SOPHOCLES

AN INTERPRETATION

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CHAPTER ONE

Introductory

Interest in Sophocles is unabating. If it was marked in the periods which followed the two world wars, yet now, when the second war has been over for more than thirty years, books and articles on Sophocles still flow from the presses. There is clearly a fascination here – a sense of relevance, if one may use a modish word. From all this scholarly and critical activity – and much of it has been of quality – one ought not to expect or even desire that a consensus should emerge any more than from the critical study of Shakespeare. The range of opinion, however, has been and still is fantastically wide. There are orthodoxies and dogmas, but they conflict. There is conflict over the interpretation of individual tragedies and over the tragic thought of Sophocles in general.

A complete survey would be tedious. We have been asked to look at Sophocles in many different guises: the virtuoso playwright, unconcerned with ideas or consistency or character; the portraitist; a Homeric, or aristocratic, or conservative, Sophocles turning his back on the contemporary world or confronting it with paradigms of a lost heroism; a pious Sophocles, the outcome of whose plays must always reflect well upon the gods; an acceptant Sophocles, but also, by contrast, one whose heroes rightly arraign the gods. On the critical stage they have had their entrances and their exits and their reappearances with a change of mask and costume; and we seem to look in vain for the face behind the mask. No dramatist perhaps has stamped his mark more strongly upon his plays, yet without obtruding his personality or advertising his personal views. That is part of the trouble.

Seven tragedies have survived, spanning some forty years or more.

Despite an uncertain chronology,[1] we can trace developments in technique: Sophocles did not write *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus Coloneus* in quite the same way that he wrote *Ajax* and *Antigone;* in the later plays there is more flexibility of form and, to employ a dangerous word, more regard for realism. The Athenian audience had changed, in its tastes and its demands, and Euripides had been at work. It is a futile exercise to ask whether both dramatists had reacted independently to the change or whether, since each knew what the other was doing, there was a mutual influence. One can play with the idea of the two fellow-craftsmen meeting in the agora and discussing, as they would do, not justice and the gods but stichomythia, messenger speeches and 'gods from the machine'; one may think to discern cases in which Sophocles, in his unobtrusive way, is showing that he can handle a technical problem with greater skill than Euripides! His way is unobtrusive, and he is in general as concerned to conceal cleverness as the other to display it. Hence an impression of conservatism. Yet take the two *Electras*. Euripides innovates boldly with his 'married' Electra, his transference of the action to a cottage in the country which necessitated ways of bringing Aegisthus and Clytemnestra within range of murder. But Sophocles, adhering closely to tradition and convention, postpones the recognition and so transforms the drama – a stroke as brilliant and (one presumes) original as the more obvious innovations of Euripides.

To trace developments in thought is more difficult, and here comparisons with Euripides are perhaps less helpful. Sophocles was the older by some fifteen years, but the early plays of both are lost, their extant works belonging, broadly, to the same period. There could have been mutual reaction and an interplay of ideas, a negative – if not a positive – influence. This has often been suspected but is never demonstrable. There were common subjects, common themes, but a different cast of mind. It is not that Euripides lacked roots in traditional thought, but no critic would have written of him what Dodds writes of Sophocles, that he was 'the last great exponent of the archaic world-view'.[2] It is not that Sophocles lacked acquaintance

[1] On chronology see App. G below. The most serious doubts arise over the dating of *Trachiniae* and *Electra*, but the former is likely to be relatively early and the latter relatively late.

[2] Dodds, *GI* 49. On traditional modes of thought in Euripides, see Lloyd-Jones, *JZ* 147ff.

with contemporary thought,[3] but, just as his technical originality is concealed and not paraded, so he is quite unconcerned to appear in the van of intellectual progress. Hence, again, that impression we gain of conservatism which may or may not be illusory but is confirmed by the persistence throughout his work of certain basic notions, themselves highly traditional – the breach between divine and human nature, between divine and human knowledge, between appearance and reality, which is indeed a main source of that irony so pervasive a feature of his theatre.

If comparisons with Euripides are, except in technical matters, rather unhelpful, it may be different with Aeschylus. *Antigone* certainly – and *Ajax* probably – are relatively early plays (though Sophocles had been producing tragedies for more than a quarter of a century before *Antigone*) and in point of time stand closer, though not close, to Aeschylus. Some critics, not without justification, have found Aeschylean modes of thought in *Ajax;* and it could well be, though it may be vain to say so, that, if we possessed the *Hoplon krisis,* we might have a better understanding of the Sophoclean play. It will be argued below that *Antigone,* with the contrasted tragedies of two central figures, is a fundamental document for the relationship of Aeschylean and Sophoclean tragic thought. These being relatively early plays, we might suppose that the influence of Aeschylus thins out or disappears as the career of Sophocles advances. Yet, when we turn to later plays – to *Electra*[4] and to *Oedipus Coloneus,* they will be found to stand in a significant relation to the Oresteian trilogy. Every critic works on assumptions derived from study of his author: I have been led to assume that, from first to last, Sophocles was reacting, one way or another, to the influence of that great predecessor who had shown how the categories and formulations of traditional Greek thought could convey a profound vision of a tragic world.[5]

It is partly for this reason that I have included chapters on Fate and on Furies[6] which deal substantially with the Aeschylean background.

[3] Cf. Long 166f.

[4] The play is certainly later – and could be considerably later – than 420.

[5] Cf. my 'Tragedy and Greek archaic thought' in Anderson (ed.) 31–50. The virtues of this tradition are eloquently presented in the last paragraph of Lloyd-Jones, *JZ.*

[6] In principle it is preferable to use the Greek word Erinyes, and I do so generally and especially when discussing texts where it occurs. Sometimes, however, it has seemed convenient to use the Latinate equivalent for these goddesses of many

For the most part, however, the book consists of detailed studies of the extant plays. Not all these studies are upon the same lines or upon the same scale, but each of them seeks to relate interpretation closely to the text. There is always a certain arrogance in supposing that one's careful study of a text will reveal things which others have missed or from which they have failed to draw the right conclusions. A scholar has, however, no right to inflict his views upon the world, unless he sincerely believes that he has something new to say; and he will be rash to believe this unless his views are firmly based upon the words of his author. Those words are the ultimate evidence. The more careful a writer the poet the better the evidence; and there is reason to suppose that Sophocles was a very careful and controlled writer who did not use words at random, even small words in short speeches, while his long speeches, even where they are most emotional, are dense with thought and carefully structured. For, like the other tragedians, he was working in a formal tradition which demanded the imposition of a shape upon the subject-matter. Thus form too is a criterion: the form of the play, the scene, the ode, the speech, the sentence. Why has the poet shaped this or that element, large or small, in this particular way? Why has he made his personages to say this and not that?

To say or to sing. The lyric features in Sophocles – odes and *kommoi*[7] – have not been neglected by scholars, their close relationship to context has been observed and discussed. It may be, however, that their structural and thematic importance has not always been given its due weight.[8] To take a couple of examples: the Second Stasimon of *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a notorious problem. Why, for instance, is the Chorus made to raise the issue of tyranny? Is Oedipus, or do they think him to be, a 'tyrant' or on the way to become one? And is his destruction related to his 'tyranny'? If so how? And if not what does this signify? The problem has been assailed from many directions, some rather tangential to the main themes of the play. Yet the ode is symmetrically constructed, dove-tailed into the structure, packed with traditional religion and morality. Placed centrally and at

names (cf. *O.C.* 42f.), and, since their nature is discussed at length, there should be no danger of misconstruction.

[7] For convenience I have, like others, used this term to cover all lyric features in which the Chorus is joined by one or more singing actors, though it should properly refer only to laments (cf. Arist. *Poet.* 1452b24).

[8] Lloyd-Jones, *JZ* 115, speaks of 'the too prevalent habit of treating the choral lyrics as an unimportant element in Sophoclean drama'.

a crucial point of the action, it should, if it can be rightly interpreted, have crucial significance for the understanding of Oedipus and his fate. If this ode has always been taken very seriously, the First Stasimon of *Ajax* is often dismissed cursorily as the distressed reaction (which it is) of a chorus in perplexity, given its due as a fine lyric utterance (which it is), but neglected as a clue to the understanding of Ajax and *Ajax*. Yet it brings into relation two themes – of time and of madness – which run throughout the first phase of the play. These odes, and some other lyric features, are closely examined below. (In one or two cases, where such an analysis would hold up the argument, it has been placed in an appendix.) In contrast with the relatively rational, not to say rhetorical, processes of dialogue, the subtleties of the lyric mode and style are elusive; the critic who tries to seize the aesthetics of a phrase or image, to detect overtones and undertones, runs the usual dangers of subjectivity and over-interpretation. These risks are better faced than abandon a vital kind of evidence. The more closely these lyric features are studied, the clearer it becomes that here too the art of Sophocles was under a masterly control.

Aristotle defined a tragedy as the imitation (or representation) of a 'serious' action, and much of the *Poetics* is concerned with situation and plot; in an earlier chapter, he distinguished tragedy from comedy as 'imitating' men 'better' than ordinary.[9] The second way of looking at it could be Platonic, since Plato was much disturbed by the tragic mode of representing heroes: it could even be popular, since what the audience might particularly remember was the great figures upon the stage. We too, when we think of Sophocles, think of imposing figures such as Ajax, Antigone, Oedipus, and Electra; and it is no wonder that some critics have regarded the creation of such figures as his paramount interest. He was, however, writing tragedies and not assembling a portrait-gallery; his figures exist for the purpose of expressing a tragic vision of the world in action. It was the great service of Aristotle to stress the cardinal importance of action

[9] Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b24; 1448a16–18. John Jones, in his justly admired book, *On Aristotle and Greek tragedy*, maintains that the notion of 'tragic hero' has been foisted on to Aristotle by later critics. I should prefer to say that, having inherited such a way of looking at plays, he strove to get away from it – not with entire success, since he keeps returning to a theme which obviously interested and exercised him, namely, the definition of the right sort of *person* to be 'imitated', cf. e.g. 1454b8ff.; 1460b33f.

(*praxis*). There is action, and there is character; the relation between the two – and the whole question of the nature and limitations of characterization in Greek tragedy – have been the matter of lively debate. That Sophocles preserved an even balance between character and action is – or deserves to be – a commonplace of Sophoclean criticism. But what does 'character' in Sophocles mean? What does it amount to? Since much of what follows will be concerned with 'character' in one degree or another, it may be useful to face this question now in a preliminary way.

And perhaps the first thing to be said is this: we do not have to search for 'character' in Sophocles, since his whole theatre is dominated throughout by a concern with states of mind. States of mind are psychological phenomena; a stable and persistent state of mind is a character. In Sophoclean tragedy the vocabulary of mind meets us at every point: *phrenes, phronein, nous, gnome,* and other words. The personages are aware of their states of mind and comment on them;[10] those states are the subject of judgements and controversy. In what do *phronein, eu phronein, sophronein,* consist? *sophrosune* (whatever place we give it in the Sophoclean scheme) is a state of mind and not a course of conduct, though it governs conduct.[11] States of mind have a past: if they determine action in the future, they have themselves been determined in the process of time by heredity, by situation, by experience, by things done and suffered. The work of time is a constant preoccupation of the dramatist. It is from the womb of time that events, often long prophesied, come to birth: no less important is the part played by time in the genesis of mental states. The first half of *Ajax*, from Prologos to suicide, is not only a dramatic exploration of the hero's mind but also an account of how it came to be what is was. The minds of Electra and Philoctetes are shown no less to be moulded by their pasts.

There is a sense, then, in which Sophoclean drama is highly psychological. Psychology has become an emotive word in this connection; and there are good reasons for this in the excesses of earlier critics who assumed that it was a primary purpose of the Greek

[10] Cf. H. Diller, *WS* 69 (1956) 74ff.

[11] Conversely, *hubris* is a mode of behaviour, but arises out of a state of mind. Since the man who is *sophron* will not act hubristically and the man who acts hubristically cannot be *sophron*, *hubris* and *sophrosune* can, with due reserve, be regarded as antithetical.

dramatists to depict character as such and that any failure on their part to provide fully fleshed 'characters' recognizable by the standards of ordinary life was a deficiency which should not be imputed to them until every effort had been made on their behalf. Reactions tend to run to extremes: hence those denials that fifth-century Greeks possessed a concept of the unitary personality at all or, alternatively, that the tragedians cared to preserve even a semblance of consistency in their portrayal of personality.[12] On the whole, the more sensible critics today recognize that there is a core of unity and consistency in the characters of Greek tragedy and that, in this form of drama at any rate, our responses depend upon a feeling that these are human-beings not altogether unlike ourselves whose emotions follow paths which are not beyond our comprehension.[13]

This takes us some way, but not very far. In the case of Aeschylus perhaps we do not go much farther than to say that he has provided that minimal degree of character and motivation which is required in order to account for the action. How far do we go with Sophocles?

[12] Cf. Tycho Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles* (Berlin 1917). For a sympathetic, if critical, account of this work see H. Lloyd-Jones, *CQ* 22 (1972) 214–28. For a representative – and highly intelligent – post-Wilamowitz reaction see Schadewaldt 61ff., esp. 63–9.

[13] Characterization in Greek tragedy might be easier to discuss, if there were any clear understanding of the means by which dramatists cause a character to 'live' upon the stage. Serious and effective drama can be written with characters ranging from mere abstractions to highly complex and 'life-like' individuals. The extent, however, to which the personage is imposed upon the audience seems not to vary directly with the complexity of his characterization. Bringing a character to 'life' may be a trade-secret not divulged, but may have something to do with giving him a characteristic 'tone of voice' (a notion I believe to be derived from Stoll, the Shakespearian scholar). Aeschylus' Clytemnestra is a good example. She is not built up with an accumulation of traits; her characterization is little more than an unfolding of the implications of the first statement made about her in the play: 'the woman's heart of manly counsel' exercising 'mastery'. And yet, when we hear her say: *ἔστιν θάλασσα· τίς δέ νιν κατασβέσει;*, we feel that no one but Clytemnestra could have spoken those words. Clytemnestra is the supreme achievement of Aeschylus in that line, but Eteocles in *Septem* (nine years earlier), simpler in conception, closer to being defined by status (son and king), yet imposes himself in an impressive way from the beginning, so that we accept him as a person, we believe in him during the traffic of the stage.

Characterization in Aeschylus is too big a matter to be dealt with *ἐκ παρέργου*. Cf. P. E. Easterling, 'Presentation of character in Aeschylus', *G&R* 20 (1973) 3–19, and some sensible remarks by K. J. Dover, *JHS* 93 (1973) 69. On characterization in Greek tragedy in general, C. Garton, *JHS* 77 (1957) 247–54, is an outstandingly valuable contribution.

We must wait and see what we find, relying more upon texts than upon dogmas. A recent writer has, however, presented us with a useful way of looking at the problem.[14] Sophocles builds down and he builds up; he builds down from the traditional situation and the mental attitudes which the action implies, and he builds up from observation of human life in such a way as to create credibility and encourage emotional response. The building-down is not, however, just a matter of exhibiting a unitary *ethos* (which has been a popular way of looking at Sophoclean character). Ajax is proud, but virtually all heroes are proud: Ajax has a special degree of pride, the quality and causation of which are essential to the action. Nor is the process of building-up a matter of introducing psychological peculiarities for their own sake.[15] Indeed it is within that large area between 'unitary *ethos*' and psychological niceties that Sophoclean characterization lies. We must take what we find. We should not wave our antennae, delve into our egos, or read ingeniously between the lines: we should, however, read the lines, and read them carefully. We should not be frightened by a dogma into dismissing the natural interpretation of a text.

Nor need we expect the observation of human nature to play the same part in the portrayal of every character or in every kind of play. When towards the end of his career, Sophocles decided to write a play about Philoctetes left alone on a desert island and to introduce the young Neoptolemus as the tool of Odysseus, he faced and met a double challenge. He had, by an effort of sympathetic imagination, to picture the mind of a heroic person in a situation which no normal man encounters; he had to enter into the mind of an adolescent in a situation which, despite the heroic setting, was not too remote from common experience. In both areas he drew upon his knowledge of human nature and human life; in both cases, character and action are inextricably intertwined.

Consideration of Sophoclean drama is bound to be focused to a very considerable extent upon the great personages who dominate his plays, who are human, yet have a stature above that of ordinary men, through whom and through whose destinies he expresses his tragic

[14] Gellie 212f.

[15] Easterling, 'Character in Sophocles', *G&R* 24 (1977) 124, draws a useful distinction between idiosyncrasy and individuality.

thought about men and the gods. For their destinies are in one way or another god-given; and the world of Sophocles is, like that of Aeschylus, inhabited and ordered by gods of power. When, however, we come to ask how the nature and fate of a Sophoclean hero are related to the divine ordering of the world, the interpreters provide us with a variety – even a confusion – of views. As one writer has well put it:[16] 'Answers range from the most pious justification of the ways of God to a radically anti-religious hero-worship.'

Sophocles has been seen by some as the prophet of *sophrosune*,[17] concerned to teach through his plays a lesson in modesty, the recognition of human status, the poverty of human power and knowledge; his heroes suffer in order that this lesson may be taught and learnt, by others if not by them. Now, if one thing is certain, one generalization valid, it is that the Sophoclean hero is not himself *sophron* in any ordinary sense of the word. A man or woman of excess, an extremist, obstinate, inaccessible to argument, he refuses to compromise with the conditions of human life.[18] Be *sophron* and, in a tragedy of Sophocles, you may hope to play Creon in the *Tyrannus* or at best Odysseus in *Ajax;* your place in the chorus is assured; you can be Ismene but not Antigone, Chrysothemis but not Electra, Deianira but only if, at the fatal moment, relaxing your *sophrosune,* you abandon the 'salutary state of mind' that keeps you safe. The greatness of these figures is, surely, bound up with their failure to conform to conventional standards of moderation. In what does their 'heroism' consist, if not in their very extremism and refusal to compromise? In ordinary life we seek, so far as lies in our power, to keep ourselves remote from tragedy, but we also stay remote from greatness, aspiring to the condition of a Creon and not an Oedipus. In Sophocles it often seems as though greatness – at least this kind of greatness – attracts disaster by a kind of natural law which may have little to do with justice as

[16] H. Friis Johansen, in his indispensable survey, 'Sophocles 1939–1959', *Lustrum* 1962/7, 152.

[17] The definition – not to say the translation – of *sophron/sophronein/sophrosune* is notoriously difficult, so wide is the semantic field. They can connote chastity or common sense, be opposed to indiscipline, sheer madness or mere ill-judgement. *Sophrosune* is moderation, self-control, prudence, sanity, good sense, mental balance. The first element in the compound *(σω-)* is often felt: such a state of mind is both sound and salutary. The theme is carefully examined by Helen North in her *Sophrosyne: self-knowledge and self-restraint in Greek literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1966).

[18] Cf. Knox, *HT* passim.

justice is commonly understood. We ask if the gods are just and, if so, what kind of justice they administer.

Tragedy is disquieting. Terrible things happen: they are terrible in themselves, and they happen to people with whom our emotions, though not necessarily without ambivalence, have been engaged by the dramatist. It is natural to seek comfort somewhere.[19] But where, in Sophocles, do we look? We can look to the heroes; and this raises the first of two primary and interrelated issues, which is the nature of heroism and its place in the world. No one can deny their greatness. Do we say, then, that they are supremely admirable, destroyed in a world which does not deserve them? That they show their greatness above all in the moment of defeat? There is no theme, perhaps, in literary criticism which involves a greater temptation towards sentimentality. The heroes are prepared to sacrifice everything, even life, to their principles, to the maintenance of their standards. It is, then, essential to enquire what, precisely, those principles and standards are; and much of the examination which follows is concerned with just that question. Whatever they may be, they lead to tragedy.

There is a second issue: there are the gods. They are powerful and rule us. Justly? Do we say that, despite appearances, they order everything for the best? That they have some kind of good-will towards men from which we can draw comfort? Or was Hyllus right to speak of unfeeling gods?[20] For what principles and standards do *they* stand? Could there be a dreadful kinship between heroes and gods, jointly productive of tragedy?

Finally, there is pity. If Hyllus arraigned the gods as pitiless, he claimed pity – sympathy – from his companions. If the theatre of Sophocles is full of suffering, it is full of pity, but it is not the pity of the gods. There is the pity of those characters who are capable of it; and there is the poet's own pity which is dominant and all-embracing. One is led to ask what the status of pity may be in a tragic world. We will return to these questions when the individual plays have been examined.

[19] Why we derive pleasure from the presentation on the stage of such terrible happenings has never, to my knowledge, been satisfactorily explained, certainly not by Aristotle with his ingenious doctrine of *katharsis*.

[20] *Trach.* 1264ff., on which see pp. 73f. below.