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INTRODUCTION

1. THE PLAY

Sophocles' *Electra* is undoubtedly one of the world's greatest plays. Even in the context of the other two remarkable tragedies written on the same subject by the two other great dramatists of the fifth century, it stands out with a peculiar excellence. From beginning to end it moves with a sense of inevitability, characteristic of Sophocles' best work and particularly his later work. Not a line, not a word is misplaced or (apart from stylistic ornament) superfluous. It is the work, not merely of a great artist, but of an inspired artist. The inspiration shows itself in the strong feeling which the play in places arouses in reader or audience, feeling whose origin or nature may be obscure to the percipient. The recognition-scene between Electra and Orestes (lines 1098–1231) is one of the most moving in literature, and cannot be read by a sensitive person or performed by accomplished actors without arousing the strongest emotion.

Yet this play has caused the greatest difficulty to critics. How are we to understand the stealthy killing of a mother[1] and (less important, perhaps) her lover and accomplice by the woman's son and daughter? We should remember here that the other two great tragedians had already (according to the usual view of the relative dates of the three plays)[2]

[1] It should be noted that, besides the *Electra*, Sophocles wrote at least two other tragedies concerned with an act of matricide (namely, the killing of Amphiaraus' wife, Eriphyle, by her son Alcmeon in revenge for her betrayal of his father into joining the fatal expedition of the Seven against Thebes). These were the *Epigoni* and the *Alcmeon*. They have not survived except in the shape of a few tantalising fragments. This much of the story is clear: that Alcmeon, after and consequent upon the matricide, was pursued and driven mad by the Furies; that *even after ritual purification* he continued to suffer bouts of madness; that he died a violent death in the course of the chain of intrigue which followed the matricide. These facts scarcely lend support to either of the two conventional views of the *Electra* described below, which assert that Sophocles *in it* either condoned or justified the killing of Clytaemnestra.

[2] The *Choephori* was produced (as the second part of the *Oresteia* trilogy) in 458 B.C. Euripides' *Electra* is generally thought to be prior to Sophocles' and

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implied contradictory views of the rights and wrongs of the ancient story. Aeschylus in the *Choephori* had justified the matricide, but only in a certain context – only as a link in a chain (typically Aeschylean) of grim events leading to the evolution of civilised institutions. Euripides, on the contrary, denounced it, making his Orestes reproach Apollo, who commanded the matricide, 'Apollo, it was a mighty piece of ignorance that you oracled' (ὦ Φοῖβε, πολλήν γ' ἀμαθίαν ἐθέσπισας, Eur. *El.* 971), and Apollo's fellow-divinities, the Dioscuri, support this judgment in the epilogue to the play, 'wise though he is, it was not wise advice he offered you' (σοφὸς δ' ὢν οὐκ ἔχρησέ σοι σοφά, 1246). Compared with these other two dramatists, whose drift is manifest, Sophocles has in a curious but characteristic way withdrawn his meaning from open scrutiny. And thus he has made it possible for different scholars to come to quite opposite views as to the play's meaning, and the tone in which it is to be read or acted. There are also certain features which are peculiar to the Sophoclean play and set it aside from the other two. Why, for instance, is the pronouncement of Apollo's oracle at Delphi sanctioning (or appearing to sanction) the matricide, the pronouncement which is so central to both the other plays[1] and (one must assume) to the traditional story, dealt with so swiftly and almost cursorily at the very opening of the play? Why in this play alone does Orestes not *hesitate* before proceeding to the killing of his mother? Why has Sophocles *reversed the order* of the killings (Aegisthus being killed before Clytaemnestra in both the other plays, but Clytaemnestra before Aegisthus in Sophocles)? Finally and most strikingly, what has happened in Sophocles to the Furies, who traditionally pursued and persecuted Orestes for the killing of his mother? These are prominent both in Aeschylus and Euripides. Sophocles' play not merely omits them, but it ends with a note of apparent finality which seems to preclude them from any imagined sequel.

Broadly, three different types of answer have been given to these questions. The first (which we may call the 'amoral' theory) is that

is now usually dated about 418: see T. B. L. Webster *The tragedies of Euripides* (1967) 2f. and 143f., A. M. Dale, ed. of Euripides' *Helen* (1967) xxivff. Miss Dale argues (*ib.* note to 1050ff.) that Sophocles' *Electra* was written almost immediately before Euripides' *Helen*, i.e. about 413 (see the note to lines 59f. of this play).

[1] Cf. Aesch. *Cho.* 269ff.; Eur. *El.* 87 and 973.

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Sophocles was simply not interested in the ethical or legalistic aspects of the story. His aim was to produce a brilliant, extrovert narrative, in the Homeric manner, of the events of Orestes' home-coming. Hence he has omitted all the ambiguities and dubieties of the traditional story, all the heart-searchings, all the *dark* side of Orestes' act, and above all the haunting Furies. His version is a thrilling piece of epic saga, with a striking centrepiece in the Paedagogus' report of the fictitious chariot-race in which Orestes is reported to have lost his life (Homeric in style, and indeed clearly related closely to the account of the chariot-race in *Iliad* 23. 287ff.). This is the theory that Jebb, for example, and J. D. Denniston mainly relied upon (cf. the Introduction to D.'s edition of Euripides' *Electra*). But it is noticeable that neither of these two fine scholars was altogether happy with it. Thus Jebb (Introduction xli) points out that Orestes would, according to Greek ideas then current with regard to homicide, be *polluted* by his mother's murder, and that the audience would have expected the Furies to appear *as the visible sign* of this pollution.

The second theory (which we may call the 'justificatory') argues that the play, so far from avoiding the moral issue of the matricide, actually makes it a central issue, and expresses downright approval of it. Having perhaps seen Euripides' play in the theatre with its attack on Apollo for having commanded the matricide, Sophocles, a staunch supporter of established religion and conventional morality, reacted by composing a work which would defend Apollo against Euripides' impious attack, re-assert the Aeschylean version, and show that the killing of Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus was both necessary and fully justified.[1] Accordingly, his Clytaemnestra is even more villainous and unredeemed than the Clytaemnestra of the other versions. His Orestes does not hesitate before killing her, because (quite simply) there is nothing for an honest son to hesitate about. And the Furies are omitted, boldly, for the same reason: why have Furies when no crime demanding punishment has been committed? But Sophocles has cleverly switched the order of the killings, in order to forestall the expectations of the audience (reared on the traditional tale). Had Clytaemnestra been killed at the end of the play, there would have been an inconvenient pause during which the audience

[1] Cf. T. B. L. Webster, *The tragedies of Euripides* 15, *Sophocles*[2] 195. Webster is probably the most insistent modern defender of the justificatory theory.

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would have had time to expect the onset of the Furies. As it is, after Clytaemnestra's murder, our attention is immediately distracted by the approaching Aegisthus, and then after Aegisthus' death there is no occasion for the Furies.[1]

Most modern critics, with occasional doubts or reservations, have followed one or other of the above theories, or some variety or admixture of them. But there is a third theory, which may be called the 'ironic', and which is only to be found fully and explicitly expressed in an article by J. T. Sheppard (*C.R.* 41 (1927) 2–9). Sheppard thought that Sophocles no more approved or condoned the cold-blooded act of matricide than did Euripides, and that it was a travesty of the play to interpret it in either of these senses. Accordingly, he called his article '*In defence* of Sophocles' (my italics). Ranging Sophocles with Euripides as a *critic* of the 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. It would of course be contrary to all we know of Sophocles to make him critical also of Apollo, whose authorisation of the matricide was a cardinal factor in the traditional story and has perhaps most influenced modern critics who see the matricide as justified. But Sheppard suggested that Apollo's response in Sophocles is not a true authorisation – because of the peculiar way in which Orestes framed his question: Orestes asked '*How* should I be avenged?' not '*Should* I be avenged?' (*El.* 37). In other words, he approached the oracle with his mind already made up on the basic issue, 'Should I kill my mother?' In such circumstances, Sheppard argued, the impious (if impious it was) intent already existed in the mind of the consultant; and it was the part of the oracle not merely not to try to dissuade him from it, but actually to encourage him to pursue it – in order that he might the sooner complete his own destruction! Sheppard cites a number of cases of similarly deceptive replies by Delphi in answer to leading questions.

Having thus cast suspicion upon Orestes' oracular mandate, Sheppard pointed to several passages which suggest difficulties and even disaster, not glory, for Orestes. Thus, when he comes out of the palace (1422 ff.), his sword dripping with his mother's blood, and

[1] I suggest a quite different reason for the divergence in my note to lines 1368f. of the play.

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Electra asks him and Pylades, 'How are things with you?', he replies, 'Things in the house are well – *if Apollo oracled well.*' The question, thus poised dramatically, seems both to suggest a doubt in the speaker's mind and to create one in the audience's. If Sophocles was quite sure, and meant his audience to be quite sure, that the matricide was just and proper, why does he *propose* an 'if' at this critical stage? Was that not to weaken the case? Again, as Aegisthus is led into the palace to his death (a specially vindictive killing, be it noted, cf. 1504), he asks Orestes why, if the deed is καλόν ('good' or 'honourable'), he *needs the dark* in which to do it (1493f.). Orestes has no answer, except to express his intention that Aegisthus shall die 'in the same place' as Agamemnon. Aegisthus further alludes to 'this day's griefs of Pelops' clan – *and tomorrow's*' (1498). Again, Orestes is given no sufficient answer by the playwright.

Sheppard's reading of the play has been almost universally dismissed or ignored by modern critics. The reasons given by those who dismiss it are mainly two: first, that it is 'too subtle' (cf. H. J. Rose, *Greek mythology*, ch. 4, n. 36); second, that it would not have been clear to the audience, who would have expected the 'ordinary' version of the story: if Sophocles had meant to convey anything of the kind suggested by Sheppard, he would have had to express it in a much more explicit way.[1]

Perhaps the first duty of an editor introducing so controversial a play is to point out that there is (in the very nature of the case) no final answer to such questions. A work of art must speak for itself. And each person who experiences it must form his own views, assess his own reactions. Such works of art have a kind of built-in ambiguity, being not so much imitations of life as sources of life, producing fresh intimations in each new reader.

This said, I may also express my own belief that Sheppard's reading of the play has been very improperly neglected. The 'answers' which have been given to it are both trivial and ambivalent. It is illogical to say that an ancient tragedian could not depart from the 'ordinary' version of a story, when *ex hypothesi* that very same playwright has already departed from it greatly by omitting a large part of that story, namely the Furies. And is it not presumptuous to legislate on permis-

[1] Cf. C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean tragedy* (1944) 216f.; H. Friis Johansen in 'Die Elektra des Sophokles', *Classica et Mediaevalia* 25 (1964) 9.

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sible degrees of subtlety in an *ancient Greek* play, particularly when the playwright is one so famous for his subtlety that he could (in the words of the anonymous ancient *Life of Sophocles* 21) 'depict a whole character from a single half-line or phrase'? Orestes' reference to the oracle is fleeting (too fleeting). But the fleeting words are clear enough indication that Orestes did ask the wrong question of the oracle. And did that not matter to Sophocles (Sophocles the pious, the punctilious), whereas it mattered to Socrates (cf. Xen. *Anab.* 3. 2)? A fragment of a lost play of Sophocles, 'and I am well aware that the god is such: to wise men ever a riddler in oracles; to *fools* a blunt, direct instructor' (καὶ τὸν θεὸν τοιοῦτον ἐξεπίσταμαι, | σοφοῖς μὲν αἰνικτῆρα θεσφάτων ἀεί, | σκαιοῖς δὲ φαῦλον κἀν βραχεῖ διδάσκαλον, fr. 771), makes it clear that Sophocles was well aware of the point of principle involved. Sophocles' Orestes thought the oracle could be dealt with bluntly; he regarded it as φαῦλος κἀν βραχεῖ διδάσκαλος. Therefore he is not 'wise', but (to that extent) a fool. But there is more characterisation of Orestes to follow. Outlining to the Paedagogus the stratagem by which he must introduce himself into the palace and tell a lying tale of his (Orestes') death, and evidently feeling some uneasiness at this proceeding, he reassures himself, 'I imagine that nothing that you *say*, provided that it brings advantage, is objectionable' (61). It is an extraordinary statement, and yet it has passed practically unnoticed by commentators.[1] It is so unprincipled. And the unscrupulousness is of a familiar kind, expressed in standard terms. Again and again, in Greek literature of the age of Sophocles, when κέρδος ('gain' or 'profit') is juxtaposed with a moral value (ἀγαθόν, καλόν, δίκαιον, and so on), it is, practically proverbially, represented as a sign of *baseness* to prefer κέρδος to what is in principle good and honourable. See, for example, the words of the time-serving Odysseus in Sophocles, *Philoctetes* (111): ὅταν τι δρᾷς ἐς κέρδος, οὐκ ὀκνεῖν πρέπει ('whenever one does something which leads to profit, one should not hesitate', ὀκνεῖν of moral scruple): these words of Odysseus, of whose principles the *Philoctetes* amounts to a rebuttal, are a mere variation on Orestes'.[2]

[1] Of the whole speech C. H. Whitman (*Sophocles* (1951) 155) says, 'In a few lines Orestes is depicted, chivalrous and noble, *with no problem and no special dramatic interest*' (my italics).

[2] See also Aesch. *Ag.* 342, Soph. *Aj.* 1349, *Ant.* 310ff., *O.T.* 594f., 889. Compare Soph. fr. 28 τοιαῦτά τοί σοι πρὸς χάριν τε κοὐ βίᾳ | λέγω· σὺ δ'

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However, the wording of the oracular consultation and the preliminary characterisation of Orestes are by no means the essential reason for disagreeing with those who believe that the *Electra* either justifies or condones the matricide. I believe that these things are crucial, but only as the earliest of a series of subtle but forceful dramatic touches which all add up to the same effect: and that effect, if I am not mistaken, amounts to a kind of suspended abhorrence of the act itself, of sustained tragic pity that it should have been necessary or have come about.

To me, the very centre of the play is the moment when Clytaemnestra, having heard the report of her son's death in glory at the Pythian Games, suddenly goes back on everything she has so far stood for, and bursts out 'O god! What am I to say of these things? Am I to call them fortunate, or...terrible but beneficial? I am in a sad state if I have to save my life by the sufferings of my own flesh and blood!' (766–8), and again 'It is a queer thing to be a mother. Even when you suffer despite at their hands, you cannot hate those you bore' (770–1). It seems astonishing to me that editors and critics have almost all failed to appreciate the tragic import of these lines, the enormous reversal that they constitute in the stage-action, with its far-reaching significance for the play's total meaning. What the critics almost all do is to recognise that Clytaemnestra exhibits 'some maternal feeling' for Orestes; but they then proceed to discount it by arguing that there is *too little of it*, and that, after all, she resumes her original attitude at 773ff. Here again (as with Orestes' consultation of the oracle) the fallacy lies in the statistical character of the approach. Clytaemnestra expresses her maternal grief in not many lines. Therefore it does not matter much! Also, she goes back upon it: but no one points out that the long speech in which she does so is poetry of so intense and tragic a quality that it makes her, inevitably, a *commanding and tragic figure*. Why did Sophocles put such words into her mouth, if he meant her to be a repellent, minor figure? In fact, he

αὐτὸς ὥσπερ οἱ σοφοὶ τὰ μὲν | δίκαι' ἐπαίνει, τοῦ δὲ κερδαίνειν ἔχου 'Pay lip-service to Justice, but actually cling to Gain!' (notice that Orestes immediately refers to οἱ σοφοί (62)); fr. 833 τὸ κέρδος ἡδύ, κἂν ἀπὸ ψευδῶν ἴῃ (Pearson remarks on the 'discreditable sentiment' and quotes *Electra* 61 (along with other parallels), but without drawing any inference about Orestes); fr. 834 οὐκ ἐξάγουσι καρπὸν οἱ ψευδεῖς λόγοι.

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didn't. And in this scene he subtly transfers our sympathy to her. It is a kind of reversal which is not infrequent in Sophocles as well as Euripides,[1] and it illustrates the fact that the dramatist who knows his job is not a moralist with a thesis, but an artist who lays bare the realities of the human heart overlaid as they may be by the accidents of time and circumstance.

Yet a thesis may help in the understanding of a work of art. Let me now put the following hypothesis before the reader. Let us suppose that Sophocles set out to write his play with the following ideas in mind:

> 'I live in a society which makes vengeance and vindictiveness a guiding principle of conduct.[2] Euripides has written many fine plays which turn, at their most critical moments, on the application of this ethic.[3] I myself have represented it in my *Ajax* and *Antigone* in that form in which it concerns the denial of burial to the dead enemy (that being merely a prolongation of hatred into death itself – "to kill the dead twice over", τὸν θανόντ' ἐπικτανεῖν, as Teiresias describes it (*Ant.* 1030)). I have made my finest heroine,

[1] Cf. (for Sophocles) the treatment of Polynices in the *Oedipus Coloneus*: denounced as a worthless rascal by Oedipus, he is shown independently, in the farewell-scene with Antigone, as going bravely to a doom which he knows is inevitable, and as feeling disinterested love for his sisters (*O.C.* 1399ff.). (It is as if the dramatist were trying deliberately to correct the impression which his own character-creation, Oedipus, has given.) And (for Euripides) cf. the ending of the *Hecuba*: the villain Polymestor turns on his captors (Agamemnon and Hecuba) and foretells (with prophetic insight) *their* deaths (*Hec.* 1257ff.). We are made to feel that the tables are suddenly and surprisingly turned; that they will in turn pay for the act of revenge that they have perpetrated on him.

[2] From the earliest historical times Greeks (like many peoples today) were taught popularly and proverbially to 'love and aid their friends and *hate and injure their enemies*': cf. Solon fr. 1. 5; Theognis 363–4; Pindar *Pyth.* 2.83f.; Plato *Meno* 71e; *Crito* 49b. In Plato's *Republic* 'doing harm to one's enemies' is offered as a definition of 'Justice' (*Rep.* 1.332b), and this conception is there for the first time analysed and shown to be philosophically untenable (*ib.* 334b ff.).

[3] The classical instance is Euripides' Medea. She would not have killed her children but for her desire to appear βαρεῖαν ἐχθροῖς καὶ φίλοισιν εὐμενῆ (*Med.* 807ff.). Cf. also Aeschylus *Ag.* 1377f., *Cho.* 122f.; Sophocles *Ant.* 641ff. (it can scarcely be held that the speaker, Creon, is right!), *O.C.* 1189f. (the ethic contradicted); Euripides *Andr.* 437f., *Hipp.* 48ff., *Tro.* 64ff., *Bacch.* 877ff., etc.

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Antigone, deny the ethic of hatred in favour of that of love, "It is not in my nature to side with enmity, but only with friendliness", οὔτοι συνέχθειν, ἀλλὰ συμφιλεῖν ἔφυν (*Ant.* 523) – in answer to Creon's "Never can one's enemy be a friend, even when he is dead", οὔτοι ποθ' οὑχθρός, οὐδ' ὅταν θάνῃ, φίλος. I see now, as the long and terrible war against the Peloponnesians drags on, the ethics of reprisal become more embittered and more pervasive.[1] I will write a tragedy about the classical revenge-situation, in which Electra and Orestes kill their mother, in recompense for their father's death. It is a situation in which tradition on the whole regards Electra and Orestes as justified. Clytaemnestra had herself killed Agamemnon in revenge for the sacrifice of her daughter, Iphigenia. I will not try to whitewash her. Indeed I shall show her living ignobly on the proceeds of her crime along with her partner in it, Aegisthus, treating her daughter badly and spitefully, and even praying for her son's death. But I shall, in one swift dramatic instant, make her go back on it. I shall show her natural love for her absent son emerging against all appearances and overcoming her unnatural hostility towards him. By this I shall show that "nature" (φύσις, in this case the instinctive, ineradicable love of the mother for her child) is a stronger and deeper force than "law" (νόμος, not the civilising law of states, but the primitive, automatic law of vengeance: "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth").

'As for Orestes and Electra, I shall handle them with continuing irony. I shall not make the traditional Furies haunt them: that would be too crude, too outward a phenomenon for my conception. I shall show their minds working inevitably (under revenge-

[1] The spirit in which the war was fought was conditioned by the fact that the Greeks had long become accustomed to identify the word for 'public enemy' (πολέμιος) with that for a private one (ἐχθρός) – a fact which is not generally understood, but which emerges *passim*, for example, from Thucydides (the Corinthians, for instance, in their speech urging Sparta to go to war with Athens, continually speak of the Athenians as ἐχθροί: Thuc. I. 68ff.). Since the public enemy was ἐχθρός, the ethic of 'hate and harm your enemy' could be applied to him. It goes without saying that the same ethic could also be used to support that half-way house between public and private belligerence known as *stasis*. (As is pointed out in the Introduction to Headlam's posthumous *Agamemnon* (ed. Pearson, 1910, 23) the 'enterprise of Aegisthus' against Agamemnon is treated by Aeschylus as a case of *stasis*: the same applies to Orestes' venture in Sophocles.)

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motivation) so that they advance further and further in infatuation, grow further and further *away from reality*.[1] Thus Orestes will mishandle the oracle. And having elicited his (imputed) oracular mandate, he will proceed to the deed of matricide (the most horrible act humanly conceivable) almost jauntily, with no religious motivation but a very materialistic one.[2] He will callously forgo the opportunity to reveal himself to his sister *before* announcing himself as dead (thus throwing her into shocked despair, when she, as well as Clytaemnestra, has to listen to the news and believe it). He will kill his mother, knowing nothing of her state of mind (that she feels love and grief for him, that her assumed hatred has been the product of fear: for him she will simply be "bad" (κακή, 1289) – only whites and blacks, no greys, no subtleties, no surprises for this militaristic, unsubtle man).

'But the play shall above all be Electra's tragedy. She shall be my familiar, impetuous, idealistic, aristocratic, *noblesse oblige* heroine (a latter-day Antigone), but this time committed to the proposition that nobility expresses itself in joining in hatred, not in love. And, given her dedication to a single purpose, her intransigence, and her lack of realistic commonsense (σωφροσύνη), we shall see how relentless association with the revenge-principle ruins her mentally and morally. Herself childless, she shall fail to comprehend her mother's maternality, mistaking the psychology of fear for that of pride. Distraught by Orestes' cruel deceit in representing himself to her as dead (as well as by her own too insistent pursuit of vengeance), she shall betray growing signs of madness as the play proceeds. Her fevered imagination will feed on the picture of herself and her sister basking in triumphant acclaim among the townspeople as the slayers of Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra (973 ff.). Only in the

[1] It seems to be a trait of Sophocles to show his characters 'growing away from reality'. The classical instance is the growth in Oedipus' mind of the delusion that he is the object of a palace-plot to drive him out of Thebes (*O.T.* 345ff.).

[2] Mme Ronnet (*Sophocle poète tragique* (1969) 232f.), though she presents on the whole an amoral view of the *Electra*, observes acutely that religion surprisingly plays a minimal part in Orestes' and Electra's words and actions: 'L'initiative vient des hommes, d'Oreste, qui agit autant par intérêt (pour retrouver son patrimoine) que par devoir filial, et par-delà Oreste, de celle qui l'a fait élever en vue de la vengeance.'

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