CHAPTER VI
GREEK MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Browning's approach to the question of subject matter taken from the Greek Literary past in modern poetry is entirely dissimilar to that of Arnold and Swinburne, two other Victorians who dealt extensively with Greek themes in their poetry:

In the 1853 Preface to his Poems Arnold wrote:

...I fearlessly assert that Hermann and Dorothea, Childe Harold, Jocelyn, The Excursion, leave the reader cold in comparison with the effect produced upon him by the latter books of the Iliad, by the Oresteia, or by the episode of Dido. And why is this? Simply because in the three last-named cases the action is greater, the personages nobler, the situations more intense: and this is the true basis of the interest in a poetical work and this alone.1

In the Advertisement to the edition of 1854, Arnold again asserted the suitability of great actions as subject matter for poetry. Swinburne's Atalanta in Calydon was his tribute to Aeschylus and Sophocles, whose poetry he loved; it was his attempt to reproduce the poetical spirit which he found in these Greek poets. Though the form was not strictly Greek, its subject and spirit were. Both these poets were consciously and deliberately endeavouring to revive old modes and moods. In the heroic actions of the past, they found a beauty and dignity which their own world could not provide. Their love of the past was in part an escape from the contemporary situation. In reproducing the form

of Greek tragedy, Arnold sought the beauty and dignity of the Hellenic discipline and restraint. Swinburne, besides this, sought also the essential poetry, the indefinable essence which he found in the tragedies of ancient Greece.

But Browning's views on this matter had been influenced by Elizabeth Barrett. As early as the period of their courtship, she wrote to him:

I am inclined to think we want new forms as well as thoughts. The old gods are dethroned. Why should we go back to the antique moulds, as they are so improperly called?........... Let us all aspire rather to Life, and let the dead bury the dead.......For there is poetry everywhere,

In his reply on May 17 to Elizabeth's letter dated May 16, 1846 (wherein she severely criticizes Mrs. Jameson's views that the present age is not heroic and undeserving of expression in art, and maintains that "genius in the arts is not a mere reflection of the times") Browning shows his perfect accord with her views:

All you write about Art is most true. Carlyle has turned and forged, reforged on his anvil the fact "that no age ever appeared heroic to itself"......

and so, worthy of reproduction in Art itself....
The cant is, that an "age of transition" is a melancholy thing to contemplate and delineate—whereas the worst things of all to look back on are times of comparative standing still, rounded in their important completeness.

2. Letters of RB and EBB, I, 43.
3. Ibid., II, 710.
This view that perfection in art means stagnation is one premise on which Browning based his opposition to the unquestioning adulation accorded to Greek art. For Browning art meant an unceasing progress towards newer goals. In "Old Pictures in Florence" Greek art is "perfect of lineament, perfect of stature" (1.117), but then "...what's come to perfection perishes" (1.130). Early Christian art, though imperfect, is awarded the palm because of its tremendous possibilities for development:

Today's brief passion limits their range,
It seethes with the morrow for us and more.
They are perfect—how else? they shall never change:
We are faulty—why not? we have time in store.
The Artificer’s hand is not arrested
With us; (XVI, 121-26)

The other premise is linked to Browning's view of the artist as attempting to join the finite to the infinite. Greek art, which portrayed the body so beautifully, did not go beyond it to the inner soul. This was the point in which the Christian painters scored over their alleged superiors:

"To bring the invisible full into play!/Let the visible go to the dogs—what matters?" ("Old Pictures in Florence," 151-52)

In his later period, Browning particularly develops this idea. For him, beyond the requirement of poetic beauty was that of poetic truth; and truth was that which entered
into and modified experience. Browning's attempts in his Greek poems was not to literally reproduce the Greek experience, which he felt time had rendered inadequate, but to transcend the time barrier and reach an insight into the essential reality that underlay all human experience.

Contrary to Arnold's emphasis on a great subject as a repository of timeless values, Browning insists on the need for the shaping spirit of the poetic imagination to penetrate the past and shape it afresh. The forms of the earlier ages could not embody the contemporary consciousness, which needed psychological truth rather than external beauty or grandeur. Browning's treatment of Greek myth challenges the view that the subject-matter taken from the heroic past was inherently invested with "immortal strength". He is rather of the opinion that it is the kind of interpretation given to the myth that matters, the particular imaginative rendering of it that gives it abiding value. Browning believes in exercising the imagination to create life and not just to imitate it. In his later poetry, he uses mythology to interpret, rather than to escape his age, adding by his reconstructions to the sum of living experience.
After the publication of *The Ring and the Book*, Browning renewed his explorations into Greek literature. Earlier he had written "Artemis Prologizes", published as a dramatic lyric in *Bells and Pomegranates*, Number III, in 1842, which DeVane says, was intended to be a prologue to a tragedy in imitation of Euripides. Browning's admiration for the Greek dramatist was further demonstrated in the Pope's monologue in *The Ring and the Book*. Euripides was one of the earliest voices of European liberalism and Browning was attracted by that. Moreover, Euripides' pathos and humanity had particularly appealed to Mrs. Browning, as indicated by the lines from her poem "Wine of Cyprus" which Browning used as an epigraph to *Balaustion's Adventure*. With her death, a study of her favourite classical poet became, for Browning, a homage to her memory.

Douglas Bush suggests that "Browning may have had a surfeit of his more or less modern and sordid realism." Moreover DeVane points out that an unappreciative introduction to the tragedies of Euripides by T.A. Buckley, published in 1868, and further, Augustus Wilhelm Schlegel's opinion in his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* that "Euripides wrecked classical poetry" roused Browning's ire (Handbook, p.377). As Donald Smalley has shown, Browning identified

closely with Euripides. In Euripides he found a
kindred soul—a realist, an ironist and psychologist
and a champion of truth and justice, the man whose
'strong style' showed men the true path through 'the
mire of cowardice and the slush of lies', as he wrote
in the Pope's monologue (X, 1786 and 1789). It is thus
wholly appropriate that when Browning came to choose
themes from the Greek for his poetry, his interest in
Euripides shaped his choice.

Balaustion's Adventure, Including a Transcript
from Euripides (1871) is a recasting of the Greek myth
of Alcestis, the woman who chose death to save the life
of her husband. 'No Greek tragedy has been better
translated' wrote one of the early reviewers of the
poem. More recently, Balaustion's Adventure has variously
been described as 'a vindication of Euripides',
'effort to deal in his art with the living problem of
his marriage to Elizabeth' and 'the embodiment of
Browning's ideas on Christian love and what it means
to be a poet'.

6. 'A Parleying with Aristophanes', PMLA 55(1940),
   pp. 823-838.
   and Smalley, p. 359.
For Browning a myth was not merely a recapturing of past glory and nobility but a base from which to embark on his characteristic explorations into man's heart and mind. "A myth may teach" (VIII) he would say in the "Parleying with Bernard de Mandeville" and the essence of his teaching was the revelation of the eternal pattern of the victory of good over evil that survives through time. Thus his method is to use the double vision, treating the myth both literally and symbolically. As Browning puts it in the "Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse":

...for sense, my de Lairesse
Cannot content itself with outward things,
Mere beauty: soul must needs know whence there springs—
How, when and why—what sense but loves,...

(V)

This is what Langbaum terms the "psychological use of myth". For while Browning delighted in the beauty of the Greek myths, his sensuous response to them as evident in Pauline underwent a progressive change as he formulated his ideas on the Incarnation; so that, seen in the light of Christianity and the divine love of Christ, the spiritual emptiness of the classical world became more pronounced. "Life's inadequate to joy!" (L.249), cries Cleon, yearning for a state of being "Unlimited in capability/For joy, as this is in desire for joy" (ll. 326-127), and rejecting

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as insane the one path that promises him this blessedness. This is the third premise on which Browning bases his criticism of Hellenism. It was the Greek philosophy that ultimately led men to despair that Browning found antipathetic; and against it he set the Christian revelation of a God of Love which gave men hope of immortality.

Thus, Browning accepts neither the Hellenic forms nor its values, and *Balaustion's Adventure* translates his ideas into practice.

Structurally, *Balaustion's Adventure* is one of the most innovative of Browning's longer poems—a translation of a Greek play spoken by a narrator-commentator (Balaustion), who not only enlarges upon the significance of the various scenes, but gives her own interpretation of the action to suit her own predilections, the whole being set in the framework of a boldly sketched-in historical framework. Browning's characters are not mere symbols for metaphysical concepts (as are Shelley's for example, in *Prometheus Unbound*), rather their humanity is emphasized to make them psychologically adequate for present-day conditions. The use of the narrator-commentator gives Browning a dramatic mask from behind which he can bring to bear his keen insight and questioning modern spirit upon the ancient myth and derive from it a meaning of a fresher and more relevant kind.
The three major stages in the action of *Balaustion*’s *Adventure* correspond to the three main themes of the poem—poetic power, perfect love and salvation, first through the vigorous action of a legendary hero and then, through the power of love itself. The poem thus deals with some of the recurrent themes in all Browning’s poetry—poetry, love and religion, and embodies Browning’s mature views on these subjects.

The ‘‘poetry is power’’ theme is stated at the very beginning, when Balaustion describes how her love and knowledge of Euripides’ poetry saved her own life and that of her companions. The hostile Syracusans would have forced their ship back to be a prey of a pursuing pirate bark, had not Balaustion pleased them by reciting the *Alcestis* as she remembered seeing and hearing it at the theatre at Kameiros. ‘‘What’s poetry except a power that makes?’, she asks, a power that gives the auditors the capacity to ‘‘link each sense on to its sister-sense/Grace-like’’ (p.782). This is the raison d’être of her interpolations. Balaustion is not content to merely explicate the action, she must explore its psychological basis. The texture of the play thus becomes richer and more meaningful. Though her soaring imagination has been questioned by ‘‘a brisk little somebody,/Critic and whippersnapper’’ (p.781), Balaustion argues that the power of poetry.
...so breeds
I' the heart and soul O' the taker, so transmutes
The man who only was a man before,
That he grows god-like in his turn, can give—
He also: share the poet's privilege,
Bring forth new good, new beauty, from the old. (p.808)

The immediate effect of her comments is to add imaginative fervour and lyrical splendour to the narrative. But it is clear that Browning is using Balaustion as a mouthpiece to voice a defence of his interpretative recreation of Greek legend against the literalists.

The *Alcestis* of Euripides was a semi-satyric play governed by Greek conventions and attitudes, but not wholly. For the ironist in Euripides, even while presenting an ideal king in Admetos, who appears to be quite justified in accepting his wife's sacrifice and who is delivered from his fate because he has put his duty as a host above his own personal sorrow, cannot quite accept or condone Admetos' selfishness. And so he created the intensely real, intensely moving *Alcestis*, who consents to sacrifice herself, but who dies with a despairing, contemptuous awareness of her husband's weakness. This realistic psychology is repeated by Browning. But even Euripides falls a prey to the Greek concept of arbitrary fate, and though he superficially tries to bridge the moral gap between *Alcestis* and Admetos, with him, the repentance of Admetos is little better than an increasing self-pity. Browning, with his subtler reasoning,
and his demand for psychological verity, makes this
the focal point of his treatment of the story; his stress is
on the development of "soul" in Admetos.

Approaching death has, for Alcestis, been a means
of removing the veils of illusion. The commercial imagery
used with reference to Admetos--"Saw him purse money up"
(p.786) emphasizes his foolish selfishness. "The man was
like some merchant who, in storm/Throws the freight over to
redeem the ship" (p.789). The process of Admetos' repentance
and his growth in moral stature constitutes the action of
Balaustion's narrative. Throughout we have the voice of
Balaustion herself, pinpointing moral ambiguities, suggesting
norms for judgement, highlighting the inner complexities.

The bitter confrontation with Pheres, his father,
reveals to Admetos the extent to which selfishness can
descend, and he recoils in horror as he sees himself
mirrored in the old man's "poor, pretentious talk" (p.796).
This is one step towards Admetos' regeneration. Balaustion
remarks:

You see the worst of the interruption was,
   It plucked back, with an overhasty hand,
Admetos from descending to the truth.               (p.795)

Yet, Admetos is "Only half-selfish now, since sensitive"
(p.798), and he moves to the anguished realization that he
has gained nothing by exchanging death for life. Balaustion
marks the stages in Admetos' awareness of the truth of the
situation, and, in a beautiful analogy, she comments:
That was the truth. Vexed waters sank to smooth:
'Twas only when the last bubble broke,
The latest circlet widened all away
And left a placid level, that up swam
To the surface the drowned truth, in dreadful change.

(p.803)

This dramatic development, according to DeVane, is
"Browning's rather than Euripides', and is modern rather
than Greek."¹² Balaustion seems to express Browning's
impatience of the earlier poet's rather hesitant treatment
of the myth when she says:

I would the Chorus here had plucked up heart,
Spoken out boldly, and explained the man,
If not to men, to Gods, (p.797)

The advent of Herakles, with its influx of "light and life/
And warmth and bounty and hope and joy" (p.798), is
delineated in terms that go beyond the pagan myth to
Christianity. He is not only the Euripidean heroic
adventurer, but, as Douglas Bush puts it, "the supreme
example of the poet's favourite mythological type, the
divine helper of mankind."¹³ Ryals calls Herakles ''a
Greek hero made Christ-like.'''¹⁴ He is the ''Helper of
our world'' (p.802). As Margaret Oliphant, reviewing the
poem in the Edinburgh Review of January, 1872, remarked:¹⁵

¹². DeVane, Handbook, p.355. See also DeVane, "Browning
and the Spirit of Greece" in Nineteenth Century Studies,
ed. H. Davis, W.C. DeVane, and R.C. Bald (Ithaca: Cornell
University Press, 1940).
¹³. Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry, p.3
¹⁴. Browning’s Later Poetry, p.35.
He [Euripides] has left it as human problems have to be left so often, without explanation, a revelation of the dread gaps and breaks that come into life, without any suggestion of a cure or even any strong sense of its necessity. He goes off into an easier, arbitrary world of gods and miracles with a light heart, ignoring all the difficulties. But not so Browning.

Browning puts great emphasis on the restoration scene, where the element of dramatic suspense is not so important as the final testing of Admetos' regenerated self, carried to great lengths to prove him 'Risen to the heights of her' (p.807).

The filtering of the Greek myth with Christian connotations is one step in transposing the past for the purposes of meeting the demands of the present. In the original play, the resolution had been brought about by means of an external agency. But Browning not only reproduces the original version, he goes a step further. With Balaustion's assertion that ''One thing may have so many sides'' (p.808), she proceeds to ''mould a new/Admetos, new Alcestis'' (p.808). Once again, her stand is modern rather than Greek. In this particular aspect of Browning's rendering we may discern a characteristic idea of his later poetry, and one that he used as the hub of his arguments in favour of the modern as against the ancient--his insistence on man as the creator of values and not on external structures as repositories of value.
In Balaustion's idealized version of the story, Love is the saviour, the noblest kind of love that is both creative and self-sacrificing. The regenerative powers of love are embodied in the image of the seed:

Say, does the seed scorn earth and seek the sun?
Surely it has no other end and aim
Than to drop, once more die into the ground,
Taste cold and darkness and oblivion there:
And thence rise, tree-like grow through pain to joy,
More joy and most joy,—do man good again.  
(p.802)

In Browning's version destiny is not something external to man, it lies in his self-hood. Admetos now speaks the words that had earlier been conspicuous in their absence:

Let the flesh perish, be perceived no more,
So thou, the spirit that informed the flesh,
Bend yet awhile, a very flame above...  
(p.810)

His nobility matches the perfect goodness of Alcestis; for Balaustion's version makes Admetos a truly just and unselfish king under Apollo's influence. Alcestis convinces him of the oneness of her soul with his, so that, in a sense, she cannot be said to have died. But Persephone sends her back from Hades—"Two souls in one were formidable odds"(p.811). Thus the old myth is modernized to the point where there is no need for a Divine Saviour at all.

Yet even in the midst of this triumphant assertion of the infinite capacities of the individual soul, comes the recognition (as so often in Browning's later poetry) that all affirmation is partial, that the ideal is circumscribed by the actual. Balaustion's idealized version ends
on a note of sadness and with a sensitive awareness of
the contraries within human existence—its promises and
its failures. Nevertheless, Balaustion's Adventure marks
an important stage in Browning's progress towards affir-
mation of the importance of the creative self. It also
presents vividly Browning's conception of myth as
"developing articulations of a truth inherent in the
nature of human life."^{16}

Aristophanes' Apology is a poem dealing with special
pleading and has already been discussed with the other
casuistical poems of the later period in Chapter III. In
the present context its importance lies in the manner in
which Browning uses a debate on poetic theory and practice,
not only, as Donald Smalley has shown,^{17} to justify his own
poetic principles, but to point to the differences between
the traditional notions of poetry and the modern.

Aristophanes' rigidly conventional views on life and
art represent the orthodoxy of Greek art, which is perfect
within its narrow range; while the poetry of Euripides,
which seeks to break the bounds of the conventional in the
interests of a higher truth, becomes representative of the
modern approach to poetry—its realism and psychological
insight. For the debate in Aristophanes' Apology is not

^{16} Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic
Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition, 1957 (rpt.
^{17} Cf. "A Parleying with Aristophanes".
merely one between Comedy and Tragedy, but the wider
one between art and morality, sense and soul, between
humane realism and a pragmatic naturalism. In Euripides,
Browning sees the sympathetic response to mankind's
frailties and an upward-looking vision that is desirable
even if impossible to realize in totality. Aristophanes'
poetic practice is based on utilitarian grounds, and as
such rejects the idealism that ennobles. So that, while
Euripides is 'modern' by virtue of his deeper insight,
Aristophanes exemplifies the limitations of the Greek mind
that sees the body but not the soul. This idea is further
elaborated in the 'Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse'.

In the 'Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse'
Browning does not treat a Greek theme directly, but by
choosing to parley with a painter who glorified Greek
myths in his work, he presents his answer to the contemporary
cult of Hellenism.

The poem is centred on the contrast between de Lairesse's
art, which seeks to invest a subject with significance by
adorning it with mythology, and Browning's own art, realistic,
psychological and analytical. He distinctly repudiates the
idea that a subject from the past has inherent significance.
Browning's emphasis is on the particular treatment given to
the subject. It is on this point that Browning crosses
swords with the contemporary Hellenists. Idealizing the
past, he feels, is no solution for modern ills. To those, like Matthew Arnold, who turned to antiquity to find symbols of values they found lacking in their own times, Browning would say that these symbols had become outdated and outworn. As Douglas Bush puts it: "He thought his vision of the infinite carried him as a modern beyond the finite rationalism of the Greeks. He cannot forgive the Greeks their lack of a satisfying belief in Christian immortality...".

It was on a similar count that Master Hughes of Saxe-Gotha's music had been rejected; its technical achievements, however superior, merely obscured and did not illuminate. It offered only empty answers to the problems of temporal existence:

Is it your moral of Life?
Such a web, simple and subtle,
Weave we on earth here in impotent strife,
Backward and forward each throwing his shuttle,
Death ending all with a knife. (XXII, 106-110)

In Balaustion's Adventure Browning had asserted that "one thing may have many sides". Now he puts this principle into practice by revealing a totally unsuspected side of Greek mythology. Throughout the "Walk", in which Browning proposes to parallel de Lairesse's creations with his own, Browning employs the double vision. The two interpretations of the myth are not presented successively as in Balaustion's Adventure, but simultaneously. As

Roma A. King says: "Like Lairesse, he sees and admires the external grandeur of these old figures; unlike Lairesse, however, he discovers beneath their grandeur a human insensitivity and a spiritual void that culminates in despair and ultimately in disintegration." 19.

The series of vignettes highlight the malice of Jove, the cruelty of Artemis, (''Not one spark/Of pity in that steel grey glance'' IX), the cruel indifference of Lyda who turned from the satyr's ''rustic homage in disdain,/Saw but the poor uncouth outside of thee'' (X), and so changed the satyr's love for her into lust and savagery. Darius and Alexander confronting each other ''wrath-molten each,/Solidified by hate'' (XI) are no longer heroes to be admired, but feared for the chaos they bring.

The conclusion reached is that ''The dead Greek lore lies buried in the urn/Where who seeks fire finds ashes'' (XIV). This is in consonance with Browning's theory of progress, which holds that ''Nothing has been which shall not bettered be/Hereafter'' (XIII). Ultimately, Browning's rejection of Hellenism is based on the belief that a philosophy of life that offered no hope was dead. In ''Cleon'' Browning had shown that Greek culture had no answer to man's yearnings for something beyond this finite

life. All man's progress towards perfection leads to nothing but terrible negation if he does not have this hopeful view of life to cling to. Cleon is tortured by the question: 

"...the years and days, the summers and the springs,/Follow each other with unwaning powers...

What, and the soul alone deteriorates?" (ll.128-29).

To him, a future state 

"'Unlimited in capability/For joy,
as this is in desire for joy'" (ll.326-27) seems a figment of his imagination: 

"'Zeus has not yet revealed; and alas, /He must have done so, were it possible!'" (ll.334-35).

In contrast, Browning presents his Christian view of immortality after death in the 'Parleying':

...come what will,
What once lives, never dies—what here attains
To a beginning, has no end, still gains
And never loses aught: (XV)

The opposition between these two views is resolved in the lyric which closes the poem. It re-inforces the theme, 

"'All's change, but permanence as well'" (CXXIV) that had been presented in Fifine at the Fair. Change is no longer an occasion for pessimism, because it is linked with continuity. Langbaum comments of the lyric: 

"Christianity, Browning implies, makes such realism possible by confirming our deepest intuitions that the vegetation cycle is, indeed, symbolic of our fate after death."

Three poems in Dramatic Idyls have themes taken from Greek legend or mythology—"Pheidippides" in the First Series (1879) and "Echetlos" and "Pan and Luna" in the Second Series (1880). The first two deal with the theme ''The great deed ne'er grows small', but in keeping with his artistic theories, the great deeds that Browning celebrates concern the heroic action of unassuming men who do their duty without thought of reward. In each poem the simple nobility of the hero is contrasted with the selfish, time-serving attitude of those in power. Browning's choice of his protagonists is a telling repudiation of conventional notions of the hero. Both are in the tradition of Herakles in Balaustion's Adventure—the helper of mankind. The great names of Miltiades and Themistokles have been ground to the dust, but the simple heroism of a Pheidippides or of an Echetlos can 'never decline, but, gloriously as he began/So to end gloriously'' ("Pheidippides", ll.114-15).

In contrast to ''Artemis Prologizes'', where Browning presents the action through the mouth of Artemis herself without comment, in the idylls, the narrator stands outside the action, which helps to emphasize its moral significance. The emphasis is on the moral value of each character's response to a particularly testing moment. The subtle working of man's soul is Browning's theme in these later
Greek poems, illustrating in practice his views regarding deeper insight in modern poets. The nameless 'holder of the Ploughshare' has 'a clown's limbs broad and bare', but once the battle is won, he does not stay to seek praise. In contrast to Miltiades, whose first words are about the reward Pheidippides might have received from Pan, the Greek runner praises Pan, rejoices in Athens' victory and has no thoughts of personal gain beyond going home to marry his girl. Douglas Bush points out that the changes Browning makes in the original Greek legend are 'mostly in the way of dramatic compression, heightening and realistic verisimilitude.' Beyond this, however, Browning's characteristic interpretation of Greek legends makes them a means of asserting fundamental human values which are relevant for all times. In ''Pheidippides'' and ''Echetlos'' the idea emerges that when man can labour selflessly to help others for no other reason than the love in his heart, he becomes a prototype of divinity '...the noble, strong man/Who could race like a god, bear the face of a god, whom a god loves so well'' (''Pheidippides'', 1.112).

The two poems discussed above deal with heroic action and its implications in the mortal world. ''Pan and Luna'' has for its theme the unpredictability of

motivation and action. The Greek myth, as related by Virgil in the third Georgic, tells how Luna, the chaste, 'full-orbed' moon was enticed by Pan, disguised as a cloud in fluffy wool, and how she followed him to his domain in the woods. The psychological incongruity of the Virgilian interpretation must have struck Browning, so that his narrator qualifies the original, Virgilian version—"and so she followed"(1.99)—with his own line, 'In her sleep/Surely' (11.99-100). In the context of the Idylls the poem emphasizes the difficulty of making absolute judgements about 'what's under lock and key/Man's soul' (Epilogue; Second Series). This is Browning's way of seeing deeper, of linking psychological veracity with the imaginative faculty. Mere sensuous beauty is not enough, neither is mere grandeur. Both must be psychologically true.

In ''Ixion'' (Jocoseria, 1883) Browning sets himself against the Greek idea of malign destiny. The Christian concept of the immortality of the soul and of a beneficent loving Being exerted too strong a hold on his imagination for Browning to accept the idea of eternal punishment. In Aristophanes' Apology he had expressed the idea that the arbitrariness of the gods nullifies their divinity. Herakles says of Heré—'What she has
willed, that brings her will to pass/...who would pray/
To such a goddess?'' (p.87l). It is inconceivable that
deeds done in ignorance should be punished, for if
punishment exists, ignorance and illusion must be dispersed
so that man can choose between right and wrong:

What were the need but of a pitying power to
touch and disperse it,
Film-work--eye's and ear's--all the distraction
of sense?
How should the soul not see, not hear, perceive
and as plainly
Render in thought, word, deed, back again the
truth--not a lie? (ll. 37-40)

Man can only worship a being that reciprocates fully his
own love, faith and hope. So Ixion's imagination soars
''past Zeus to the Potency o'er him'', Thus Browning's
protagonist turns away from the Greek concept of Gods
who use man for ''a purpose of hate'' (1.4), who pay the
price of man's endeavour by striking him down, to an
assertion of the values of striving and aspiration until
''despair's murk mist blends in a rainbow of hope'' (1.116).
Once again, one can see Browning's modernizing influence
at work in his treatment of an ancient Greek legend. For
Browning's hero is not the treacherous murderer and ingrate
that Ixion is in Virgil's Georgics. The Ixion is the
Dramatic Idylls is rather the injured party, in that Zeus
had first encouraged him to look upon himself as an equal
and friend of the gods at Olympus, and then wreaked
vengeance on him for presuming to love Here. Therefore, says DeVane, ''Browning voices the revolt of an outraged humanity in the manner of Shelley in Prometheus Unbound, against the heartless decree of the tyrant'.' Browning's conception of godhood would rather emphasize its 'grand benevolence', as in his delineation of Herakles and Pan. He makes Balaustion say:

I think that this is the authentic sign and seal
Of Godship, that it ever waxes glad,
And more glad, until gladness blossoms, bursts
Into a rage to suffer for mankind,
And recommence at sorrow:

(Balaustion's Adventure, p.802)

The most convincing evidence of Browning's antagonism to the Hellenist position is his translation of the Agamemnon of Aeschylus in 1877. Mrs. Orr in her biography of the poet, makes the following comment:

Mr. Browning's deep feeling for the humanities of Greek literature, and his almost passionate love for the language, contrasted strongly with his refusal to regard even the first of the Greek writers as models of literary style. The pretensions raised for them on this ground were inconceivable to him; and his translation of the Agamemnon published in 1877, was partly made, I am convinced, for the pleasure of exposing these claims and of rebuking them. His preface to the transcript gives evidence of this.

(Mrs. Orr, Life, p.294.)

It is clear that Browning translated the Agamemnon in a meticulously literal manner in order to expose the claims

of Arnold and the other Hellenists of the day about the fitness of Greek themes for treatment in modern art. The following excerpt from the preface bears ample testimony to this fact:

"Fortunately, the poorest translation, provided only it be faithful, though it reproduce all the artistic confusion of tenses, moods, and persons, with which the original teems,—will not only suffice to display what an eloquent friend maintains to be the all-in-all of poetry—''the action of the piece''—but may help to illustrate his assurance that ''the Greeks are the highest models of expression, the unapproached masters of the grand style: their expression is so excellent because it is so admirably kept in its right degree of prominence, because it is so simple and so well subordinated, because it draws its force directly from the pregnancy of the matter which it conveys.... not a word wasted, not a sentiment capriciously thrown in, stroke on stroke!'' So may all happen!"

(Preface to the Agamemnon of Aeschylus, pp.511-12)

Browning was evidently thinking of Arnold's position in the Preface to the Poems of 1852. His own preface can be seen as an ironical retort.

As the present study reveals, Browning finds neither Greek philosophy nor Greek art suitable for present-day conditions. In the 'Parleying with de Lairesse' (as also in 'Cleon' in the earlier phase) he gives his opinion of the former:
What was the best Greece babbled of as truth?
"A shade, a wretched nothing, - sad, thin, drear,
Cold, dark, it holds on to the lost loves here,
If hand have haply sprinkled o'er the dead
Three charitable dust-heaps, made mouth red
One moment by the sip of sacrifice:
Just so much comfort thaws the stubborn ice
Slow-thickening upward till it choke at length
The last faint flutter craving--not for strength,
Not beauty, not the riches and the rule
O'er men that made life life indeed". Sad school
Was Hades!

(XIV)

His opinions of Greek art are embodied in "Old Pictures
in Florence" and in the "Parleying with Lairesse". But what Browning rejects are not the Greek myths and
legends in themselves, but those particular interpretations
of them that have uncritically invested them with value.
In "Development" (Asolando, 1889) Browning explains the
importance of mythology as a "guardian sheath" for
"fact's essence". In his own poems Browning successfully
demonstrates the vitality that could be infused into
Greek themes provided they were made psychologically
relevant to the modern situation.