

THE INFLUENCE OF GREEK DRAMA ON THE NOVELS
OF GEORGE ELIOT

by

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PREFACE

The seed for this research germinated in a course I had at Butler University some years ago with Dr. John Harrison. Part of this paper was written for him as a term paper. Before revising, I examined more up-to-date material. I chose to retain the Blackie and Young translations of Aeschylus and Sophocles, those used in Dr. Harrison's course, because the literary quality of the poetry translation is, in my estimation, superior to the modern versions. In her essay "On Translation," Edith Hamilton says she wants "to be accurate more than . . . readable." Her translation of the Agamemnon is so literal as to be barren and cryptic. I also preferred Fox's Greek and Roman Mythology (the text I used in a course on the subject at Butler) to Miss Hamilton's Mythology because it is a more thorough presentation. The chapters in the second half of Miss Hamilton's The Greek Way I found excellent background reading.

For Euripides' dramas I preferred the more modern translations. Warner's and Vellacott's interpretations are better for this "most modern in spirit" of the Greek tragedians. Gilbert Murray's well-known Medea is not so forceful.

The recent publications of Gordon S. Haight I found most helpful in expanding my original research. Mr. Haight's reference to Vernon Rendall's articles on "George Eliot and the Classics" gave me the clue to the only statements on this subject. The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature, the bibliography of the Modern Humanities Research Association, and the bibliographies on the Victorian Period published by Modern Philology list no other inquiries into this characteristic of George Eliot. The two latest biographies by Gerald Bullett and Joan Bennett were also helpful.

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CHAPTER I

GEORGE ELIOT'S KNOWLEDGE OF THE CLASSICS

In 1832, when she was thirteen, Mary Ann Evans was sent to a school at Coventry kept by the Misses Franklin. By 1837 she was studying Italian, German, Greek, and Latin. Mathilde Blind's biography states that "the Rev. T. Sheepshanks, head master of the Coventry Grammar-school, gave her lessons in Greek and Latin, as she particularly wished to learn the former language in order to read Aeschylus."¹

In 1843 she visited Dr. Brabant at Devizes. During her sojourn there, they read Greek together. In 1846 Marian Evans mentioned in one of her letters that she wanted to complete a set of Xenophon. In J. W. Cross's first volume of her life there is a journal entry dated 1855 which notes the reading of Iphigenia. This was the first year of Marian Evans' union with George Henry Lewes when they were in retreat at Weimar, Germany. From this date on there are numerous entries in her journals or comments in her letters which indicate her unceasing study of the classics, the Greek tragedians particularly.

¹ Mathilde Blind, George Eliot (Boston, 1883), p. 31.

Those works or authors specifically mentioned in her journals or letters over the period from 1856 to 1868 are the Ajax, Electra, Agamemnon, Choephorae, Eumenides, Oedipus Rex, Oedipus Coloneus, Euripides, the Iliad, Aristotle's Poetics, Plato's Republic, and excerpts from Lucretius and Theocritus.

The Agamemnon was evidently a favorite, for the George Eliot journal records a second reading in 1865, eight years after the first. She and Mr. Cross, her husband, attended a performance of this tragedy by the undergraduates of Oxford on December 17, 1880, just four days before her death. Mr. Cross described this experience as "a great enjoyment - an exciting stimulus" for his wife and adds that she "proposed that during the winter we should read together some of the great Greek dramas."²

Vernon Rendall, who has, according to Gordon Haight, written the "best account of George Eliot's knowledge of Greek and Latin," calls her a "capable classical scholar" and "a determined student." Concerning her use of the classics, he recalls that "in her allusions of this sort I found some years ago a point of special interest in the presentation of her characters. This has hardly been appreciated by her earlier critics."³ He concludes his article with the statement that after her first Greek

² J. W. Cross, George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals (Boston, 1908), III, 325.

³ Vernon Rendall, "George Eliot and the Classics," Notes and Queries, CXCII (December 13, 1947), 544.

quotations from Philoctetes in Amos Barton, "she went on to a garland of Greek which I have not seen equalled in the writings of any author, inside or outside fiction."⁴ Mr. Rendall suggests that George Eliot, writing first anonymously, wished to encourage the idea of a male author with this display of classical learning. But the reasons for such absorption of Greek elements in her writing lay deeper within her moral and artistic development than a desire to prove male authorship.

Mary Ann Evans, born to parents of peasant lineage, her father a respectable farmer and land agent, was reared in strict adherence to the rules of the Established Church. Deeply religious by nature, she early developed an intense and zealous faith under the influence of her Evangelical schoolteachers and her Methodist aunt. In opposition to this dogmatic religious training came a slow and subtle reconditioning by Sir Walter Scott's "broad toleration and genial humanity,"⁵ Mary Ann began reading Scott when she was seven. Mary Deakin has reported that, when asked in later years to whose influence she attributed the first unsettlement of her orthodox views, she answered, "Oh, Walter Scott's."⁶ Her early letters

⁴ Ibid., (December 27, 1947), 565.

⁵ Gerald Bullett, George Eliot: Her Life and Books (London, 1947), p. 131.

⁶ Mary H. Deakin, The Early Life of George Eliot (Manchester, 1913), p. 37.

testify to the thoroughness with which she investigated prevalent dogmas and church history. The next disturbing influence was that of Lord Lytton's Devereux which she read at thirteen: "I was considerably shaken by the impression that religion was not requisite to moral excellence."⁷ Her study of the classics began at approximately the same time and confirmed this premise. When she became friends with the Brays at Coventry in 1841, her mind was ready for a conversion. The limitations of Christian theology were all too apparent to an intellect as capacious as hers.

The Brays and their guests, all free-thinkers, challenged the divine inspiration of the scriptures, professed rationalism, explored sociology, and accepted other new philosophies which were developing in England and on the continent. Before her father died Mary Ann quarreled with him over her new religious outlook. There was a reconciliation and the dutiful daughter resumed her church attendance. After her father's death, however, Mary Ann Evans' conversion from Evangelical Christianity to religious agnosticism was complete and overt. She was now ready for a substitute to take the place of the rejected Christianity.

The ideas contained in certain essays and books which Marian Evans was reading and reviewing during the pregnant period before her novel writing will indicate that they were a convenient bridge to her gradual

⁷ Cross, I, 52. Letter to Miss Lewis, May 21, 1840.

acceptance of Greek morality and her later use of Greek aesthetic techniques. Of course she knew Charles Hennell's Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity, one of the first attempts in English to regard Christianity from a historical and analytical point of view.⁸ Charles Bray's The Philosophy of Necessity made a lasting impression on her.⁹ He wrote in his old age that George Eliot "'always held with me that one of the greatest duties of life was unembittered resignation to the inevitable.'"¹⁰ At this point the similarity of old and new ideas becomes apparent, - the Greek tragedians taught the same ideas. Mary Ann Evans had found a substitute to replace the rejected Christianity.

Later, as a literary journalist in London, she wrote reviews of James Anthony Froude's The Nemesis of Fate and Robert William Mackay's The Progress of the Intellect as Exemplified in the Religious Development of the Greeks and Hebrews. Reviewing the latter she writes:

'The master key to this [divine] revelation . . . is the recognition of the presence of undeviating law in the material and moral world - of that invariability of sequence . . . which can alone give value to experience, and renders education . . . possible. The divine yea and nay . . . are effectually impressed on human deeds and aspirations . . . by that inexorable law of consequences, whose evidence is confirmed instead of weakened as the ages advance; and human duty is comprised in the earnest study of this law and patient obedience to its teaching In this

⁸ Bullett, p. 32.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

view religion and philosophy are not merely conciliated,
they are identical . . .¹¹

The close relationship to the ideas inculcated by the Greek tragedians is again obvious.¹² These are the same ideas which she later used as a basis for the underlying philosophy of her novels.

When George Eliot seriously considered writing fiction, she and her husband George Henry Lewes thought she was deficient in dramatic powers, both of construction and dialogue. Her first stories revealed dialogue was no problem; for help in the construction of her first full-length novel, Adam Bede, she turned intuitively to the classic tragedian Aeschylus, who had centuries before embodied her particular fusion of philosophy and religion in the aesthetic pattern of drama.

In a letter to Frederic Harrison discussing The Spanish Gypsy George Eliot has indirectly acknowledged her debt to the Classical dramatists: "When one has to work out the dramatic action for one's self under the inspiration of an idea, instead of having a grand myth . . . ready to one's hand, one feels anything but omnipotent."¹³

¹¹ Bullett, p. 53.

¹² There were other contributing influences along similar veins of thought from other philosophers of her time, for she knew them well, either personally or through their publications. These examples suffice to link George Eliot's philosophy to that of the Greek dramatists.

¹³ Gordon S. Haight, ed., The George Eliot Letters (New Haven, 1954), IV, 301.

One of the common criticisms of George Eliot is "her pedantry." Most modern contemporary biographers and critics accuse her of this fault, some quite bitterly. She was also attacked during her lifetime for this addiction. There are two defensive statements on the subject, one of them her own in a letter to John Blackwood about a Greek couplet quoted in Amos Barton (she slyly suggests that the publisher see if some error has not crept into her "solitary bit of pedantry" through a proof-reader's fault), the second by G. H. Lewes in a letter to Edward Dowden. He writes: "Those who know the Greek poets recognize in a thousand subtle indications her familiarity with them, but where -- except in the 'Clerical Scenes' . . . are the Greeks?"¹⁴

The function of Greek drama, which was religious, was to teach moral truth. George Eliot's purpose as a novelist was of the same serious nature. Her creativity, characterized primarily by wisdom, accepted the dramatic presentation of religious and philosophical teaching which the Greek poets had originated. In a letter to Mrs. Peter Alfred Taylor, dated July 18, 1878, she wrote: "My function is that of the aesthetic not the doctrinal teacher -- the rousing of the nobler emotions, which make mankind desire the social right, not the prescribing of

¹⁴ Ibid., VI, 337. There are two Greek inserts in Clerical Scenes to be exact: the second in Chap. 13 of Janet's Repentance.

special measures, concerning which the artistic mind, however strongly moved by social sympathy, is often not the best judge."¹⁵

Her firm belief in this method of teaching is also stated in a letter to Frederic Harrison: "I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching, because it deals with life in its highest complexity. But if it ceases to be purely aesthetic -- if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram -- it becomes the most offensive of all teaching."¹⁶ Later, in 1873, she elucidates further:

Unless my readers are more moved towards the ends I seek by my works as wholes than by an assemblage of extracts, my writings are a mistake. I have always exercised a severe watch against anything that could be called preaching, and if I have ever allowed myself in dissertation or in dialogue anything which is not part of the structure of my books, I have then sinned against my own laws.

I am particularly susceptible on this point because it touches deeply my conviction of what art should be, and because a great deal of foolish stuff has been written in this relation.¹⁷

The full extent to which Greek moral philosophy and aesthetic form probably penetrated George Eliot's genius can best be estimated first by examining the ethical implications and the artistic structure of the particular Greek dramas which she studied immediately before

¹⁵ Ibid., VII, 44.

¹⁶ Ibid., IV, 300.

¹⁷ Ibid., V, 458-59. Letter to John Blackwood, November 12, 1873.

composition; second, by analyzing the three novels most seriously influenced by Aeschylus and Sophocles in both dramatic structure and character development; and third, by comparing the presentation and development of certain characters in her later novels with Greek dramatic prototypes.

CHAPTER II

GREEK MORAL PHILOSOPHY AS EXPRESSED IN GREEK TRAGIC DRAMA

The Greek dramatists limited their subject material to myths dealing with the actions of gods or demi-gods. This body of poetic and religious material had been developing ethically and artistically from the time of the Orphic Poems, Hesiod, and Homer to the period of the great dramatists. By the fifth century B. C., Greek civilization had reached a level where the ethical implications which had been taking shape behind the poetic imagery assumed significance of their own. Aeschylus and Sophocles as dramatists used the gods of the conventional polytheistic pantheon, and the cultural heroes (demi-gods), which had formerly explained natural phenomena or racial, geographical, or political origins, to inculcate moral philosophy. The mythological material which these two poets found at their disposal had not to be changed, but to be reinterpreted more philosophically than had been previously done. In such a work they were the heralds of the great philosophers.

The Greek pantheon was controlled by Zeus, accepted from primitive time as the Father of the Gods. Being the chief god, his ethical aspect developed simultaneously with Greek moral thought until "he almost shrank the Greek polytheism into monotheism."¹ This idea is stated many times in Aeschylus: "Jove supremely great,"² "Jove cause and end of all,"³ and "Jove, or what other name the God that reigns supreme delights to claim."⁴

As the supreme god, Zeus represents the highest moral law of the universe, justice. "From Homer to the dramatic poets the unqualified use of θεός, 'god,' invariably refers to Zeus, who was the 'Father of gods and men,' chiefly in a spiritual and moral sense, in which last capacity it is natural to see in him the ultimate court of appeal for offenses against the gods and the higher law, and the final arbiter of punishments."⁵ Zeus, then, not only preserved justice in the affairs of Gods and men, but he also avenged injustice. "Of the high functions which belong to the supreme god of the Greeks, that of avenger is not the least

¹ William Sherwood Fox, Greek and Roman Mythology (Boston, 1928), p. 161.

² Aeschylus, "Choephorae," Lyrical Dramas, tr. by John Stuart Blackie (New York, 1936), p. 106.

³ Aeschylus, "Agamemnon," p. 85.

⁴ Ibid., p. 47.

⁵ Fox, pp. 157-58.

notable . . . "6 To him alone belongs divine punishment for acts of impiety and iniquity.

Aeschylus, a sterner moralist than Sophocles, gives emphasis to the idea of Zeus as avenger:

The hand of Jove hath smote them; thou
 May'st trace it plainly;
 What the god willed, behold it now
 Not purposed vainly!⁷

. . . for, though
 Oft-times it lag, with measured blow for blow
 Vengeance prevaieth,
 While great Jove lives.⁸

In Sophocles, who relaxes somewhat in his ethical viewpoint to embrace a more humanistic attitude toward his characters, there are few specific references to this moral nature of the chief god.

Heaven's insistence
 Nothing allows of man's irreverence;
 And great blows great speeches avenging,
 Dealt on a boaster,
 Teach men wisdom in age, at last.⁹

The manner in which this divine retribution was effected took shape in another ethical law, the law of Nemesis. The evil-doer was

⁶ Aeschylus, "Notes to the Choephorae," p. 358 (note 3).

⁷ Aeschylus, "Agamemnon," p. 53.

⁸ Ibid., p. 88.

⁹ Sophocles, "Antigone," tr. by Sir George Young, The Dramas of Sophocles, ed. by Ernest Rhys, Everyman's Library (New York, 1936) p. 41.

inevitably visited by punishment, spiritual and physical. To coerce the insolent spirit, mental anguish and bodily suffering were inflicted; this severe discipline subdued the wicked, purged them of their evil habits, and led them into the way of wisdom. Aeschylus expresses this idea:

For Jove doth teach men wisdom, sternly wins
 To virtue by the tutoring of their sins;
 Yea! drops of torturing recollection chill
 The sleeper's heart; 'gainst man's rebellious will
 Jove works the wise remorse;
 Dread Powers, on awful seats enthroned, compel
 Our hearts with gracious force.¹⁰

The reference to the "dread powers" in the last two lines brings up the subject of the Greek belief in Fate or Destiny. In Homer, Fate was the will of Jove.

. . . Moira ("Fate") was, as it were, an impersonal decree issuing from him; but in the fifth century the idea rapidly gained currency that there was a power preforming the future to which Zeus himself must bow. In Aischylos, accordingly, it is the three Fates who limit his dominion, but in spite of this the Homeric belief never wholly died out.¹¹

In the dramatists the terms Fate and Zeus are usually used interchangeably; but in some instances, Fate represents some mysterious universal power greater and more awful than the supreme god. This power is personified in the hideous forms of the Furies, or Erinnyes, fiends from Hades, who ruthlessly inflicted the tortures of retribution.

¹⁰ Aeschylus, "Agamemnon," p. 48.

¹¹ Fox, p. 162.

Aeschylus portrays them so vividly in The Eumenides that they strike terror into even a reader:

Begone! . . .
 . . . lest
 Thou vomit forth black froth of murdered men,
 Belching the clotted slaughter by thy maw
 Insatiate sucked . . .
 . . . where beheading, eye-out-digging dooms,
 Abortions, butcheries, barrenness abound,
 Where mutilations, flayings, torturings,
 Make wretches groan, on pointed stakes impaled,
 There fix your seats; there hold the horrid feasts,
 In which your savage hearts exultant revel,
 Of gods abominate - maids whose features foul
 Speak your foul tempers plainly.¹²

The Greek dramatists developed a fine psychology of the cycle of sin and crime. Again they did not invent, for their material, enriched by the treatment of many preceding minds, had gradually absorbed the universal characteristics of human conduct. "Pride or insolence of disposition is marked by the Greek moralists as the great source of all the darker crimes . . . of our race."¹³ Such an overweening attitude leads to unreasonable and unjust conduct; the first crime leads to a second; the second breeds a third; and the cycle, having gained momentum of itself, runs its course to inevitable ruin. The truly dreadful idea illustrated here is that the wrong-doer, after his first false

¹² Aeschylus, "The Eumenides," pp. 146-47.

¹³ Ibid., "Notes to the Eumenides," p. 382.

step, becomes the slave to his own sin; his act assumes a will of its own, superior to his. Each Greek dramatist demonstrates this cycle of sin in the actions of his plays repeatedly.

Sin from its primal spring
Mads the ill-counsell'd heart, and arms the hand
With reckless strength. ¹⁴

I know
That impious deeds conspire
To beget an offspring of impious deeds
Too like their ugly sire. ¹⁵

Entangled in the web of his own misdeeds, the sinner unwittingly falls into a laxity of conscience which affords easy access to two evil powers which the Greeks personified as Ate and Peitho. The former represents the frenzied infatuation of the mind which results in perdition,¹⁶ and the latter represents "evil self-persuasion, by which, in the pride of self-will, and vain confidence, a man justifies his worst deeds to himself, and is driven recklessly on to destruction."¹⁷ At last comes retribution, in the form of the Furies, racking the conscience with remorse, purging the mind of sin to encourage moral regeneration; or, in proportion to the crime committed, effecting some horrible death.

¹⁴ Aeschylus, "Agamemnon," p. 48.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁶ A further explanation of this can be found in John Stuart Blackie's "Notes to the Agamemnon," p. 348 (note 60).

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 344 (note 41).

The cycle of sin is not limited to the span of an individual life,¹⁸

but moves from generation to generation:

The heart of the haughty delights to beget
A haughty heart. From time to time
In children's children recurrent appears
 The ancestral crime.

When the dark hour comes that the gods have decreed,
And the Fury burns with wrathful fires,
A demon unholy, with ire unabated,
Lies like black night on the halls of the fated:
And the recreant son plunges guiltily on
 To perfect the guilt of his sires.¹⁹

Closely allied to this evolution of crime is the curse, an instrument of vengeance. In the dramas it has two aspects: the imprecation pronounced by the wronged person upon the evil-doer, or the burden of ancestral crime. Oedipus curses his sons for this lack of filial duty. Both he and Antigone inherit fatal tendencies from sinful ancestors. In either case, the curse, sworn into the jurisdiction of the Furies, gains impetus of its own, like crime, and works its will.

The following analyses of George Eliot's novels intend to show that she accepted the ethical ideal of Justice as the controlling power of human conduct; that she believed in the law of Nemesis as the scourge of

¹⁸ This does not mean to imply that sin affects only the sinner; human society being as closely woven as it is, no crime was ever committed which did not cause suffering to many people innocently involved.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 64.

the unjust and wayward; that she perceived that wisdom is a possession acquired only by suffering. She used the Greek psychology of sin, first cautiously in the case of Arthur Donnithorne; then with complete assurance in Tito Melema's life. She used the curse as an instrument of vengeance cautiously again in Adam Bede; then vigorously in The Mill on the Floss and Romola. In short, she accepted the ethics of Aeschylus and Sophocles, moulding them, of course, into her own period of civilization, democratizing her demi-gods and humanizing her gods.

The reasons why George Eliot chose to express her ethical opinions in Greek rather than Christian terms are stated clearly in her novels. In both Adam Bede and The Mill on the Floss she devoted special chapters to discussions on the inefficacy of modern Christianity to meet the spiritual needs of the average man.²⁰ Her sympathy was for the unlearned, common people, the great bulk of humanity; and she observed that "their religion was of a simple, semi-pagan kind."²¹ Christian theology never actually functioned in such people's lives. Ecclesiastical laws determining baptism and burial rites, the ritual of worship, proper interpretation of the Biblical text, or the exact nature of God were extraneous matters to them. They lived close to nature and were subject

²⁰ George Eliot, Adam Bede, Large Paper Edition (Boston, 1908), I, 253, and The Mill on the Floss, II, 3. Subsequent references are to this edition.

²¹ Mill on the Floss, II, 7.

to her few simple universal laws. How far the church failed in teaching the true Christian attitude of forgiving love is illustrated in Dr. Kenn's criticism of his parishioners in The Mill on the Floss.²²

Then, too, Christianity looks to the next world. George Eliot was convinced "that the immediate object and proper sphere of all our highest emotions are our struggling fellow-men in this earthly existence."²³ She believed that a deep yearning for justice is an innate characteristic of the human soul; and that as long as that yearning exists, the common conscience of mankind will function (as it does in the Greek drama) to protect its ideal, with complete indifference to any doctrine. The chief concern of the teacher is the strengthening of those few simple moral truths, the observance of which organized society has ever found to be for its highest good. "The will of God is the same thing as the will of other men, compelling us to work and avoid what they have seen to be harmful to social existence. Disjoined from any perceived good, the divine will is simply so much as we have ascertained of the facts of existence which compel obedience at our peril."²⁴

²² Ibid., II, 7.

²³ Cross, II, 168.

²⁴ Cross, III, 13.

CHAPTER III

GREEK AESTHETIC FORM

George Eliot began her literary career as a journalist and critic. As has been stated, she hesitated to attempt fiction because she felt herself weak in constructive ability. In her study of Greek drama, she found not only moral truth as a buttress for her own philosophy, but consummate aesthetic patterns as a guide for her inexperienced creative powers.

In choosing the novel as a vehicle for expression, she gave herself scope enough to commit the customary error of untried authors who amass incidents and characters in perhaps an entertaining fashion, but are at a loss to make them functional. Her familiarity with the Greeks was good insurance against such a pitfall. The action of a novel is its crucial part; it must not only be universal in appeal but aesthetically complete if the work is to have literary worth. George Eliot aimed at once for "a single action, united and complete, with beginning, middle, and end, so as to come home to the apprehension with the effect of one entire living being."¹

¹ William Cleaver Wilkinson, Greek Classics, Vol. II of Wilkinson's Foreign Classics in English (New York, 1900), p. 129. This is Colonel Mure's translation of Aristotle.

In Aeschylus the subject is stripped to its barest essentials. His great trilogy, The Oresteia, is composed of three dramas, each dealing with a single dramatic situation, and as a unit, comprising a complete action. The return of Agamemnon, as the conquering hero of Troy, to Argos, and his immediate murder by his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aigisthus, is the dramatic situation in the first part of the trilogy. The second drama, The Choephorae, is concerned with the arrival of the son, Orestes, from exile to avenge, through divine command, the death of his father by slaying his mother and her lover. In accomplishing this vengeance, divinely sanctioned though it is, Orestes commits a crime, which, according to the law of Justice, must also be punished. To bring this action to completion Aeschylus, in The Eumenides, acquits Orestes through the intervention of the Goddess of Wisdom, Athena, whose rational persuasion placates the retributive Furies.

The pattern of the dramatic action resolves itself into three movements: action, the crime; reaction, the vengeance; synthesis, the reconciliation. This is the same pattern used in Adam Bede.

Sophocles, although his action is more complex (because he introduced a third actor) and his interest in character more personal, used a dramatic pattern in the Oedipus Rex which has been considered the perfect example of all Greek tragedy. The situation in this case is a discovery of a past crime which tragically affects the present; this

discovery precedes or results in a reversal of fortune. Oedipus, king of Thebes, to alleviate the plague afflicting his subjects, sends an envoy to the oracle of Apollo to learn some remedy. He is advised to bring to light the murderer of the former king, Laius. In accomplishing this, Oedipus uncovers certain incidents in the past which reveal that he, the only son of Laius and Jocasta, destined by a hereditary curse, has unknowingly murdered his father, married, and begotten children by his mother. Horrified at his terrible fate, he blinds himself and goes into the exile he appointed himself as the guilty one.

The dramatic pattern here is discovery followed by psychological recoil, remorse and retribution - a single and complete action. The Mill on the Floss has a similar structure. In Romola George Eliot combines the two patterns.

Since George Eliot appears to be influenced in her first three novels by Aeschylus and Sophocles in both structural unity and character development, a discussion of Euripides' influence (which does not seem to be as far-reaching) will come later.

CHAPTER IV

THE GREEK INFLUENCE ON ADAM BEDE

On September 1, 1857, George Eliot wrote to John Blackwood:

"I have a subject in my mind which will not come under the limitations of the title 'Clerical Life,' and I am inclined to take a large canvas for it and write a novel."¹ This subject was Adam Bede. She began the story on October 22, 1857.² On November 16, 1858, she recorded its completion.³

Her journal also indicates that previous to and during this period, George Eliot was intently studying Greek drama. In a letter to Miss Sara Hennell, dated April 16, 1857, she wrote: "We are enjoying a retrogression to old-fashioned reading: . . . I rush on the slightest pretext to Sophocles and am as excited about blind old Oedipus as any young lady can be about the latest hero with magnificent eyes."⁴ In her journal of the twelfth of August of the same year, she wrote: "Finished the 'Electra' of

¹ Cross, II, 57.

² Ibid., II, 60.

³ Ibid., II, 99.

⁴ Haight, II, 319.

Sophocles, and began Aeschylus's 'Agamemnon.'⁵ She began reading Aeschylus, then, shortly before Adam Bede was conceived and continued that study during the formative period of the novel. On December 6, 1857, she finished the Agamemnon.⁶ On December 17, 1857, she was reading The Choephorae.⁷ By January 18, 1858 she had progressed into The Eumenides.⁸

The germ of Adam Bede was suggested to George Eliot by the anecdote of an aunt who had gone in a cart to the gallows with an unfortunate girl-mother convicted of child-murder. The setting of the novel is rural England, about 1798. Adam Bede, a conscientious young carpenter, burdened with a drunkard father, a querulous mother, and a wool-gathering, religious brother finds his personal happiness in loving pretty Hetty Sorrel. As family difficulties vanish in the course of time, and Adam finds he can plan for marriage, he begins courting Hetty seriously. But Hetty, a vain and pleasure-loving little creature, knows Arthur Donnithorne, the Squire's grandson, is attracted by her beauty. When Arthur comes of age, he is influential in securing for Adam, whom he has respected and admired from boyhood, the superintendency of his

⁵ Cross, II. 55.

⁶ Ibid., II, 65.

⁷ Ibid., II, 68.

⁸ Ibid., II, 76.

grandfather's woods. Adam, at the peak of his good fortune, believing Hetty is responding to his attentions, discovers that Arthur has already claimed her affection by surreptitious meetings in the woods and by costly gifts. In his first rage, Adam provokes Arthur to blows; then realizing the futility of this course, he becomes partially reconciled to the situation after he compels Arthur to sever relations with Hetty and leave the country. Hetty, reduced to despair at Arthur's departure, indifferently accepts Adam's proposal. Adam, again about to grasp happiness, learns of Hetty's disappearance, then of her arrest for child-murder. Throughout her trial, he is maddened with thoughts of revenge for Arthur, who, he feels, is responsible for the crime and ought to suffer. The parish Rector finally brings him to see the futility of such insensate hatred and to realize that Arthur's conscience will effect a more severe punishment than any mortal can inflict. Hetty is saved from hanging by Arthur's intervention, but deported. The moral persuasion of the Rector, and the force of Adam's suffering, making him capable of pity, reconcile the two men. Adam sees in Arthur's countenance the remorse which follows a sinful act as inevitable punishment.

The synopsis reveals "an action that is weighty, complete, and of a proper magnitude."⁹ It also points to a similarity to the Aeschylean

⁹ Wilkinson, p. 129. This is J. A. Symonds' translation of Aristotle's definition of tragedy. The synopsis also reveals that George Eliot is working in the democratic tradition. In her treatment there is nothing which approximates the semi-divine or divine characters of Aeschylus. The scene is rural; the characters are predominantly common country people of peasant descent. The highest social position is held by the Squire; the highest cultural position by the Rector.

trilogy in dramatic structure. The action is tri-fold, falling into three movements. The first movement is crime: the seduction of Hetty and her child-murder. The second movement is reaction: the vindictive desire of Adam to punish Arthur. The last movement represents a synthesis in the reconciliation of the two men. In keeping with the Aeschylean tradition, Arthur, Adam and the Rector have functional roles paralleling the Greek concepts of wrong-doer, avenger and conciliator.

Arthur's function in the novel is to illustrate the inevitable downfall of sin. The young man's lack of moral fibre comes from his protective social shell which hardly encourages a vigorous will or a sharpened perception of cause and effect. His tragedy is the more common, pitiable disaster which overtakes the many well-intentioned, good people:

It was not possible for Arthur Donnithorne to do anything mean, dastardly, or cruel. "No! I'm a devil of a fellow for getting myself into a hobble, but I always take care the load shall fall on my own shoulders!" Unhappily there is no inherent poetic justice in hobbles, and they will sometimes obstinately refuse to inflict their worst consequences on the prime offender, in spite of his loudly-expressed wish. It was entirely owing to this deficiency in the scheme of things that Arthur had ever brought any one into trouble besides himself.¹⁰

George Eliot traces the growth of sin in Arthur's conscience utilizing the Greek cycle of sin discussed on pages 14 and 15. In the first stage of his temptation, the young man makes some efforts at resistance

¹⁰ Eliot, Adam Bede, I, 176.

after his first advances to Hetty (Chap. XIII). His conscience asserts itself with visions of Hetty's disgrace and his tenants' disrespect for his trifling. He decides to confess all to the Rector but at the crucial moment his will dodges the delicate issue:

Was there a motive at work under this strange reluctance of Arthur's which had a sort of backstairs influence, not admitted to himself? . . . possibly it was the fear lest he might hereafter find the fact of having made a confession to the Rector a serious annoyance, in case he should not be able quite to carry out his good resolutions?¹¹

Fear and its companion false pride have gained a hold. Hetty soon secretly hoards two costly ear-rings and a locket. The guilt which assails Arthur now is expressed in these few lines from the description of his birthday feast:

That look of Hetty's possessed Arthur with a dread,
. . . he felt he would have given up three years of his youth for the happiness of abandoning himself without remorse to his passion for Hetty.¹²

When Adam discovers Arthur kissing Hetty, the young squire has been drinking "to make unpleasant feelings more bearable," and the ensuing exhibition of insolent pride and self-will from the onetime gentlemen together with the flippant excuses he uses to justify his actions are indicative of the corrosive effects of sin (Chap. XXVII). When Arthur

¹¹ Ibid., I, 247-48.

¹² Ibid., I, 412.

learns that Adam loves Hetty he is brought "face to face with the first irrevocable evil he had ever committed" and "all screening self-excuse, which rarely falls quite away while others respect us, forsook him."¹³ The next downward step, slavery to the sinful deed which has now acquired a separate life, is described thus:

Arthur was in the wretched position of an open generous man, who has committed an error which makes deception seem a necessity. The native impulse to give truth in return for truth, to meet trust with frank confession, must be suppressed, and duty was become a question of tactics. His deed was reacting upon him - was already governing him tyrannously, and forcing him into a course that jarred with his habitual feelings. The only aim that seemed admissible to him now was to deceive Adam to the utmost: to make Adam think better of him than he deserved.¹⁴

Arthur's conscience has constantly resisted his questionable course of action, causing him no little remorseful suffering; but to be really effective, Nemesis must become objectified, beyond the reach of indulgent self-persuasion. George Eliot demonstrates this in true Greek fashion: "Nemesis can seldom forge a sword for herself out of our consciences - out of the suffering we feel in the suffering we may have caused: there is rarely metal enough there to make an effective weapon."¹⁵ Adam, therefore, must become a Fury, the objectified embodiment of Arthur's sin, and just as the Erynnes scourge the murderers in The Oresteia, his

¹³ Ibid., II, 16.

¹⁴ Ibid., II, 24-25.

¹⁵ Ibid., II, 32.

wrath scourges Arthur. "He stood like an immovable obstacle against which no pressure could avail; an embodiment of what Arthur most shrank from believing in - the irrevocableness of his own wrong-doing."¹⁶ George Eliot is as insistent as Aeschylus in her statement of the significance of human actions:

Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds . . . There is a terrible coercion in our deeds which may first turn the honest man into a deceiver, and then reconcile him to the change; for this reason - that the second wrong presents itself to him in the guise of the only practicable right.¹⁷

Adam is the force which compels the vacillating Arthur to meet the crisis: breaking off relations with Hetty. At this point George Eliot follows Aeschylus closely (The Eumenides) in shifting the emphasis from the lesser problem, the remorse of the sinner, to the greater problem, the regeneration of the Fury. That Arthur suffers the greatest blow of retribution when he learns of Hetty's arrest is certain. The ultimate reconciliation does not alleviate Arthur's punishment. At the very end of the book he says: " ' "I could never do anything for her, Adam - she lived long enough for all the suffering, - and I'd thought so of the time when I might do something for her. But you told me the truth when you

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., II, 34. Compare this with Aeschylus's first quotation on page 13 and the idea expressed in these lines: "Self-will, fell Ate's daughter, still/Fore-counselling ruin,/Shall spur him on restless borne/To his undoing." Aeschylus, "Agamemnon," p. 53.

said to me once, "There's a sort of wrong that can never be made up for." "18

As has been indicated, Adam's function in the novel is similar to that of the Eumenides. George Eliot makes his harshness logical by giving him a peasant lineage so that even though he possesses an alert intelligence, the primitive passions rise to the surface quickly. There are many allusions to his proud and harsh treatment of erring man. He admits to himself, " ' Ah, I was always too hard, . . . It's a sore fault in me as I'm so hot and out o' patience with people when they do wrong, and my heart gets shut up against 'em, so as I can't bring myself to forgive 'em. I see clear enough there's more pride nor love in my soul . . . ' "19

George Eliot further explains Adam's role:

Perhaps here lay the secret of the hardness he had accused himself of: he had too little fellow-feeling with the weakness that errs inspite of foreseen consequences. Without this fellow-feeling, how are we to get enough patience and charity towards our stumbling, falling companions in the long and changeful journey? And there is but one way in which a strong determined soul can learn it - by getting his heart-strings bound round the weak and erring, so that he must share not only the outward consequences of their error, but their inward suffering.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., II, Epilogue, p. 362. Aeschylus has also expressed this idea in various ways in the "Agamemnon." "Who breaks the close-linked woe/Which Heaven entaileth?" p. 89. "Springs his reaping/From what seed he sowed," p. 89.

¹⁹ Ibid., I, 260-61

²⁰ Ibid., I, 302-03.

When Adam discovers Hetty's and Arthur's sin, he absolves Hetty and concentrates all his wrath on Arthur. Adam learns his preliminary lesson after he had struck Arthur down in the woods: "What had he done by fighting? Only satisfied his own passion, only wreaked his own vengeance. He had not rescued Hetty, nor changed the past . . ." ²¹

Caught in a deeper current of agony after Hetty's arrest, he falls into the same error again. Blinded by wrath, like the Erynnes, he cannot see any punishment for Arthur other than one immediate and equal to Hetty's as the expression of justice. At the close of the story, when his spiritual change is effected, Adam is a wiser and nobler man. He recognizes Arthur's suffering and offers his hand in renewed friendship: "'Ah, sir,' said Adam, for the first time feeling his own pain merged in sympathy for Arthur, 'you and me'll often be thinkin' o' the same thing, when we're a long way off one another. I'll pray God to help you, as I pray him to help me.'" ²²

Adam's reaction parallels that of the Furies in these points: they demand immediate and physical punishment (for Orestes), they make terrible threats when their will is opposed; they are finally placated chiefly by reason and moral persuasion and relinquish their attitude of hate for one of reconciliation. The chorus of Furies replies to Athena:

²¹ Ibid., II, 18.

²² Ibid., II, 262.

"Thy words have soothed me, and my wrath relents."²³ Athena answers:
 "Wisely now the tongue of kindness/Thou hast found, the way of love."²⁴

The function of the Rector is similar to that of Athena in Aeschylus. He effects the reconciliation of Adam and the Poysers with Arthur, bringing the single action to its satisfying completion. His method is the same: rational and moral persuasion. No other character of George Eliot is so infused with Greek principles as Adolphus Irwine.

His mental palate, indeed, was rather pagan, and found a savouriness in a quotation from Sophocles or Theocritus that was quite absent from any text in Isaiah or Amos.
 . . . Mr. Irwine's recollections of young enthusiasm and ambition were all associated with poetry and ethics that lay aloof from the Bible.²⁵

The author seems to have taken special delight in touching up the Rector's portrait with the most minute Greek "accessories." The first volume of the Foulis Aeschylus lies ready to his hand in his study. He calls his dog Juno. His mother is likened to a statue of Ceres. His conversation is rich with classical allusions. He is, in short, the perfect mouthpiece for enunciating George Eliot's ethical beliefs. It is significant that he possesses the quality which she felt to be more essentially religious than doctrinal knowledge and zeal.

²³ Aeschylus, "The Eumenides," p. 168.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 171.

²⁵ Eliot, Adam Bede, I, 96.

. . . his was one of those large-hearted, sweet-blooded natures that never know a narrow or grudging thought; epicurean, if you will, with no enthusiasm, no self-scourging sense of duty; but yet . . . of a sufficiently subtle moral fibre to have an unwearied tenderness for obscure and monotonous suffering.²⁶

The Rector's reply to Arthur (when the latter goes to confess) voices George Eliot's ethical law, the basis of which was a belief in Nemesis or Necessity.

" . . . I pity him [the man who struggles against temptation but finally falls] in proportion to his struggles, for they foreshadow the inward suffering which is the worst form of Nemesis. Consequences are unpitying. Our deeds carry their terrible consequences, quite apart from any fluctuations that went before - consequences that are hardly ever confined to ourselves. And it is best to fix our minds on that certainty, instead of considering what may be the elements of excuse for us."²⁷

When Adam threatens to drag Arthur back to suffer for his sin, Mr. Irwine reasons with him: " ' No, Adam, no; I'm sure you will wish to stay and see what good can be done for her, instead of going on a useless errand of vengeance. The punishment will surely fall without your aid. ' "²⁸

Further moral persuasion is necessary to restrain Adam during the trial:

"An act of vengeance on your part against Arthur would simply be another evil added to those we are suffering under . . . You would have committed a blind act of fury,

²⁶ Ibid., I, 94.

²⁷ Ibid., I, 246-47.

²⁸ Ibid., II, 175.

that would leave all the present evils just as they were, and add worse evils to them. You may tell me that you meditate no fatal act of vengeance: but the feeling in your mind is what gives birth to such actions, and as long as you indulge it, as long as you do not see that to fix your mind on Arthur's punishment is revenge, and not justice, you are in danger of being led on to the commission of some great wrong."²⁹

This parallels Athena's pleading with the Eumenides:

Be ruled by me . . .

. . . Soothe ye, therefore;

Cast not your bolted vengeance on this land,
Your gout of wrath divine distil not, stings
Of pointed venom, with keen corrosive power
Eating life's seeds, all barrenness and blight.

.
Dishonoured are ye not: Spit not your rancour
On this fair land remediless. Rests my trust
On Jove, the mighty . . .

Yield thou: cast not the seed of reckless speech
To crop the land with woe. Soothing the waves
Of bitter anger darkling in thy breast,
Dwell in this land, thy dreadful deity
Sistered with me.

.

. . . You -

Mark well my words - if now some foreign land
Ye choose, will rue your choice . . .
Use thine election: wisely use it; give
A blessing, and a blessing take . . .³⁰

The Rector's persuasion hinders any rashness on Adam's part while he is at the height of his agony (as in the drama) and prepares him for his spiritual regeneration.

²⁹ Ibid., II, 195.

³⁰ Aeschylus, "The Eumenides," pp. 166-68.

Deep, unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state. The yearning memories, the bitter regret, the agonised sympathy, the struggling appeals to the Invisible Right . . . made Adam look back on all the previous years as if they had been a dim, sleepy existence, and he had only now awaked to full consciousness. . . . a great anguish may do the work of years, and we may come out from that baptism of fire with a soul full of new awe and new pity.³¹

The same exalted idea Aeschylus illustrates: that vengeance is an irrational act which neither corrects the crime nor alleviates its misery but rather propagates further evil. The only solution is the way of reason, adjustment effected by pity and kind sympathy for our erring fellowman. The Greek poet puts his statement in Athena's words:

"Wisely now the tongue of kindness/Thou hast found, the way of love."³²

One final duty remains for the Rector: persuading the Poyser family and Adam to forego their feelings of humiliation and disgrace and remain in their native parish. Arthur, voicing the Rector's arguments, accomplishes this in his last meeting with Adam. As the Furies, subdued by the emotion of kindly graciousness, find an honourable refuge in Athena's city, so Adam and his friends find solace in remaining in their own community.

³¹ Eliot, Adam Bede, II, 199.

³² Aeschylus, "The Eumenides," p. 171.

CHAPTER V

THE GREEK INFLUENCE ON THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

In a letter to John Blackwood, dated March 31, 1859, George Eliot wrote: "About my new story, which will be a novel as long as 'Adam Bede,' and a sort of companion picture of provincial life . . . it will be a work which will require time and labour."¹ The completion of the novel was recorded on March 21, 1860.

It is probable that Sophocles was the major Greek influence at work here. According to her journal George Eliot read the Ajax during December and January of 1856-57.² She read the Oedipus Rex during February through April, 1857,³ completing the Oedipus Coloneus also within the same month and year.⁴ The Electra was finished, according to her notation, on August 12, 1857.⁵ Since there are frequent references

¹ Haight, III, 41.

² Cross, II, 30.

³ Haight, II, 319, footnote 8.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cross, II, 55.

to both the Antigone and the Philoctetes in her novels, it is safe to assume that George Eliot was familiar with them. It is also probable that The Seven Against Thebes of Aeschylus, a drama which completes the cycle of tragic action involving the family of Laius, did not escape her perusal.

Vernon Rendall relates an enlightening incident:

I begin with a passage from 'The Life and Letters of Sir R. C. Jebb,' Chap. VII. At Cambridge in 1873 he wrote to the lady who later became his wife that he had met George Eliot not for the first time and had made great friends with her. He asked her how Sophocles had influenced her and her answer startled him. He had noted long before that she was the modern dramatist, in the large sense, most like Sophocles, probably in the "outlining of the first emotions." She said, "in the delineations of the great primitive emotions." Jebb did not tell her of this curious corroboration of his views.⁶

Mr. Rendall continues with his own views which are also apropos.

In dealing with such primitive emotions as fear and love Sophocles does not let himself go, like the other two great dramatists. George Eliot never lets herself go. She is much more restrained than George Sand, whose work she admired. She wrote with difficulty and perhaps was cautious because she felt herself to be a teacher. As Herbert Paul says, "She never made a pretense of not having a moral." The plays of Sophocles were in a world in which the divine overlordship is not queried, as by Aeschylus, or scouted, as by Euripides. George Eliot has always a high sense of morality, but by the time she wrote she had ceased to believe in the Christian religion. She believed in the sure retribution of Nemesis amply exhibited in the fresh drama. . . . Sophocles is evidently a favourite. I have never seen so many references to him in the writings of any other author.⁷

⁶ Rendall, CXCII (December 13, 1947), 544.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 544-45.

Dramatic structure and character presentation and development in The Mill on the Floss bear interesting similarities to those elements in the Sophoclean treatment of the Oedipus legend. The action of both stories includes several generations. There is the discovery motif followed by psychological recoil and reversal of fortune. The curse motif is utilized, and the Sophoclean idea of unescapable Destiny functions as an integral part of the action.

George Eliot draws a parallel between Mr. Tulliver and his Greek prototype: "Mr. Tulliver had a destiny as well as Oedipus, and in this case he might plead, like Oedipus, that his deed was inflicted on him rather than committed by him."⁸ She continues her characterization:

And Mr. Tulliver, . . . though nothing more than a superior miller and maltster, was as proud and obstinate as if he had been a very lofty personage, in whom such dispositions might be a source of that conspicuous, far-echoing tragedy, which sweeps the stage in regal robes, and makes the dullest chronicler sublime. The pride and obstinacy of millers, and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day, have their tragedy too; but it is of that unwept, hidden sort, that goes on from generation to generation, and leaves no record - such tragedy . . . as lies in the slow or sudden death that follows on a bruised passion, though it may be a death that finds only a parish funeral.⁹

⁸ Eliot, Mill on the Floss, I, 195.

⁹ Ibid., I, 294.

The discovery of Oedipus is impelled first by the honest conviction that he must correct an evil; second, by his rash, impetuous nature which causes him to quarrel with his confederates and accuse them; third, by persistent prodding of the affair at hand; fourth, by the well-intentioned but fatal interference of his wife; and fifth, by pure chance. The same steps are taken to produce the same effect in The Mill on the Floss.

Mr. Tulliver, having been unfortunate in unwise legal proceedings and being incapable of comprehending the lawyer's shrewdness, associates the whole profession with "Old Harry." His rage centers upon Mr. Wakem, who has defeated him consistently. Desiring to right such wrong (the personal being at once the general to him), he determines to educate his son Tom so that he might "be up to the tricks of these fellows." The announcement of Tom's fine education, expensive as it will be and unusual for a miller's son, is met with disapproval from Mr. Tulliver's in-laws. Criticism pricks his obstinate pride into anger, and he quarrels with his sister-in-law over a loan she has made him. His impetuous nature is like Oedipus'; wrath is also his bane. Piqued by his wife's fretful attempts at reconciliation, he pays the loan and sends Tom to school by mortgaging his land. Further disputes over the right to water-power incense Mr. Tulliver, and he carries on a persistent but fatal lawsuit, with Wakem the final victor. The decision of the trial in which he gains nothing and

loses everything is a severe blow; but when he learns that his mortgage has fallen into the hands of Wakem by a chance transfer, the shock results in a stroke of paralysis. In dramatic action, although the circumstances are not exactly the same, this parallels the blindness of Oedipus. During the following weeks in which he lies in a state of coma, he is declared bankrupt and his belongings sold. Then Mrs. Tulliver, like Jocasta, with the best intentions, interferes. Hoping to persuade Wakem not to buy the mill and house, she reveals facts which make him determine to do so. Learning, during convalescence, of the full extent of his misfortune, that the Tulliver property belongs to Wakem and that he must serve this man as tenant or leave his ancestral home, Mr. Tulliver submits to his fate, like Oedipus, because he must.

It is probable that George Eliot now turned to suggestions from Oedipus at Colonus and The Seven Against Thebes. In the concluding dramas of the Greek cycle the sons of Oedipus neglect their father's welfare to fight for the supremacy of his throne. He curses them. This curse becomes a Fury which hunts its victims down to destruction.

Mr. Tulliver's natural reaction is to curse Wakem, and to render the curse as effective as possible he makes Tom write it in the family Bible with his promise of revenge and his signature. Mr. Tulliver lives until Tom succeeds in paying off his debts; then in a fit of joyous frenzy, he madly flogs Wakem and dies from over-exertion. The remainder of

the action illustrates the fatal influences of the curse upon the children. Although they are not the accursed, as in the Greek myth, they are parties to the imprecation, and it reacts upon their lives more seriously than it does upon Wakem. Tom inherits the old weakness, hatred, and through him the curse is eventually worked out.

Many critics of George Eliot have pointed to her Antigone-like heroines. Maggie's character and destiny partake of this influence to some extent. Maggie, like the Greek heroine, inherits the troublous traits of her father. She has his impulsive, affectionate nature with its fatal tendency toward the extreme. She also possesses a magnanimous intelligence like her prototype; and the demands of this intelligence, intensified by her emotional nature, necessarily result in tragedy under the conditions of her environment. Her relations with Philip Wakem bring about a bitter father-son altercation similar to that of Creon and Haemon in the Antigone. The elder Wakem is as wrathful and adamant in his opposition to his son's love for Maggie as Creon is to Haemon's loyalty to Antigone. Filial duty is demanded by both fathers imperiously. Both sons argue reason instead of "ridiculous rancour"¹⁰ and "a sinning against right."¹¹ They point out that their loved ones have the respect

¹⁰ Ibid., II, 239.

¹¹ Sophocles, "Antigone," p. 23.

and admiration of their communities. When Maggie's social position is sneered at by Wakem, Philip replies, "All St. Ogg's I fancy would pronounce her to be more than my equal."¹² Haemon in answer to Creon's contempt for Antigone's rebelliousness quotes the townspeople's feeling: "'Is she not worthy to be carved in gold?'"¹³ Both sons are concerned for their father's erring judgment.

The Sophoclean idea that man is a victim of Fate is traced more clearly in Maggie's life than in her father's. His misfortunes are due to the tragic flaw in his character, but the idea that he is predestined to calamity is not predominant. But Maggie, like Antigone, is fated from the very first, her father's characteristics and action serving as a background for her personal tragedy. Premonitions of her death are uttered early in the story by her mother. "'Goodness heart! she's got drowned!' exclaimed Mrs. Tulliver."¹⁴ . . . "'They're such children for the water, mine are,' she said aloud . . . 'they'll be brought in dead and drowned some day.'"¹⁵ Learning to look upon "her life as an insignificant part of a divinely-guided whole,"¹⁶ Maggie is led in a discussion with Philip to remark that "our life is determined for us."¹⁷

¹² Eliot, Mill on the Floss, II, 240.

¹³ Sophocles, "Antigone," p. 22.

¹⁴ Eliot, Mill on the Floss, I, 52.

¹⁵ Ibid., I, 153.

¹⁶ Ibid., II, 33.

¹⁷ Ibid., II, 51.

George Eliot is explicit in stating her belief that there is a destiny operating in our lives which determines human fate irrespective of character:

But you have known Maggie a long while, and need to be told, not her characteristics, but her history, which is a thing hardly to be predicted even from the completest knowledge of characteristics. For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. "Character," says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms - "character is destiny." ¹⁸

This destiny is responsible for Maggie's final step with Stephen.

Maggie felt that she was being led down the garden among the roses, being helped with firm tender care into the boat . . . all by this stronger presence that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will, like the added self which comes with the sudden exalting influence of a strong tonic - and she felt nothing else. Memory was excluded. ¹⁹

George Eliot prepares the reader for the death of her heroine in somewhat the same manner of the chorus in Antigone. Statements like "Maggie's destiny, then, is at present hidden, and we must wait for it to reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river: we only know that the river is full and rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home" ²⁰ remind the reader of the prognosticating function of the Greek chorus. The death scene is reminiscent of Oedipus' passing:

¹⁸ Ibid. , II, 203.

¹⁹ Ibid. , II, 299.

²⁰ Ibid. , II, 203-04.

. . . some guide
 Sent from above, or depth of the earth beneath
 Opening to take him, friendly, without pain.
 For not as of one mourned, or with disease
 Grown pitiable, was his departure; but
 If any ever was so, wonderful.

 But viewless regions rapt him home,
 Sudden, by some mysterious doom.²¹

When Maggie is swept into the flood, her experience is similarly transcendent: "In the first moments Maggie felt nothing, thought of nothing, but that she had suddenly passed away from that life which she had been dreading: it was the transition of death, without its agony - and she was alone in the darkness with God."²²

The concept of Justice, or the law of Nemesis, again functions throughout the novel. Mr. Tulliver, placed in conditions he only vaguely comprehends, realizes that justice in this world seems to be on the side of the "raskills." Scrupulously honest, he cannot solve the perplexity this fact brings him. His son's narrow and severe concept of right is described thus: "Tom . . . was rather a Rhadamanthine personage, having more than the usual share of boy's justice in him - the justice that desires to hurt culprits as much as they deserve to be hurt, and is troubled with no doubts concerning the exact amount of their deserts."²³

²¹ Sophocles, "Oedipus Coloneus," p. 307.

²² Eliot, Mill on the Floss, II, 380.

²³ Ibid., I, 75.

This is the reason that his father's curse finds such support in him. The curse to Maggie's intelligent and humane soul is hateful and unjustifiable. Tom's mentality can never apprehend spiritual truth; he can judge only outward facts and those from a prejudiced point of view. This accounts for his cruelty to Maggie in her love for Philip and his rejection of her after her fated elopement with Stephen. It might be said that, in their childhood, Tom represents that frustrating, punishing fate which plagued Maggie for her hyper-sensitive nature; in later life, in a measure, he becomes the agent of Nemesis which pursues her for her acts of weakness.

George Eliot saw with Sophocles that man's life is essentially tragic because the strict moral laws which result from the complexities of society must of necessity conflict with certain inherited tendencies. In the Oedipus legend, the fates of the individuals are not considered punishments for their actions. Whatever sins Oedipus commits are unconsciously done. Antigone disregards a king's command to obey a religious law. Their fates are indicative of the terrible consequences which result from certain courses of action, erroneous perhaps, but under certain conditions, innocently committed. Destiny, not retributive fate, is emphasized. The same idea prevails in the cases of Mr. Tulliver and Maggie; yet Maggie suffers retribution for her elopement with Stephen, although it was beyond her control. This retribution, however,

is not a divine one, but inflicted by her unfeeling, prejudiced fellow-beings. Maggie's conscience upholds righteousness throughout her temptations. Otherwise she could not have renounced Philip's and Stephen's love. Her transcendent death was a recompense for her sufferings, as was that of Oedipus.

CHAPTER VI

THE GREEK INFLUENCE ON ROMOLA

Romola was written during the period from 1861 to 1863. George Eliot began to write on October 7, 1861, and completed the novel on June 9, 1863. There are no specific evidences in the author's journal that she studied any particular Greek works as an immediate aid toward the construction of this novel. However, her diaries and letters and those of her husband indicate that she was in close contact with the classics all during her writing career. She had grown adept in utilizing Greek thought and Greek literary patterns in both preceding novels; she hardly needed additional study for this third, especially when the historical research involved was so onerous.

Putting aside the democratic tradition, George Eliot turned to the historical method of Scott, giving proof of remarkable powers of research. She chose as her setting Renaissance Italy; doubtless, because this was the period in the spiritual history of humanity which most

completely accepted the old Greek spirit,¹ and consequently, provided historically for the conflict between Christianity and Paganism, the two ideals of life which she skillfully placed in juxtaposition in Adam Bede and in tragic contrast in The Mill on the Floss. In this third novel the two concepts are bitterly opposed, then reconciled. (A further expansion of this will come later.) The scene she laid in Florence, a center of great religious and political upheaval; first, because the existing situation was perfect for the evolution of her two chief characters, Romola and Tito Melema; and second, because Florence was the center of Savonarola's activities.

This novel, greater in scope than the two preceding, is exceedingly complex, not only in its structural design, but also in its character delineations, so that orderly analytical procedure is difficult. The analysis which follows is not at all exhaustive, intending to select only such elements as are pertinent.

¹ Vernon Rendall further elaborates: "Florence at the date of 'Romola', 1492, thought a great deal of the classics and particularly of Greek. George Eliot was equal to the occasion. She knew of Valla's translation of Thucydides and how much the Pope paid for it. Her Tito was familiar with Pausanias, a guide book little read by many scholars, unless they are archeologists, and the sight of a page in the 'Messenica' brings back to him, though the light is too poor for reading, the stoning of Aristocrates. . . . The learned Bardo in his blindness recalled his emendations in Nonnus. . . . Bardo also quotes Epictetus." Rendall, CXCI (December 27, 1947), 565.

There are two major lines of action in this novel, represented by the two chief characters, Romola and Tito. The action involving Tito is a falling one; it signifies the complete degradation of character. His actions proceed without pause or deflection to a self-imposed doom. His life magnificently illustrates the Greek cycle of sin, its philosophy and psychology.²

The line of action involving Romola is a rising one; it signifies the ennobling possibilities of suffering on character. Romola, a noble, learned, but inexperienced girl, falls in love with Tito Melema, a young Greek scholar who agrees to assist her scholarly father. She marries him, believing his beauty to be the outward expression of a noble soul. She makes a series of discoveries which prove him to be grossly deceptive in all his human relationships. Her reaction is to sever her marriage ties. Savonarola halts her flight from Florence, and points out the path of Christian duty, to which she submits. When the political and religious turmoil which grips Florence culminates in the Frate's spiritual and temporal defeat, Romola, whose ardent nature has leaned heavily upon the monk's guidance, recoils a second time from certain discoveries she makes in regard to his purposes. This time she quits

² Vernon Rendall says, "In 'Romola' Tito is an adroit, intensely selfish scoundrel, commended by nothing but his beauty and his scholarship. His case leads George Eliot to her most elaborate analysis of Nemesis . . ." Rendall, CXCII (December 27, 1947), 564.

Florence. However, time and reflection assuage her griefs, and she returns to her native city to care for her husband's illegitimate children and their peasant mother, and to revere the memory of Savonarola as one who guided her through a great spiritual crisis to a transcendent moral life.

This novel seems to be the natural outcome of the fusion of Aeschylean and Sophoclean influences. There is an intricate weaving together of the elements of both dramatists' patterns, but the novelist has shifted some of these elements to new positions, producing a more complicated design. The above synopsis reveals a discovery-recoil-reconciliation action. The relationship of Tito and Baldassare illustrates another original combination of patterns. Tito commits an unfilial offence against his foster father who vows vengeance. Instead of the reconciliation movement closing this action, the discovery-recoil-reversal motif is utilized, resulting in a second combination pattern. The reconciliation element in this novel George Eliot reserves as her answer to the two conflicting religious ideals of Christianity and Paganism: the character of Romola is its personification.

George Eliot has shown an increasingly marked preoccupation with this theme. In Adam Bede, Mr. Irwine is the exponent of the Greek philosophy; Dinah Morris is the disciple of the Christian religion. Adam Bede and Mrs. Poyser, both shrewd practical inhabitants of this world,

have a great deal more sympathy for the Rector's point of view than for Dinah's. The ideals of the Rector and Dinah, however, are never brought into conflict; they exist side by side. This very juxtaposition, handled as it is by the novelist, emphasizes the rational efficacy of the Greek ideal.

In The Mill on the Floss, the two views conflict. Philip Wakem voices the pagan attitude. When he meets Maggie in the Red Deeps and overcomes her doubts about seeing him, he uses arguments based on the Greek ideal of a courageous, sane and natural life. She has accepted the teachings of Thomas á Kempis, the medieval idea of salvation achieved through ascetic habits and the renunciation of all earthly desires. Philip argues against such narrow privation for a mind and spirit like Maggie's; he tells her that poetry and art and knowledge are sacred:

"Yes, Maggie . . . and you are shutting yourself up in a narrow self-delusive fanaticism, which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dulness all the highest powers of your nature. . . . Stupefaction is not resignation: and it is stupefaction to remain in ignorance - to shut up all the avenues by which the life of your fellow men might become known to you."³

When Maggie says that she will be given the strength to accomplish this renunciation, he replies:

"No, you will not, Maggie: no one has strength given to do what is unnatural. It is mere cowardice to seek safety in negations. No character becomes strong in that way. You

³ Eliot, Mill on the Floss, II, 90.

will be thrown into the world some day, and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now, will assault you like a savage appetite."⁴

In Romola the two ideals are set in strong opposition and developed at length. A brief statement of the effect of this conflict on the action of the story is all that is pertinent here. Bardo, the Greek antiquarian and pagan stoic, supported in his views by his daughter, Romola, is opposed by his son, Dino. Dino, who was educated to carry on Bardo's scholarly research, disappoints his father by becoming a monk. After the deaths of these two, the opposition is carried on by Romola and Savonarola. Then, under the stress of her grievous experience with Tito, Romola, whose ardent feminine nature cannot find consolation in the "grand severity of the stoical philosophy in which her father had taken care to instruct her,"⁵ succumbs to the influence of the impassioned Frate; not because the mystical life of the religious visionary appeals to her mind, but because her heart demands the democratic emotion of brotherhood, of loving pity for her fellow-sufferers - all of which underlie true Christianity. Her recoil from him comes when she perceives his all-too-human inconsistencies. Romola's reconciliation to the memory of Savonarola is significant in a larger sense; it is George Eliot's way

⁴ Ibid., II, 92.

⁵ George Eliot, Romola (Boston, 1908), II, 48.

of saying that both ideals have spiritual sustenance necessary to the mind of man and that the best of both, united, can result in a more ennobled attitude toward the problems and responsibilities of life.

In the delineation of character in this novel, there is a growing tendency to model persons on Greek prototypes. In Adam Bede, although the Rector's function is the same as that of Athena in The Eumenides, his character is not conceived after any Greek design. In The Mill on the Floss, Mr. Tulliver has the same tragic flaw as Oedipus while Maggie's filial devotion and fatally inherited tendencies recall Antigone.

In Romola, the similarity between the blind old Bardo and his devoted daughter and Oedipus and Antigone is emphasized. Even before the incident of Piero di Cosimo's proposed portrait of Bardo and Romola as Oedipus and Antigone, the reader becomes aware of the parallel by the suggestive descriptions, physical as well as mental. When Tito asks for Romola as his wife, Bardo speaks of her as Oedipus might have described Antigone: "For thou art not like the herd of thy sex: thou art such a woman as the immortal poets had a vision of when they sang the lives of the heroes - tender but strong, like thy voice, which has been to me instead of the light in the years of my blindness."⁶ Bardo's "anathema on a degenerate and ungrateful son"⁷ and Romola's affection for her

⁶ Ibid., I, 190.

⁷ Ibid., I, 80.

brother in spite of his unfilial act parallel their Greek counterparts.

All the final Greek influences merge in the action involving Tito Melema. Like Arthur, Tito is not a vicious character. He has many superficially good qualities, but his intelligence is too facile, too volatile to grasp the sterner ideals of responsibility. His personality is brilliant but shallow. His ideal is Epicurean: "the end of all life [was] but to extract the utmost sum of pleasure."⁸ The chief cause of his downfall is his complete lack of conscience. The words of Nello, the barber, are significant: "But it is said of the Greeks that their honesty begins at what is the hanging point with us, and that since the old Furies went to sleep, your Christian Greek is of so easy a conscience that he would make a stepping stone of his father's corpse."⁹ George Eliot draws upon Greek sources again in this further characterization:

His mind was destitute of that dread which has been erroneously decried as if it were nothing higher than a man's animal care for his own skin: that awe of the Divine Nemesis which was felt by religious pagans, and, though it took a more positive form under Christianity, is still felt by the mass of mankind simply as a vague fear at anything which is called wrong-doing. Such terror of the unseen is so far above mere sensual cowardice that it will annihilate that cowardice: it is the initial recognition of a moral law restraining desire, and checks the hard bold scrutiny of imperfect thought into obligations which can never be proved to

⁸ Ibid., I, 170.

⁹ Ibid., I, 55.

have any sanctity in the absence of feeling. "It is good," sing the old Eumenides, in Aeschylus, "that fear should sit as the guardian of the soul, forcing it into wisdom - good that men should carry a threatening shadow in their hearts under the full sunshine; else, how shall they learn to revere the right?" That guardianship may become needless; but only when all outward law has become needless - only when duty and love have united in one stream and made a common force.¹⁰

In the beginning of his Florentine career, Tito charms acquaintances with his unusual beauty, his smiling suave disposition, and his polished scholarship. Like Hetty, he possesses that irresistible type of beauty which conquers all but experienced and analytical minds. There are only two men who distrust the young Greek at once: Piero di Cosimo, the painter, and Bernardo de Nero, Romola's godfather. Like Arthur Donnithorne Tito's self-respect is based on the approval of others. His gentle, sensitive, self-indulgent nature, which shrinks from maltreating others, also shrinks from any uncomplimentary opinions of himself. The mental uneasiness which results from the treatment of these two men is the first indication of Tito's weaknesses.

Tito suffers retributive blow after blow, but being conscienceless, cannot profit by them. The first visit of Nemesis comes in the message delivered by Fra Luca which establishes the fact that Baldassare is alive and held for ransom. Tito sells Baldassare's gems but not to

¹⁰ Ibid., I, 171-72.

redeem his father: "He had sold himself to evil, but . . . he was not conscious of the bond."¹¹ The second visit of Nemesis, his meeting face to face with Baldassare (now an escaped prisoner), results in his "experiencing that inexorable law of human souls, that we prepare ourselves for sudden deeds by the reiterated choice of good or evil that gradually determines character."¹² In the third and fourth fated encounters with his father, Tito never once considers confession or repentance; he entangles himself further in lies and intrigue. All this while his marital problems have developed into such a dilemma that "such power of dislike and resistance as there was in him was beginning to rise against a wife whose voice seemed like the herald of a retributive fate."¹³ When Nemesis overtakes him for the last time, Tito is on the run from all his enemies. Baldassare has the satisfaction of strangling him after his exhausting swim to escape the Compagnacci.

Chapter LXVI is entitled "A Masque of the Furies." The sacking, looting, and killing by the frenzied rabble, which represents their warped idea of justice, is thus compared to the Eumenides of Aeschylus.

The idea of Justice as a scourge to be visited upon the wicked is not only personified in Baldassare but also in Savonarola. The Frate's

¹¹ Eliot, Romola, I, 174.

¹² Ibid., I, 329-30.

¹³ Ibid., I, 425.

God was a God of Vengeance whose wrath was to be poured upon the abuses of the church. His words "The day of vengeance is at hand" are the first that entered Baldassare's perturbed mind after his initial meeting with Tito. Baldassare is thus wrought "into an ecstasy of self-martyring revenge" and becomes the embodiment of a living fury. All of Baldassare's frustrations heighten the suspense, increase the reader's sympathy for the wronged father, and prepare for the final act of vengeance which is now sublimated from the personal to the divine. Aeschylus says: ". . . for, though/Oft-times it lag, with measured blow for blow/Vengeance prevaieth/While great Jove lives."¹⁴

¹⁴ Aeschylus, "Agamemnon," p. 88.

CHAPTER VII

THE GREEK INFLUENCE ON THE LATER NOVELS

The three preceding chapters have demonstrated George Eliot's early dependence on the Greek dramatists. Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, and Romola are structurally tragedies concurrent with the Greek ideal. Hetty, Maggie, and Tito pay with their lives for their sins as do most of the Greek tragic characters. Edith Hamilton has pointed out that of the four great tragic artists (Shakespeare, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides), three are Greek.

Tragedy is an achievement peculiarly Greek. They [the Greeks] were the first to perceive it and they lifted it to its supreme height. . . . In tragedy the Greek genius penetrated farthest and it is the revelation of what was most profound in them . . . Men were thinking more and more deeply about human life, and beginning to perceive more and more clearly that it was bound up with evil and that injustice was of the nature of things. And then, one day, this knowledge of something irremediably wrong in the world came to a poet with his poet's power to see beauty in the truth of human life, and the first tragedy was written. . . . "The spirit of inquiry meets the spirit of poetry and tragedy is born."¹

¹ Edith Hamilton, The Greek Way (New York, 1930), pp. 138-40.

In her creative growth as an artist, George Eliot experienced this same revelation and expressed it in her way. However, after Romola she did not attempt tragedy in the novel again.² She had carried the Greek tragic formula to her ultimate boundaries artistically and was exhausted. She said she began Romola a young woman but finished it an old one. It was not only the most exhaustive of her efforts but also the most depressing creatively.

She turned now to the English type of story popular in her time; the realistic, semi-psychological novel dealing with provincial life.³ Silas Marner was published before Romola, but it really introduces George Eliot's second period of creative activity. All critics agree as to the "freshness and apparently effortless freedom of its style."⁴ Of this "legendary tale" she wrote Blackwood in February of 1861, "It . . . is

² The Spanish Gypsy, 1867-1868, George Eliot's attempt at tragic poetic drama, is based on a "great dramatic motive of the same class as those used by the Greek dramatists, yet more specifically differing from them." This quotation is from some undated "Notes on the Spanish Gypsy and Tragedy in General" found after the novelist's death and published in Cross's Life, III, 9-14. This essay, already quoted briefly from (supra, p. 16, footnote 24), is the finest example in George Eliot's own words of her profound understanding of the Greek tragedians and their influence upon her creativity.

³ There are evidences from letters and journals that her husband and her publisher had some part in this change for practical monetary reasons. They realized from parts of her preceding work that in the field she had talents unexcelled by any of her contemporaries.

⁴ Joan Bennett, George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art (Cambridge, 1948), p. 141.

intended to set in a strong light the remedial influences of pure, natural human relations. The Nemesis is a very mild one."⁵ This quotation and the one following express briefly the modified moral purposes of George Eliot's later novels. J. W. Cross explained: "She was cheered by the hope and by the belief in gradual improvement of the mass for in her view each individual must find the better part of happiness helping another."⁶ She herself commented in 1875, "I am fond of that old Greek saying that the best state is that in which every man feels a wrong done to another as if it were done to himself."⁷

Godfrey Cass in Silas Marner is the character who is visited by the mild nemesis. He is too slight a fictional figure to be fashioned on a Greek dramatic prototype, but his career does follow the familiar pattern of sin and sure retribution. At the beginning of the tale the young squire has created a "yoke . . . for himself by wrong-doing"⁸ with his secret marriage to Molly, a common woman addicted to opium. He refuses to meet his moral obligations to his wife and child for fear it will disgrace him in the eyes of his family and friends and ruin his courtship of Nancy

⁵ Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson, Marian Evans and George Eliot (London, 1952), p. 237.

⁶ Cross, III, 309-10.

⁷ Haight, VI, 112. Letter to Mrs. Elma Stuart, January 10, 1875.

⁸ George Eliot, Silas Marner (Boston, 1908), p. 46.

Lammeter. This dilemma breeds hate and fear in the accustomed manner. Molly's premeditated "act of vengeance" results in her death and Eppie's loving adoption by Silas. Godfrey experiences "an evil terror" that Molly, when discovered in the snow, may not really be dead and live to accuse him. When he knows surely that she is out of his way, remorse assails him.

Deeper down, and half-smothered by passionate desire and dread, there was that sense that he ought . . . to accept the consequences of his deeds, own the miserable wife, and fulfill the claims of the helpless child. But he had not moral courage enough to contemplate that active renunciation of Nancy as possible for him: he had only conscience and heart enough to make him forever uneasy under the weakness that forbade the renunciation.⁹

At the close of the book, long after Godfrey's marriage, "his conscience . . . gave his childless home the aspect of a retribution."¹⁰ When Dunstan's skeleton is found in the Stone-pit with Silas's bags of gold, Godfrey's awe of God's omniscient will forces his confession to his wife. The refusal of Eppie to accept Godfrey and Nancy's belated parental love is accepted by both as justice.

There has been much detailed analysis of the last three famous examples of Nemesis to come from the pen of George Eliot: Mrs. Transome (Felix Holt), Nicholas Bulstrode (Middlemarch), and Gwendolen

⁹ Ibid., p. 173.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 231.

Harleth (Daniel Deronda). Of the more recent critics, F. R. Leavis has dealt fully with all three in The Great Tradition as has Walter Allen in The English Novel. Joan Bennett and Gerald Bullett in their biographies of the author have also made pertinent comments. The related subsidiary characters, Jermyn, Lydgate, Rosamond, Casaubon, and Grandcourt, all created with petty or serious personal flaws which add to the forces of injurious frustration, have also had their share of similar attention. In the following pages the tracing of the Nemesis pattern is consequently of secondary importance. The relation of these characters to their Greek dramatic or mythological prototypes is the chief concern.

Euripides has provided George Eliot with inspiration for her last novels. She first mentions reading Iphigenia in 1855. In 1863 her journal indicates that she "was swimming"¹¹ in Euripides. In 1873 she mentions Iphigenia¹² and Iphigenia in Aulis¹³ in letters. Felix Holt was published in 1866, Middlemarch in 1871, and Daniel Deronda in 1876.

That George Eliot in her later years should turn to Euripides is logical. His thought was agnostic, pessimistic, and above all humanitarian. Edith Hamilton says that he alone of all the classic world

¹¹ Elizabeth S. Haldane, George Eliot and Her Times (New York, 1927), p. 216.

¹² Haight, V, 372. Letter to Mrs. Nassau John Senior, January 24, 1873.

¹³ Ibid., V, 391. Letter to Edward Burne-Jones, March 20, 1873.

had a modern sense of the value of each individual human being. He questions some of the gods but never Zeus, the unifying moral force. He states no dogma. His fatalistic philosophy he reveals in the last chorus of the Alcestis: "There is no remedy against Necessity."¹⁴ He presents man "in the full range of his capacity for goodness, for goodness and suffering and sympathy."

. . . Euripides' work . . . with a touching restraint and subtlety illuminates the moral issue in a constant series of unexpected, simple, almost trivial, situations; in every kind of scene, ironic, melodramatic, comic or tragic, he shows the true worth of the quiet virtues, of modesty, dignity, kindness, and integrity and with it the partial and relative nature of most human achievement of virtue.¹⁵

These quotations are equally appropriate for George Eliot's last efforts.

There is another point of similarity. Euripides warns his audience in a half a dozen surviving tragedies against hybris (arrogant folly) for "the world holds, or human nature holds, impersonal forces of terrifying power which, once set in motion, can cause unlimited suffering to guilty and innocent, to individuals and communities alike."¹⁶ George Eliot had progressed in her "melioristic" philosophy to the point that she too desired to show the interpenetration of individual and social

¹⁴ Euripides, Alcestis and Other Plays, tr. by Philip Vellacott (Baltimore, 1956), p. 151.

¹⁵ Ibid., Introduction, p. 13.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

right and wrong.¹⁷ Although Aeschylus and Sophocles also cautioned against hubristic behavior, they did not seem to carry the idea so far as to trace its influence on society.

The philosophy of life on which they [the plays of Euripides] are based asserts that happiness and suffering alike are indivisible; that their impact on the group is more significant than their impact on the individual, and the true 'tragic hero' is humanity; that evil, by the time its activity has gained any noticeable power, is already outside the control of any human agent, is something impersonal, something at the same time sub-human and super-human; in fact, something like one of the Olympian gods. . . . Euripides . . . dealt with some of the impersonal and irresistible forces which he saw to be active in human communities.¹⁸

George Eliot's tendency is also towards these community problems in her last novels. Felix Holt explores the lawyers' and politicians' spheres of social influence. Middlemarch investigates the medical profession's responsibilities. Daniel Deronda attacks the racial problem. Although she is a novelist, she accomplishes her purpose by developing dramatically (as Euripides did) a few principal characters representative of social sectors whose inner lives are directly revealed to us in relation to a larger "chorus-like" group "whose function is to suggest the world at large, to create in the reader a sense of the animated human environment in which this particular drama moves."¹⁹

¹⁷ "In her general attitude towards life, George Eliot was neither optimistic nor pessimistic. She held to the middle term, which she invented herself, of 'meliorist.'" Cross, supra, p. 51, footnote 6.

¹⁸ Euripides, Introduction, pp. 18-19.

¹⁹ Bullett, p. 180.

In Felix Holt George Eliot again draws a significant parallel. In Chapter 42, when lawyer Matthew Jermyn comes to Mrs. Transome for help in defending himself against her son's investigation, the novelist writes:

At any rate, he was likely at last to get the worst of it, and it was he who had reason to complain. The unfortunate Jason, as we know from Euripides, piously thanked the goddess, and saw clearly that he was not at all obliged to Medea; Jermyn was perhaps not aware of the precedent, but thought out his own freedom from obligation and the indebtedness of others towards him with a native faculty not inferior to Jason's.²⁰

There are interesting similarities in character delineation in these pairs of sinners: Jason and Medea, and Jermyn and Mrs. Transome.

The personal characteristics of Medea are sketched by Euripides through epithets or descriptions by the Nurse, Jason, or the Chorus. The Nurse's introductory soliloquy describes Medea's violent reaction to her husband's marriage:

I am afraid she may think of some dreadful thing,
For her heart is violent . . .
. . . I know and fear her
.
She's a strange woman. I know it won't be easy
To make an enemy of her and come off best.²¹

Later she cautions the Tutor: "but be careful/Of the wildness and bitter nature/ Of that proud mind."²² When the Chorus of Corinthian women

²⁰ George Eliot, Felix Holt (Boston, 1908), II, 226.

²¹ Rex Warner, "Medea," Three Great Plays of Euripides (New York, 1958), p. 27.

²² Ibid., p. 29.

asks the Nurse to bring out Medea so they can placate "her rage/And temper of her heart"²³ she replies: "Such a look she will flash on her servants/If any comes near with a message,/Like a lioness guarding her cubs."²⁴ These qualifying phrases are used by the Chorus in its subsequent attempts to conciliate Medea: "This heavy anger on your heart/This cruel bloody mind,"²⁵ "O you hard heart, O woman fated for evil,"²⁶ "O your heart must have been made of rock or steel."²⁷ Jason refers often (having many occasions) to his wife's hatefulness and bitter temper and tongue: "This mouthing tempest, woman, of your bitter tongue."²⁸ His finest comparison is to "A monster, not a woman, having a nature/Wilder than that of Scylla in the Tuscan sea."²⁹ It was not the custom for a Greek dramatist to go into details about the physical attributes of his characters; he relied on the imagination of his audience. George Eliot, however, as a novelist could supply this dimension and does so in a very satisfying manner.

Mrs. Transome is a woman as fiercely proud, passionate, and savage as Medea. The first long chapter of Felix Holt is concerned with

²³ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 65.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 42.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

a detailed character analysis. She is described as a "tall, proud-looking woman" with a somewhat eagle-like yet not unfeminine face. " There are "deep lines of bitter discontent about the mouth. " She has "piercing black eyes" and a passionate and peremptory manner of speech: "her rhetoric and temper belonged to her superior rank, her grand person. " She has "a sense of impiety in her words which made them all the more tempting to her impotent anger. " She has a "high-born imperious air that would have fitted an empress" and a "tongue that could be a whip upon occasion. " She likes "every little sign of power her lot had left her," but "her imperious will had availed little to ward off the great evils of her life. " Of all of George Eliot's sinners, except Grandcourt, Mrs. Transome is the one portrayed with the least compassion. She has few good qualities. There is "no activity of tenderness" nor any "large sympathy" in her soul. Her moral attitude is described as that of a "goddess in ages when it was not thought necessary or likely that a goddess should be very moral. " She found "many sinful things were highly agreeable to her. " Although her past secret sin has deposited a great quivering dread within her which becomes an agonizing retribution when her highest hopes for affection and domination are killed by Harold's polite but casual regard for her, she does not become submissive to her Nemesis. When Medea plans her terrible revenge on Jason, the Chorus warns her: " 'Of women you will be the most unhappy. ' " She replies

"So it must be. No compromise is possible."³⁰ Similarly Mrs. Transome says to herself "in her bitter way, 'It is a lucky eel that escapes skinning. The best happiness I shall ever know will be to escape the worst misery.'³¹

Mrs. Transome's "Chorus of Corinthian women" are Denner, her godless little maid who has kept her mistress's secret for years, and Esther, who feels a daughterly compassion for the old lady's evident suffering.

Matthew Jermyn has his quest for the Golden Fleece realized in the profitable mismanagement of the Transome estates, and he uses Mrs. Transome as speciously as Jason does Medea. He denies his responsibilities to her and his illegitimate son to make a prosperous, respectable marriage. "Moral vulgarity cleaved to him like an hereditary odor."³² The first dramatic scene between Jermyn and Mrs. Transome, when Harold's activities have begun to disturb their dormant guilty consciences, parallels the first meeting of Jason and Medea in Euripides. George Eliot writes: "He was anything but stupid; yet he always blundered when he wanted to be delicate or magnanimous; he constantly sought to soothe others by praising himself."³³ Jason angers

³⁰ Warner, p. 52.

³¹ Eliot, Felix Holt, I, 42.

³² Ibid., I, 166.

³³ Ibid.

Medea the same way; he says to her: "I will not go into much detail/In so far as you helped me, you did well enough./But on this question of saving me, I can prove/You have certainly got from me more than you gave."³⁴ The following passage from Euripides illustrates Medea's passionate scorn:

O coward in every way, that is what I call you,
 With bitterest reproach for your lack of manliness,
 You have come, you, my worst enemy, have come to me.
 It is not an example of over-confidence
 Or of boldness thus to look your friends in the face,
 Friends you have injured, - no, it is the worst of all
 Human diseases, shamelessness. But you did well
 To come, for I can speak ill of you and lighten
 My heart, and you will suffer while you are listening.³⁵

She goes on bitterly to remind Jason of all the sins she has committed to prove her love and advance his security.

This is George Eliot's handling of a similar situation:

"My management of the affairs!" Mrs. Transome said, with concentrated rage, flashing a fierce look at Jermyn. She checked herself: she felt as if she were lighting a torch to flare on her own past folly and misery. It was a resolve which had become a habit, that she would never quarrel with this man - never tell him what she saw him to be.³⁶

Mrs. Transome does not determine to assume the role of the avenging Furies, as Medea did, and deal out punishment of her own. Mrs.

³⁴ Warner, "Medea," p. 42.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 40.

³⁶ Eliot, Felix Holt, I, 166.

Transome's Nemesis involves her terrible realization that she has no influence over either Jermyn or their son, and is powerless to avoid their inevitable clash. In the second dramatic scene between Mrs. Transome and Jermyn, when he goes to her for help in trying to avoid the trial Harold's investigation is bringing upon him, she can no longer restrain her rage and contempt. She gives Jermyn a belated Medea-like tongue-lashing that makes him "almost inclined to throttle the voice out of this woman."³⁷ Nemesis then closes in on the three characters so closely involved. Jermyn was forced to go "'abroad,' that large home of ruined reputations."³⁸ Mrs. Transome must bear a double anguish, her son's un pitying scorn and the misery she has brought upon an innocent loved one. Harold, of course, has an Oedipus-like role in being destined to discover his real father and his mother's sin.

Middlemarch is George Eliot's "widest and deepest study of the interpenetration between the life of a community and the individual lives that compose it."³⁹ It could be that its reputation as the greatest English novel of its time and, as Virginia Woolf calls it, "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people"⁴⁰ rests herein. In a letter to Blackwood

³⁷ Ibid., II, 234.

³⁸ Ibid., II, Epilogue, 343.

³⁹ Bennett, p. 83.

dated July 24, 1871 about this great work (then in progress) George Eliot wrote: "my design . . . is to show the gradual action of ordinary causes rather than exceptional, and to show this in some directions which have not been from time immemorial the beaten path . . ."40

There are classic prototypes for some of the Middlemarch characters. Dorothea Brooke is twice referred to as an Antigone. Her highmindedness, unwavering loyalty, and sense of duty give her the role of "active good" and her influence ameliorates many little wrongs and elevates the mediocre. Philip Vellacott says in explaining Euripides' philosophy that the Chorus (in the Hippolytus) "in their last Ode disavow any desire to be heroic, and ask only for quietness and the gift of adapting principle to daily needs."⁴¹ This is the philosophy which underlies George Eliot's treatment of Dorothea at the close of the book.

Bulstrode is the figure from this novel most widely discussed as the example par excellence of retributive justice. His is not the first nor the last of the literary portraits of the religious hypocrite, but his is one of the most memorable. Bulstrode's unsavory character unfolds gradually in his role as community philanthropist for the greater glory of Church and God. There is no role comparable in Greek drama. Bulstrode evolved from such characters as Silas Marner and David Faux, alias

⁴⁰ Cross, III, 83-84.

⁴¹ Euripides, Introduction, p. 19.

Edward Freely, in Brother Jacob. Few characters have been as thoroughly scourged by retributive justice as Nicholas Bulstrode, or with as compassionate a technique, for one cannot but pity him the terrible consequences of his sins. He cannot right his wrongs, although he tries when Nemesis begins to stalk him. He not only must face the bitter humiliation of being denounced openly by his community Board Members when his early misdeeds come to light through Raffles' gossip; but he must have his religious faith, which was sincere, publicly labeled "a canting palavering Christianity"; he must suffer the agonizing fearful remorse of his responsibility in Raffles' death; and above all, being a man of sensibility, he must endure the torment of fully realizing to what extent he has hurt others who are innocent yet must bear shame because of his actions. Inexorable Nemesis has seldom been as thoroughly, awfully, or succinctly presented as in this man's dilemma.

Lydgate is the "tragic hero" type. George Eliot devotes much space to his development. He is a person of distinction and nobility, yet endowed with human weaknesses. His conceit is "of the arrogant sort, never simpering, never impertinent, but massive in its claims and benevolently contemptuous."⁴² His "spots of commonness" consist of "the complexion of his prejudices, which, in spite of noble intention and sympathy, were half of them such as are found in ordinary men of the

⁴² George Eliot, Middlemarch (Boston, 1908), I, 215.

world."⁴³ It is chiefly these faults which undermine his marriage to Rosamond, his practice in Middlemarch, and his high hopes in medical research. Lydgate suffers several ordeals, the final one being the collaboration in the death of Raffles with Bulstrode, in which Lydgate is completely innocent. However, it leads to his downfall as far as Middlemarch society is concerned, and serves to bring a man of no little promise to an acceptance of "his narrowed lot with sad resignation."⁴⁴

There are some suggestions of similarity between the Lydgate-Rosamond alliance and the situation between Hippolytus and Phaedra in Euripides' Hippolytus. This young man is as arrogant in his conceit and prejudices as the young Lydgate. In the opening scene an old servant offers some good advice to the young man. He recalls the old law, "Abhor pride and all unfriendliness."⁴⁵ Hippolytus agrees that "Haughtiness is always a hateful thing."⁴⁶ However, the young man refuses to worship Aphrodite, the great goddess of Love. In the beginning of Middlemarch, Lydgate decides that love and marriage must wait "until he has trodden out a good clear path for himself."⁴⁷ When Hippolytus is approached by

⁴³ Ibid., I, 216.

⁴⁴ Ibid., III, 392.

⁴⁵ Euripides, "Hippolytus," p. 30.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Eliot, Middlemarch, I, 132.

the Nurse in Phaedra's behalf, he has no sympathy for the latter's passion; instead he bursts out with a contemptuous tirade against women:

O Zeus! Why have you plagued this world with so vile and worthless a thing as woman? . . . her father, after begetting her and bringing her up, pays out a dowry to find her a home, and so gets rid of her; while whoever welcomes the viper to his bosom gleefully decks her out with gauds and gowns like a sacred statue, heaping beauty upon hatefulness, poor wretch, and squanders his inheritance. . . . For an easy life, marry a nobody, and keep her worthless and witless on a pedestal. I hate a woman who is clever - a woman who thinks more than becomes a woman; I would not have her in my house! . . . Curse the whole race of you! I can never hate you enough! 48

Lydgate's reaction is not so vehement but he was disposed to consider first among wifely functions "adornment." Miss Brooke, for example, "did not look at things from the proper feminine angle. The society of such women was about as relaxing as going from your work to teach the second form." 49

Lydgate felt sure that if ever he married, his wife would have that feminine radiance, that distinctive womanhood which must be classed with flowers and music, that sort of beauty which by its very nature was virtuous, being moulded only for pure and delicate joys. 50

48 Euripides, "Hippolytus," p. 46.

49 Eliot, Middlemarch, I, 133.

50 Ibid., I, 235-36.

He feels quite safe with "Miss Vincy, who had just the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman - polished, refined, docile, lending itself to finish in all the delicacies of life, and enshrined in a body which expressed this with a force of demonstration that excluded the need for other evidence."⁵¹ Propelled into sudden marriage by Rosamond's wiles and Aunt Bulstrode's righteousness, Lydgate finds no submissive, solicitous mate. He has an extravagant housekeeper who increases his debts thoughtlessly, and a wilful clever schemer who exasperates and embarrasses him. The pair grow more and more embittered with their mutual disappointment (for Rosamond cannot tolerate her husband's silent moodiness and fits of anger) until his attitude becomes as cynical as that of Hippolytus. "I am a fool. Haven't I given up expecting anything? I have married care, not help."⁵² This is Lydgate's silent thought when he is awaiting Rosamond's knowledge of his involvement with her Uncle Bulstrode.

Rosamond has the same fragile beauty as Phaedra, wears her golden hair in a braided coronet, and has a passion for horseback riding. There the similarity ends. She is also likened to Ariadne and Psyche in the course of the story.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., III, 330.

Lydgate and his wife both suffer for their flaws. As his faults of conceit and prejudice blind him to her shallow nature, her obstinate pride and childish, romantic social aspirations make her oblivious to his sterling qualities. Their reconciliation is effected by Dorothea in her role of "active good."

There is little to say about Casaubon except that he follows the general pattern in a mild subsidiary way. His petty jealousy and discontent are the natural results of his self-deception and charlatanism.

The classical allusions in Middlemarch, George Eliot's most modern novel in many respects, are so numerous and persistently woven into the text that they deserve comment. Vernon Rendall, who has discussed these as well as the many similar references in the other novels, has written: "Such quotations are unusual in English fiction, or in English literature in general, if I may trust a wide and long survey of this particular sign of interest in Greek ideas."⁵³ References are made to Hercules, Antigone, Cupid, Psyche, Apollo, the Minotaur, Olympus, a sylph, the Greek actor, and the choric wail. Chapters 23 and 27 have mottoes of classic origin; Chapter 70 opens with: "Our deeds still travel with us from afar/And what we have been makes us what we are," a quotation from Aeschylus.

⁵³ Rendall, CXCI (December 13, 1947), 545.

It has been stated that Daniel Deronda, the last novel of George Eliot, has as its theme a racial problem. The Jewish people this author knew well, for she had read extensively on the subject since her girlhood. In a letter to Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe she explains her objective in writing this book: she wished to chasten the English "spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness,"⁵⁴ not only towards the Jews, but toward all oriental peoples. She continues:

There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who must differ from them in customs and beliefs. But towards the Hebrews we western people who have been reared in Christianity, have a peculiar debt, and whether we acknowledge it or not, a peculiar thoroughness of fellowship in religious and moral sentiment.⁵⁵

In a letter to Blackwood she writes: "This is what I wanted to do - to widen the English vision a little in that direction and let in a little conscience and refinement."⁵⁶ George Eliot had become by 1876, as the Hansons have pointed out in their biography, no longer just a novelist but "a moral force, an incalculable power for good." Universal brotherhood was her final theme.

⁵⁴ Haight, VI, 301.

⁵⁵ Ibid., VI, 301-302. Letter to Mrs. Stowe, October 29, 1876.

⁵⁶ Ibid., VI, 304.

How much Gwendolen Harleth (the fascinating "wicked witch" as Blackwood immediately labeled her) had to do with the book's popularity cannot be ascertained, but it was probably a major factor. In one of her letters the author seems somewhat annoyed at "readers who cut the book up into scraps, and talk of nothing in it but Gwendolen. I meant everything in the book to be related to everything else there."⁵⁷ The relationship of Gwendolen and Deronda carries further the development of the Pagan-Christian theme which was symbolized by the friendship of Romola and Savonarola. Deronda, "embodying the principles by which Christ wrought and will conquer,"⁵⁸ becomes Gwendolen's spiritual savior.

Gwendolen has no prototype in Greek drama. However, she does remind the reader of those egoistic youths or nymphs in Greek mythology (Narcissus, Psyche, Arachne, Coronis, Scylla) who incur the wrath of the gods by arrogantly parading their beauty or talents in vain competition or by scorning the deities' favors. In Chapters X and XI at the Archery Meeting, Gwendolen moves among the participants like a goddess among mortals, making them only too aware of her superior beauty, poise, skill, and wit. Her hubristic behavior calls for chastisement; Nemesis must act. That George Eliot had the usual plans for Gwendolen is evident in this epistolary comment to Blackwood in

⁵⁷ Haight, VI, 290. Letter to Madame Bodichon, October 2, 1876.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

1875: "Don't you see the process already beginning? I have no doubt you do, for you are a wide-awake reader."⁵⁹ Gwendolen's arrogance demands absolute adulation and obedience from her family and friends; she gives nothing in return except benign scorn. The only person for whom she shows any unselfish concern is her mamma. Her punishment stems from the fact that she snobbishly rejects the genuine affection of young Rex Gascoigne to marry for wealth and social position. She receives from Henleigh Grandcourt the cold and cruel treatment, magnified by sadistic viciousness, that she herself has been guilty of.

The course of Gwendolen's progress through chastisement by Nemesis is traced as carefully and insistently as that of any of George Eliot's earlier sinners.⁶⁰ At the outset of her career Gwendolen's spiritual dependence on Deronda is established.⁶¹ The turquoise necklace, redeemed and returned to her by Deronda, is to counteract

⁵⁹ Ibid., VI, 188.

⁶⁰ "To watch her contriving her own doom is to be reminded of Greek tragedy in which the action is at once wilful and pre-determined and the end foreknown by all but those who must endure it. . . . The dramatic irony in such a sequence of events needs no underlining, and again one is reminded of classical models. Gwendolen is a tragic figure in the Aristotelian mode: she herself, in blind hubristic folly, works her undoing." Bullett, p. 209.

⁶¹ Mathilde Blind is the only biographer of George Eliot who has clearly understood that the relation of Deronda to Gwendolen is "of a Christ-like nature. He is her only moral hold in the fearful temptations that assail her now and again under the intolerable irritations of her married life." Blind, p. 265.

with symbolical significance the diamond necklace which Grandcourt makes her wear. After her marriage, Gwendolen's guilty conscience begins to function. In accepting Grandcourt she has broken her word to Mrs. Glasher (Grandcourt's mistress) that she would not usurp her and her children's rightful claims. This begins the "swift travel from her bright rash girlhood into this agony of remorse."⁶² The diamond necklace, which Grandcourt demands from his mistress and makes Gwendolen accept as a wedding gift, becomes for her a yoke of guilt and fear: guilt for what she has wrongly done and fear of her husband's tyranny because he knows her secret and glories in humiliating her. Guilt, fear, remorse, and hate that breed from wrong-doing, make Gwendolen's life a nightmare of nervous terror.

In Gwendolen's consciousness Temptation and Dread met and stared like two pale phantoms, each seeing itself in the other - each obstructed by its own image; and all the while her fuller self beheld the apparitions and sobbed for deliverance from them . . .⁶³ And yet quick, quick, came images, plans of evil that would come again and seize her in the night, like furies preparing the deed that they would straightway avenge.⁶⁴

When Grandcourt drowns, Gwendolen suffers her greatest agony for she feels his death is the fulfillment of her worst desires and she is somehow responsible. She confesses to Deronda, "I felt a hatred in me that was

⁶² George Eliot, Daniel Deronda (Boston, 1908), III, 217.

⁶³ Ibid., III, 188.

⁶⁴ Ibid., III, 199.

always working like an evil spirit - contriving things.'⁶⁵ Deronda gives her hope for deliverance. "' No evil dooms us hopelessly except the evil we love and desire to continue in, and make no effort to escape from.'⁶⁶ "' You know I am a guilty woman!' " she says. "But his eyes met hers sorrowfully . . . and that full glance in its intense mournfulness seemed to say, 'I know it, but I shall all the less forsake you.'⁶⁷ At the end of the novel Deronda is to Gwendolen an active moral force, resuscitating her harassed soul which has been "spiritually saved 'but so as by fire.'⁶⁸

Concerning Henleigh Grandcourt and his retribution, Blackwood's comment suffices: "Grandcourt is hateful and one reflects with grim satisfaction that the Furies have entered his house."⁶⁹

In his autobiography Herbert Spencer has characterized George Eliot's unique quality concisely in this one sentence: "Capacity for abstract thinking is rarely found along with the capacity for concrete representation, even in men: and among women, such a union of the two

⁶⁵ Ibid., III, 211.

⁶⁶ Ibid., III, 225.

⁶⁷ Ibid., III, 218.

⁶⁸ Cross, III, 190. Letter from George Eliot to Blackwood, November 18, 1875.

⁶⁹ Haight, VI, 221. Letter from John Blackwood to George Eliot, February 24, 1876.

as existed in her has, I should think, never been paralleled."⁷⁰ It is no singular coincidence that George Eliot should have found affinity with the Greek mind.

The same habit of thought which could clothe the mysterious operations of nature with all the features of personality could consistently treat in a like manner the inscrutable processes of the mind and the qualities of things, whence we actually find the Greeks making these abstract conceptions over into divine beings.⁷¹

As a novelist George Eliot chose to deal with human beings, but her purposes and methods were identical. Her characters are, above and beyond their own individual and social personalities, personifications of the abstract conceptions of that morality which she intended to inculcate by concrete representation.

⁷⁰ Bullett, p. 52.

⁷¹ Fox, p. 282.

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