

PREFACE

THE present study is an attempt at putting the two halves of a single picture together—the one half Attic drama, the other Attic society. It is the outcome of a question which probably many others beside myself have been both philistine and sensible enough to ask. Why do people continue to read these plays? As literature they breathe an old world air; they are remote in time, strange in plot, in form unlike the drama of today, and yet they do very definitely and inexplicably move the reader. On the other hand, if they can move us in times like these, must they not have stirred more effectively a contemporary audience?

In answering these questions the first thing to do was to read all the plays through, not haphazardly picking tragedy, then comedy in turn, but in the order of their original appearance as chronological links in a single evolution. The next was to find out how they were produced. The drama *in vacuo* as literature is not complete. It must be visualized, for the imagination, at least, must stalk the boards and come alive again. Here archaeology was of enormous help. A visit in the past to the Dionysiac theater and to the mountain-encircled stage at Delphi did more than volumes to apply the touch of life to the old plays. Further, with all the power of a richly expressive art the Greeks recorded their own impressions of the theater in countless vase paintings, in statuettes and figurines, which are still available in museums or in reproduction. Like small scintillae of ancient life they helped repeople and vivify the ancient stage.

And yet there was something still lacking. As spectacle the plays must have been bright indeed—a moving mass of color and of not too statuesque figures—but the plots, the dialogue, the curious ethical principles involved, continued to seem strange. Was there

here another psychology, like enough to our own to arouse a baffled interest, unlike it enough to raise a deeper question? Could it be that these ancients did not think exactly as we do, or, rather, was their method of expression different? A partial answer was to be found in the theory of the subconscious. Here, then, was non-logical thought emerging into logical, a passage from partly subconscious processes into conscious, a contrast plain in the turgid image-making expression of Aeschylus beside that of Euripides, so reduced to fit the leaner girth of a more nervous, more articulate thought.

And the myths—these recurrent myths hammered by frequent use to different meanings—could they have a face value and another value too, which changed with the progress of society? The answer eventually became plain. The drama was, like all art, a reflection of society; it was a sounding board on which were struck out discords only to be resolved. That resolution had a social value. It was in Aristotle's term cathartic, or purgative, not only for the individual spectator however, as he imagined, but collectively for the society as a whole. It was a solvent for social conflict.

Thus Attic drama took on a new complexion. It was the expression both of a society and of a psychology—of a society passing from tribal organization into political, from a tribal responsibility directed towards the group into individual equality before the law; of a psychology dependent upon this advance and fashioned by it, emerging from primitive methods of expression into the conscious use of abstract speech. It became the key not only to a chapter in Attic society, but to a chapter also in human thought.

The passage from primitive thinking is an event of importance for the human race paralleled only by the discoveries of the age in which we live ourselves. Since the Greeks it has been in terms of logical thought that civilization has continued to advance. But we stand today in a situation not unlike that of the fifth-century Athenians. Just as they hesitated in that century between the processes of a mythological or primitive speech and a logical or fully conscious speech, so today we hesitate between the older

thought which took account only of conscious processes and the newer which takes account both of the subconscious and conscious in evaluating the whole. The counterparts today of Socrates are Pareto and the psychologists.

The history of the ancient stage is traceable over a very long period. A span of some thousand odd years covers its origin in Greece at the end of the sixth century B.C. and its disappearance in a dissolving Roman Empire. But there is one fact which gives a distinct unity to this chapter of theatrical history. During all this long period the theater is closely bound up with that typical form of ancient society, the city-state. It was the city-state which produced the drama, and with it the drama disappeared. It is not possible, however, in this study to carry the story to its conclusion, and for the present this book must remain a prelude to a larger work, the social history of the ancient theater.

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