In order to avoid any misunderstanding arising from the somewhat misleading title of this paper I may as well state at once that it is not my purpose to consider tragedy as a kind of prophecy or to represent the tragedians as a sort of prophets of their age. It is the much humbler subject of the function (or better functions) of prophetic utterances, oracles, prophetic dreams, premonitions and warnings in Greek tragedy I have in view. That is not to say that I am writing under the delusion that it would be possible to deal exhaustively—in a brief survey—with the many aspects and problems of this subject 1). What I want to make clear is the eminent relevancy of these phenomena both to dramatic structure and to tragic meaning.

When we are studying them in the body of Greek Tragedy it will be well to bear in mind the following general considerations, which may serve as preliminary remarks:

1. It would be an understatement to claim that prophecy and its concomitants were important in Greek life of the classical period. In point of fact the latter was inextricably bound up with them. So their occurrence in drama, strange as it may sometimes seem to us, was taken as a matter of course by the audience and presumably not, in the first place, as a dramaturgic convention or means.

2. If it is right (as must be the case) that these phenomena are instrumental to the dramatic interpretation of myth or saga (which is tragedy), neither should it be forgotten that in a great number of


1) The number of categories among which the functions of these phenomena might be distributed amount to sixteen for Aeschylus, to twenty two for Soph., to thirty two for Eur. according to an analysis made by me for private use.
myths used by Tragedy oracles, prophecies, prophets belong there
to the material inherited by the dramatic poets. Sometimes (as in
the case of Oedipus) we may ask whether the drama is interpretation
of the oracle or the inverse. Professor Kirkwood's pointed formu-
alation: "in his <Sophocles' > plays events do not take place because
the oracles say that they will; on the contrary, the oracles say
that events will take place because they are going on" 1), alludes
to grave problems of interpretation.

3. It is a well-known truth that oracular responses and prophecies
(in the Greek sense) have their bearings upon the past, the present
and the future alike 2). Prometheus' and Cassandra's foretelling
of the future is explicitly validated by their showing exact knowl-
dge of the past.

4. Since Tragedy deals, among other things but perhaps primarily,
with the perplexities of human action, it is well to remember that in
daily life—both personal and political—important decisions were
as a rule taken after consulting oracles or diviners, and that all
sorts of omens and prognostications were taken into account as to
the course of action to follow or to avoid. A case might be made
for a theory deriving the deep interest of Tragedy in the problems
of human action in relation to human fate from the same roots from
which divination in all its forms originated.

5. The stories which served as the material of Tragedy were, all of
them, fixed in their main outlines and in their outcome. So if the
inevitability of the latter is, as it were, stressed by pointing out
that a given oracle has been fulfilled, the oracle or the prophecy
would always seem to bear some resemblance to a vaticinium ex
eventu, to the same extent as the oracles in Herodotus, which
bear on events belonging already to the past, to history 3). That is
to say that perhaps a stronger case can be made for the oracles as
interpretation of the events than for the events as the results of

1) G. M. Kirkwood, Sophoclean Drama (1958), 73.
1065, 6; Ag. 1569; Soph. Phil. 191-200, Teiresias-Creon scene in Ant.,
3) Some interesting remarks on this topic in R. Crahay, La Littérature
oraculaire chez Hérodote (1956), 21-22.