feeling to another; and in tracing the action upon each other of dissimilar or opposite natures. Philoctetes, first rejoiced by the arrival of the Greeks on his island,—then suspicious,—then reassured,—then frenzied with anger,—then finally conciliated; Tecmessa, agitated successively by fear, by hope, by despair concerning Ajax; Electra, at first heroically patient in the hope that her brother will return as an avenger, then broken-hearted at the news of his death, at last filled with rapture by his sudden living presence; Deianeira, by turns anxious, elated, jealous, horror-stricken—these are examples of the power with which Sophocles could trace a chapter of spiritual history.

A closer examination of the character of Deianeira will help to set this power in a clearer light. When the herald Lichas arrives at Trachis with the prisoners taken by Heracles at Œchalia, Iolê, beautiful and dejected, at once arouses the interest of Deianeira; but it is the interest of compassion merely, with a touch of condescension in its kindness. "Ah, unhappy girl, who art thou among women…?" "Lichas, from whom is this stranger sprung?" Lichas does not know; Iolê will not speak;—nor has she spoken, adds the herald, since they left Eubœa. So Deianeira says: "Then let her be left at peace and go into the house as best it pleases her, and not find a new pain at my hands beside her present ills; they are enough. And now let us all move towards the house."

Presently Deianeira is told by a man of Trachis, who had heard it from Lichas himself in the marketplace, that Iolê is the daughter of Eurytus, King of Œchalia; and that it was to win Iolê that Heracles had stormed and sacked that town. "Ah me unhappy," she cries, "in what a plight do I stand! What hidden bane have I taken under my roof?" Her informant and Lichas are confronted with each other; Lichas is put to confusion; and then Deianeira turns to him with this appeal:—

"Do not, I pray thee by Zeus who sends forth his lightnings over the high Œtean glen, do not use deceitful speech. For thou wilt tell thy news not to a base woman, nor to one who knows not the estate of men, and how it is not in their nature always to take joy in the same things. Now whosoever stands up against Love, as a boxer to change buffets, is not wise. For Love rules the gods as he will, and me also—why should he not?—yes, and many another such as I. So that I am quite mad if I blame my husband for being taken with this malady, or blame this woman, who has had part in a thing nowise shameful, and not in any