

DRAMATIC IRONY IN THE ELECTRA OF SOPHOCLES

In a recent edition¹ of the *Electra*, J. H. Kells, returns to J. T. Sheppard's old interpretation of the play as *ironic*². It is worth noting that Sheppard himself follows Dio Chrys. (X. 23—32) in considering that the whole fault lay with Orestes, who was not told by Apollo to proceed to the deed of matricide but, assuming this to be his duty, asked the god how to do it, and that Apollo, as was his custom when asked a question simply about means to an assumed end, answered him what to do but did not express his approval (cf., for instance, the oracle of Branchidae to the Cymaeans about the suppliant, Pactyes, in Herod. I. 158—160)³.

We agree with Sheppard and Kells that Sophocles in the *Electra* neither justifies nor condones the matricide, but keeping, like Euripides, a critical attitude towards the act of matricide «he claimed his approach was in fact more subtle and less direct than Euripides: it is by ironic innuendo, by reading between the lines, that we see the act to be as odious as it is»⁴.

In any case, if we accept Clytaemestra's 'unnatural' hostility towards her son, Orestes' 'misinterpretation' of the Delphic oracle, and above all Electra's 'contradictory feelings', as she is driven by her unyielding loyalty to the moral course of action into conduct which she herself recognizes as immoral, the play may appear pervaded by a moving tone of irony.

Perhaps the most interesting pieces of dramatic irony of the *Electra* might be traced in the deception scene of Aegisthus at the end (1442 ff.). For this reason we prefer to concentrate on these particular instances. And as will be seen from their analysis, Sophocles' method in the use of the dramatic irony of conscious type reaches here its culminating point. In fact few dramatists could approach Sophocles in the tragic force and intensity with which he uses this particular form of irony by means of his characters, *Electra* and *Orestes*. For their language in this scene is not only simply ambiguous but involves a special kind of humour, extremely grim and perverse indeed, which adds too much to the horror of the situation.

But let us come to the evidence.

Clytaemestra is already killed (1415—6), when Aegisthus enters the stage, joyful at the unexpected news about Orestes' death. He asks *Electra* and the chorus «Where are those Phocian strangers»? (1442), quite unaware that among those ξένοι Φωκεῖς is Orestes himself who has come back home to take revenge on his father's murderers. *Electra* trying to cheat him into a sense of false security, answers him in an ambiguous way:

1) J. H. Kells, *Sophocles, Electra*, Cambridge 1973, pp. 4—12,

2) J. T. Sheppard, *In Defence of Sophocles*, *Cl. Review*, 41, 1927, pp. 2—9,

3) Sheppard cites (op. cit., pp. 3 ff.) a number of cases of similar deceptive replies by Apollo in answer to leading questions.

4) Kells, op. cit., p. 4.

ἔξοιδα· πῶς γὰρ οὐχί; συμφορᾶς γὰρ ἂν
ἔξωθεν εἶην τῶν ἐμῶν γε φιλτάτων. (1448—9)

The word συμφορᾶς seems to be intentionally used here, since it can suggest either 'fortune' (indifferent meaning) as in O. T. 33 or 'bad fortune' as in Philoct. 885 and Pind. Olymp. VII. 141. Besides, the words τῶν φιλτάτων⁵ (if the text is sound) is another intended ambiguity. Here the whole phrase means to Aegisthus «certainly I know; otherwise, I should be a stranger to the fortune of my closest kinswoman», but to the audience it means «of course, I know; else, I should be a stranger to the 'fortunes' of my dearest, that is, of my brother». Thus ἡ συμφορὰ τῶν φιλτάτων conveys a further meaning, concerning Clytaemestra's disaster, which Aegisthus cannot yet suspect.

The scene proceeds loaded with irony arising mainly from Electra's answers, which are designed to tell the truth and mislead at the same time. The news is so glad for Aegisthus that he cannot believe yet; but while he wants a more persuasive evidence, Electra finds the opportunity to indulge in a dark humour upon Aegisthus:

Αι. ποῦ δῆτ' ἂν εἶεν οἱ ξένοι; διδασκέ με
Ηλ. ἔνδον· φίλης γὰρ προξένου κατήνυσαν.
Αι. ἦ καὶ θανόντ' ἠγγειλαν ὡς ἐτητύμως;
Ηλ. οὐκ, ἀλλὰ κάπεδειξαν, οὐ λόγῳ μόνον.
Αι. πάρεστ' ἄρ' ἡμῖν ὥστε κάμφανῆ μαθεῖν;
Ηλ. πάρεστι δῆτα καὶ μάλ' ἄζηλος θέα.
Αι. ἦ πολλὰ χαίρειν μ' εἶπας οὐκ εἰωθότως.
Ηλ. χαίροις ἂν, εἴ σοι χαρτὰ τυγχάνει τάδε. (1450—1457)

Electra's replies to Aegisthus' questions are venomously double-edged. In fact, after some moments he will stand before an ἄζηλος θέα, which will be by no means χαρτός to him. But Aegisthus deserves the cruel treatment to which he is subjected by Electra's ironical words and no tears need be shed over his misfortune.

Let us have a closer loock at Electra's ambiguous answers: In 1451 the phrase φίλης γὰρ προξένου (ἐς οἶκον) κατήνυσαν means to Aegisthus, «they have reached the home of a dear hostess»⁶, but to the audience it means φίλης γὰρ προξένου (φόνον) κατήνυσαν, that is, «they have accomplished [the murder] of their dear hostess»⁷. Likewise the next reply of Electra to Aegisthus' question whether the Phocian strangers truly reported Orestes' death οὐκ, ἀλλὰ κάπεδειξαν, οὐ λόγῳ μόνον «no, they have brought himself, not news alone», shows her guileful playing on 'evidence' and 'hearsay', while sustaining perfect equivocation. The line 1454 conveys also an ominous ambiguity: Aegisthus does not hear of the urn (ἄγγος), but seems to believe that the body of Orestes was brought and is laying now within (πάρεστι), while Electra and the audience understand «of course he is here, but in full. . . life». The words κάμφανῆ may be felt by Aegisthus «the relics» (λείψανα), or at least 'Orestes' body' (cf. Ajax 538), but by the spectators «the manifest and inevitable events» (cf. Herod. II. 33). In 1455 and 1457 a stir

5) R. C. Jebb adopts the reading τῆς φιλτάτης (Ls rec.). Perhaps L. Campbell is right in considering that Electra would not 'speak of her mother as τῆς φιλτάτης in addressing Aegisthus' (Paralipomena Sophoclea, London 1907, repr. 1969, p. 153),

6) Cf. Herod. VI. 140.

7) Cf. Eurip. El. 1164; also the schol., ad loc.

ring ironical effect plays its part penetrating all Electra's words: in 1455 «there is indeed to be seen a sight for which I do not envy you», Aegisthus understands Orestes' corpse, but to Electra and the audience it suggests «the dead body of Clytaemestra». Finally in 1457 *χαίροις ἄν, εἴ σοι χαρτὰ τυγχάνει*⁸ *τάδε*, the real meaning of the words is not understood by Aegisthus, who is sure that Electra hints at his and Clytaemestra's joy after the recent news about Orestes' death.

Now we come to examine another utterance of Electra, which is full of conscious dramatic irony:

Aegisthus is convinced that Electra has at last collapsed after the bad message about her brother's death, and now is forced to submit to him and Clytaemestra. Electra succeeds in reinforcing this belief of Aegisthus by the following utterance:

καὶ δὴ τελεῖται τὰπ' ἐμοῦ· τῷ γὰρ χρόνῳ
νοῦν ἔσχον, ὥστε συμφέρειν τοῖς κρείσσοσιν. (1464—5)

Electra's words *καὶ δὴ τελεῖται τὰπ' ἐμοῦ* mean to Aegisthus «my duty is being carried out», that is, «I, at least, have decided to be obedient and loyal», but for the audience it has quite another ring «my part in the vengeance is being performed». Then, she, trying to lure Aegisthus to his fate, adds *τῷ γὰρ χρόνῳ νοῦν ἔσχον, ὥστε συμφέρειν τοῖς κρείσσοσιν* «time has taught me the prudence of living in accord with these who are now stronger»⁹, that is, «with Clytaemestra and himself» is the meaning for Aegisthus, but to the audience and the chorus it means «with Orestes who is now ruler in Argos».

Immediately after Electra, it is Orestes' turn to continue the same kind of humour at the expence of Aegisthus.

As soon as Electra throws the palace-door wide open, Aegisthus anxiously rushes into the palace, approaches the veiled body and, bending over it, commands:

- Αι. *χαλᾶτε πᾶν κάλυμμ' ἀπ' ὀφθαλμῶν, ὅπως
τὸ συγγενές τοι κάπ' ἐμοῦ θρήνων τύχη.*
Ορ. *αὐτὸς σὺ βάσταζ'· οὐκ ἐμὸν τόδ', ἀλλὰ σὸν,
τὸ ταῦθ' ὄρᾶν τε καὶ προσηγορεῖν φίλω.*
Αι. *ἀλλ' εὐ παραινεῖς, κάπιπέισομαι· σὺ δὲ
εἴ που κατ' οἴκόν μοι Κλυταιμνήστρα, κάλει.*
Ορ. *αὕτη πέλας σοῦ· μηκέτ' ἄλλοσε σκόπει.* (1468—74)

Orestes' answers to Aegisthus contain thrilling effects of irony pervading all his words. In 1470 *αὐτὸς σὺ βάσταζ'· οὐκ ἐμὸν τόδ' ἀλλὰ σὸν* «take it up yourself; you are the relative», Orestes is supposed to be a Phocian stranger, so that he has 'no relation' to the dead body. Here we must stress the ambiguous word *ταῦθ'* which means to Aegisthus 'Orestes' relics' as well as the phrase *προσηγορεῖν φίλω*, which suggest to him the sorrowful farewell addressed by relatives to the corpse, when laid ou for burial¹⁰. Also Aegisthus' reply to the 'Phocian stranger' (1472—3) shows that he has no doubt about the identity of the person to whom the body belongs. He calls at once for his wife: «call Clytaemestra

8) *Τυγχάνει* A rec: *τυγχάνοι* L.

9) Cf. Mazon's transl.: «J ai enfin acquis assez de bon sens pour m'accommoder à mes maîtres».

10) Cf. Lucian. *De luctu*, 13.

to me, please if she is anywhere in the house» εἴ που κατ' οἶκον (so that I can see her: his words imply). But Orestes, answer reveals all. The irony and the pretence are now over: αὕτη πέλας σοῦ· μηκέτ' ἄλλοσε σκόπει «she is close to you; do not look for her elsewhere». When Aegisthus sees Clytaemestra's body, he is convinced that his fate is already sealed.

Thus detached and pitiless, Orestes politely toys with Aegisthus' unawareness cutting him with words while holding off the sword until the right spot has been reached.

Perhaps it is worth observing that this type of the effect (conscious dramatic irony) — used for the first time by Aeschylus in the Agamemnon — is mainly based on a 'devised' contrast through a 'deception' of one character upon another. Euripides, in his turn, made a wide use of it. But this form of 'artificial' ironies cannot be compared, of course, with the 'natural' ironies of the Oedipus Tyrannus for example, which are not contrived by the dramatist, but seem to be inherent in the story itself, and so they are essential to the theme of the play.

Nevertheless the artificial ironies are equally effective since they can provide the setting for some of the most dramatically rousing scenes as happens in the end of the Electra.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

1. C. Thirlwall. On the Irony of Sophocles, Remains, Literary and Theological, (ed. J. S. Perowne, London 1878), vol. 3 rd, pp. 22 ff.
1. G. Kirkwood, A Study of Sophoclean Drama, Ithaca, N. York 1958, pp. 258 ff.

Π Ε Ρ Ι Λ Η Ψ Ι Σ

Εἰς τὸ τέλος τῆς Ἡλέκτρας τοῦ Σοφοκλέους, καὶ ἀκριβέστερον εἰς τὴν καλουμένην «σκηνὴν τῆς ἀπάτης» τοῦ Αἰγίσθου ἐκ μέρους τῆς ὁμωνύμου ἡρώιδος συναντῶμεν μερικὰ χωρία-ὑποδείγματα δραματικῆς εἰρωνείας (συνειδητοῦ τύπου): 1448—9, 1450—7, 1463—5 καὶ 1468—74. Εἰς τὸ ἀνωτέρω ἄρθρον περιωρίσθημεν εἰς μίαν σύντομον ἀνάλυσιν τῶν διαφορουμένων, κατὰ τὴν σημασίαν, ἐκείνων φραστικῶν στοιχείων, τὰ ὅποια ἐχρησιμοποιήθησαν ὑπὸ τοῦ ποιητοῦ κατὰ τὸν τρόπον ἀριστοτεχνικὸν διὰ τὴν δημιουργίαν τραγικῆς εἰρωνείας, ἥτις ὡς γνωστὸν καθιστᾷ τόσον «παθητικὴν» τὴν ἔξοδον τοῦ ἐν λόγῳ ἔργου.