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CHARACTER IN SOPHOCLES

By P.E. EASTERLING

Critics are always reminding us that character-drawing in Greek tragedy was a very different thing from what we meet in the modern theatre, different and (it is implied) perhaps more limited or rudimentary. But this contrast between ancient and modern is too vague to be illuminating: we need to define exactly what kind of difference it is before we can decide whether it is important. In drama meant for live performance it can hardly be a difference of *technique*, since every playwright is limited to two basic means of character-drawing, what his figures say and do and what other people say and do to them and about them. Nor can there be much significance in differences of *convention.* Of course convention counts for something: a dramatist writing for three masked male actors, who must take all the speaking roles in his play, male or female indiscriminately, using a highly formal and declamatory style of acting in a large open-air theatre, will create characters which can be rendered in these circumstances. But there is no reason why the particular conventions of his time should limit his portrayal of character in any serious way: Lady Macbeth, after all, was written to be played by a teenage boy. Surely the differences that really demand attention are those of *attitude*.

Modern audiences, brought up on post-Romantic literature with its overwhelming emphasis on the individual, and conditioned by modern psychological terminology, expect a dramatist to be primarily concerned with the unique aspect of each man's experience, with the solitary focus of consciousness which, as John Jones puts it, is 'secret, inward, interesting'.[1] When they first read a Greek play they are naturally inclined to interpret what the characters say and do as if the ancient dramatist shared their preoccupation with idiosyncratic detail. But closer study soon makes plain that this is an anachronistic prejudice, which can all too easily lead us to irrelevant or absurd conclusions.

The prologue of *Trachiniae* will perhaps illustrate my point. The first forty-eight lines are a careful presentation of Deianira, full of significance for the rest of the play. She begins by recalling her past, how she was courted by the terrifying river god Achelous

who came to her in the guise of bull, snake, and bull-headed man. Heracles appeared and challenged him, and there was a duel; but she could not bear to watch: 'I sat apart terrified lest my beauty should bring me pain one day' (*ἐγὼ γὰρ ἥμην ἐκπεπληγμένη φόβῳ | μή μοι τὸ κάλλος ἄλγος ἐξεύροι ποτέ*, 24–5). Then she describes Heracles' victory and their subsequent life together, or rather apart: Heracles always away from home performing his Labours, herself waiting in lonely anxiety. Here we have a speech of the greatest importance for our understanding of Deianira, establishing her history as the princess who was the object of violent passion and showing how her life as wife of Heracles has brought her nothing but fear, pain, and loneliness. What of the detail at line 25? In a modern writer it would certainly have to be interpreted as a glimpse of an idiosyncrasy: Deianira talking about her own beauty would be revealing her self-absorption, even her narcissism . . . But the tone in Sophocles is so clear that the 'modern' interpretation does not even occur to us, and we take the line quite straightforwardly as an unselfconscious statement of the situation: it is Deianira's rank and beauty that make her a fitting battle prize for the great river god and the great hero. The phrase is picked up in a telling way later, when Deianira sees the captive princess Iole and pities her 'because her beauty has destroyed her life' (*ὅτι | τὸ κάλλος αὐτῆς τὸν βίον διώλεσεν*, 464–5). Deianira does not yet know that, like her, Iole has been fought for by Heracles; for the audience there is irony and pathos in the echo, which links the two women as victims of Love. The idea is further developed in the lyric which follows this scene (497 ff.): the Chorus recall the duel of Achelous and Heracles and the beautiful Deianira sitting apart (*ἁ δ' εὐῶπις ἁβρὰ | τηλαυγεῖ παρ' ὄχθῳ | ἧστο*, 523–5) as an analogy to the case of Iole.

So the apparently rather incidental detail at 24–5 turns out to have an important function, which we are in no danger of failing to recognize; but later in the same prologue there is a passage which it is much easier to misinterpret, Deianira's response to the Nurse's advice. Deianira has ended her long speech with an account of her present anxieties: Heracles is still away, no one knows where, but there is reason to fear that he is in danger. The Nurse suggests sending one of his sons to find news: Hyllus, as the eldest, is the obvious choice, 'if he is concerned for his father's safety' (*εἰ πατρὸς | νέμοι τιν' ὥραν τοῦ καλῶς πράσσειν δοκεῖν*, 56–7). Hyllus opportunely rushes in; Deianira at once acts on the Nurse's advice, paraphrasing her words in a rather striking way: 'She says it is a disgrace that you are not trying to find out where your father is,

as he has been away so long' (*σὲ πατρὸς οὕτω δαρὸν ἐξενωμένου | τὸ μὴ πυθέσθαι ποῦ 'στιν αἰσχύνην φέρειν*, 65–6). The Nurse has in fact said nothing of the kind; why does Deianira rephrase her words like this? Because Sophocles wants to give her a suitably dignified and queenly response (this is also the effect of her preamble at 61–2, 'Son, even the lowly can speak noble words . . .), and it is dramatically important to create a sense of urgency: Hyllus must be stirred to act straight away.

Editors and critics commonly ignore these details, which give a purposeful tone to Deianira's words, and instead make much of the fact that she has failed to take action earlier and even now has to be prompted by the Nurse. Does not this mean that she is irresolute, weak-willed, helpless, timid? But it is easy to see why Sophocles leaves the decision to look for Heracles till now: the play must open at the most critical moment; and the sending of Hyllus must take place within the play, not before the action starts. Hyllus himself gives the reason why nobody has taken steps to look for Heracles before: in the past he was always successful (88–9).[2] When the greatest of Greek heroes is away on an expedition his family expect to wait patiently at home, not to go running after him. Why make the *Nurse* suggest sending Hyllus, though? We may guess that Sophocles chose to do it like this partly because the Nurse would have greater impact in the scene where she reports Deianira's suicide if she had already been introduced to the audience early in the play, partly because she can convey expository information about Hyllus (at 54 ff.) more appropriately than Deianira herself; and in any case it is more interesting for the audience if the action starts with someone else's response to Deianira's account of her anxieties. I suggest that, having decided to use the Nurse for these or whatever other reasons, Sophocles gave Deianira the rather dignified words at 65–6 precisely to avoid an impression of weakness.

Suppose then, that we agree to be wary of our natural preoccupation with idiosyncrasy and to distrust the modern view of what constitutes an 'interesting' character, what is there to be said positively about character portrayal in Greek tragedy, or more particularly, in Sophocles? For the ancients, at any rate, Sophocles was one of the great masters of the art, as a famous passage in the *Life* attests: 'He knows how to arrange the action with such a sense of timing that he creates an entire character out of a mere half-line or a single expression. This is the essential in poetry, to delineate character or feelings' (*οἶδε δὲ καιρὸν συμμετρῆσαι καὶ πράγματα, ὥστ' ἐκ μικροῦ ἡμιστιχίου ἢ λέξεως μιᾶς ὅλον ἠθοποιεῖν πρόσωπον.*

ἔστι δὲ τοῦτο μέγιστον ἐν τῇ ποιητικῇ, δηλοῦν ἦθος ἢ πάθος, 21). And Sophocles himself, according to Plutarch (*De prof. in virt.* 7), described his mature style as 'the best and most expressive of character'.

Perhaps it will be helpful to start by making a distinction between idiosyncrasy and individuality. For it is a striking feature of Sophocles' characters that although we are given so little circumstantial detail about them they are all clearly distinct from one another, and it does not seem to be enough to say that he is just a brilliant depictor of *types*. One might argue that in the *Tyrannus*, for example, Sophocles does indeed make us believe in Oedipus' intense experiences of fear and hope and pain, but that is as far as it goes: Oedipus could be any noble sufferer finding out the truth about himself. But I suspect that most of us when reading or watching the plays are conscious of a significant difference between Oedipus and, say, Ajax or Philoctetes, which goes beyond the basic observation made by G.H. Gellie[3] that 'these people are different because their stories are different'. Of course the stories are important; and in any case all the main and many of the minor characters had a certain pre-existing mythological identity which helped to give them individuality. It is also true that Sophocles deals in dramatic formulas, particularly that of the intransigent hero or heroine whose passionate refusal to compromise is set off by the sympathetic ordinariness of an associate.[4] But he finds ways of making the formulas work differently in different plays, so that Chrysothemis, for instance, is quite distinct from Ismene, though both have the same functional role, and Tecmessa, Deianira, and Jocasta are all sharply individualized.

This impression of individuality derives, I think, from the dramatist's ability to seize on significant detail. Much must depend on the intensity with which he explores the situations he takes from the myths; if he can recreate them in dramatic form with the fullest understanding of what happens to people and what they do and feel in real life, then he will be able to present his readers with the significant details that force them to suspend disbelief and accept his characters as individuals. This demands of us as critics that we use our imagination, as actors do when they are trying to understand a part: in other words, we have to be open to psychological insight in the dramatist's observation.

Consider the notorious scene early in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where Tiresias tells Oedipus the whole truth about himself; but Oedipus responds only to the accusation that he is Laius' murderer (apart

from giving just a fleeting hint of uncertainty at 437 and 439, when he tests the seer about his parentage). How do we explain this failure to react to the rest of Tiresias' denunciation, particularly his speech at 447 ff.? 'Fortunately', says Tycho von Wilamowitz,[5] 'it cannot be explained in terms of Oedipus' psychology, because the Chorus reacts in the same way and can talk . . . only about the murder of Laius. . . . The poet's intention is a far cry from all psychological refinements, and the effect of this scene, which is still powerfully felt, does not depend on the presentation of so-called characters.' The dramatic power, he goes on, is in the contrast between the knowing seer and the unsuspecting Oedipus, with Oedipus forcing the full revelation of his guilt out of Tiresias. The characters understand only what is necessary for the action and do not hear the rest. Can one doubt that Sophocles knew he was being implausible?

The essential point left out of this analysis is Sophocles' insight. Tiresias accuses Oedipus of killing a man he *knows* he has never met, a king what is more, whom he could hardly expect to meet and kill without realizing it in some casual skirmish.[6] Oedipus knows, therefore, that the accusation is false; but false as it must be it comes as a shattering challenge to his sense of his identity, and there is nothing at all surprising in the fact that he is unable to take in the rest of the seer's words, which suggest even more outrageous and unthinkable guilt. No wonder, either, that the Chorus are unable to grasp their significance. Thus, although the scene may indeed have little directly to do with character-portrayal, it does deepen our sense of the reality of Oedipus' experiences.

This impression of depth, of a solid individual consciousness behind the words, is often conveyed by the ambiguity with which Sophocles treats people or episodes. Take Antigone. A great many details of her motivation are left inexplicit, but from what we are given most of us have a full and vivid picture of that role and know how we would want it acted. But we should not all agree—and I think this is quite an important point. It seems to be true of most great roles that they offer scope for varying interpretation (I mean of course something more serious than mere producer's gimmicks, like putting on Hamlet in a space-suit). When Antigone rejects Ismene's claim to share the guilt of burying Polynices (536 ff.), how do we interpret her motives? No doubt it is too sentimental to say that she is using these cruel words as an attempt to shield Ismene; some of her retorts recall the harsh way she spoke to her sister in the prologue, when there was no

third party present (one thinks particularly of 69–70: 'I won't ask you again, I won't accept your help if you change your mind'). On the other hand, it would be too trivial to narrow down Antigone's reaction to simple petulance or doctrinaire martyrhood: is it not a more whole-hearted sentiment than that? Certainly the picture is complicated by Ismene's reiterated claim that life without Antigone is not worth living (548, 566) and by her remark at 570 about the love of Antigone and Haemon. Critics will go on disagreeing; but at least Sophocles has given us something real in this ambiguous little scene.

What I am trying to suggest is that a dramatist with a delicate sense of the complexity of experience will often give his characters words and actions which are susceptible of varying shades of interpretation, for in so doing he will be imitating life. Behaviour that can be variously explained has great dramatic potential; what bores us is either motiveless, totally inconsequential behaviour which we cannot relate to our observation of life, or its opposite, the over-simple, too predictable behaviour we meet in soap-opera. We welcome an intimation by the dramatist that 'character' is not a static thing detachable from people's words and actions, but a dynamic phenomenon not ultimately to be separated from what they say and do. Sophocles' extant plays abound in examples of this kind of ambiguity: the Deception Speech in *Ajax* (646 ff.); Clytemnestra's reaction to the false news of Orestes' death in *Electra* (766 ff.); Odysseus' threat to Philoctetes that he is to be left behind on Lemnos: 'We're leaving you here, we don't need you now we have the bow. There are plenty of expert archers at Troy . . . χαῖρε τὴν Λῆμνον πατῶν' (1054 ff.). This can be seen as a bluff designed to force Philoctetes off the island, or as a genuine threat: readers react differently, but the important point is that Sophocles creates a situation—as in life—in which both interpretations are plausible, and he thereby gives a certain depth to his portrait of Odysseus.

One of the finest examples of Sophocles' sustained use of ambiguity comes in this same play. When Neoptolemus is carrying out the plan to trick Philoctetes, almost everything he says can be interpreted in two ways, either as direct deceit or as an indication of his growing reluctance to take part in the trickery at all. So at 431 ff., where he is talking of the Greek heroes at Troy, we know he has been instructed by Odysseus to tell whatever slanderous stories he likes about him as part of the deception (ἔσχατ' ἐσχάτων κακά, 65), and this makes it hard to know how to take his denigration of Odysseus. He could just be leading Philoctetes on when he

agrees with him that Odysseus is one of the wicked who survive, by contrast with the good, like Ajax and Antilochus, who die (426 ff.); but the audience knows that he was reluctant to use deceit in the first place, that he is after all the son of Achilles; and this scene shows him and Philoctetes forming a bond based on shared heroic attitudes. So at 431, for example, when he slightingly calls Odysseus a 'clever wrestler' (σοφὸς παλαιστής) and adds that even clever schemes are often thwarted, or at 441, when he again insults him, we cannot help wondering whether this hostility is not seriously meant. Certainly the pitiful appearance and dignified behaviour of Philoctetes affect the audience's feelings: one is bound to wonder, as one watches the scene, how far they are affecting Neoptolemus' feelings too. How long will he be able to sustain the deception?

The stage action itself is often used to contribute to the depth of the situation the dramatist is exploring. I argue elsewhere[7] that the breaking point for Neoptolemus comes when he supports Philoctetes physically, raising him to his feet after his attack of the disease (893 ff.). Sophocles puts the visual action to equally powerful use in *Electra*, when Orestes tries to make Electra set down the urn so that he can convince her that her brother is not dead after all but alive and standing beside her (1205 ff.). In the *Coloneus* there are two great moments when the stage action greatly deepens our sense of Oedipus' consciousness. The first comes at 1130 at the end of his speech of gratitude to Theseus for rescuing Antigone and Ismene from Creon. Oedipus is over joyed; he wants to take Theseus' hand and embrace him—but then he suddenly holds back. 'What am I saying?' His sense of his own pollution prevents him from touching Theseus or allowing Theseus to touch him; and yet one of the most insistent themes in this play has been Oedipus' passionate assertion of his innocence (e.g. 266 ff., 966 ff.). This instinctive feeling of pollution is a touch of great psychological nicety; it is worth considering the possibility that the whole sequence—Creon's kidnapping of Antigone and Ismene, and their rescue by Theseus—is designed to lead up to this dramatic moment. The second example is the famous climax at 1540 ff. when the blind Oedipus leads the way off stage, in striking contrast with his helplessness shown all through the play so far, and particularly in the prologue, where he has to be led step by step.[8]

I have said little so far about language, though this is surely one of the most important means of creating an impression of depth: if a character talks with the power of the Deception Speech in

Ajax or Electra's opening anapaests (86 ff.) or her lament over the urn (1126 ff.) we are forced to recognize the reality of the person portrayed. I am not of course suggesting that Sophocles consistently gives each character a style of his own. There are habits of style that any character will use in certain circumstances—in an *agon,* or a narrative, or stichomythia—in response to what Miss Dale[9] called 'the rhetoric of the situation', which reminds us of the dangers of over-interpretation I mentioned at the beginning. However, one can detect some degree of characterization by style, for example in contrasts between noble and lower characters: in *Trachiniae* the differences between Deianira, the rather grand herald Lichas, and the crude old man who comes as messenger, show that it can be a fairly complex matter too. But beyond this use of style to differentiate there is a more pervasive use of language, inextricable from the poet's development of a play's themes and structure, which deepens our awareness of the particular individual at the centre of the action. This is one reason why I think we can go further than Gellie in his claim that 'the people are different because their stories are different'. What I want to suggest is that Sophocles' conception of his central character or characters influences his choice of words and images in a quite fundamental way.

Philoctetes is a clear-cut example, though each of the plays illustrates the same technique. Not only is Philoctetes given a series of magnificent speeches, full of subtle detail; he is also the focus of almost everything in the lyrics, and the play's leading images are all associated with him: the desert island with its lonely rocks and its wild beasts, the wound, the bow, the dead man. The theme of his loneliness is explored in terms both of being cut off from civilization (as in the lyric at 676 ff.: he has no neighbours, no one to heal him, no crops, no wine) and of having only the wild creatures and the rocks of Lemnos for companions—and the birds and beasts that are his prey will prey on him in turn if he is abandoned without the bow. All this, which is both literal and symbolic, creates a highly individual impression of Philoctetes, which distinguishes him sharply from other great sufferers in Sophocles. Of course he is cast in the same mould as Electra and Oedipus, but the poetry which defines him is uniquely his.

Finally, can we agree with the ancient *Life* that Sophocles captures a character in a 'half-line or single expression'? If one can allow a whole verse there is Antigone's famous 'It is my nature to join not in hating but in loving' (οὔτοι συνέχθειν, ἀλλὰ

συμφιλεῖν ἔφυν, 523); or there is Philoctetes' brief and ordinary-seeming question at 923–4: 'Stranger, what have you done to me?' (τί μ' ὦ ξένε | δέδρακας;). This depends for its powerful impact on the cumulative effect of all Philoctetes' generous and trusting words to Neoptolemus up to this point. All through the play he has called him 'my child', 'my son' (ὦ τέκνον, ὦ παῖ), but the moment when he realizes that Neoptolemus has been deceiving him and his trust evaporates is precisely defined with ὦ ξένε.

I have perhaps been implying in these notes that in the matter of characterization the differences between Sophocles and modern dramatists are ultimately unimportant, that there is nothing in modern drama that does not have its counterpart in his plays. In a qualitative sense I believe this to be true: his insight into human behaviour and his gift for expressing it in dramatic form remain unsurpassed; but it would be absurd to argue that he covers all the same ground as his modern successors. There are times, if we are honest, when we are made uneasy by the extremely public nature of his characters, as indeed by that of all characters in Greek tragedy. This is no doubt because the Greeks were interested in individuals as part of a community much more than in the individual's unique private experience, a difference of attitude which is sometimes hard for us to share or appreciate. For example, in Sophocles the loneliness and isolation of the suffering hero is a major tragic theme, but his heroes are quite unlike outsiders in the modern sense, men and women who can only define themselves meaningfully in terms that cut them off from society for good. There are many things that his characters simply do not talk about and that he and his contemporaries presumably never thought about. But that is a historical matter, something to be discussed in a quite different sort of paper.

NOTES

1. *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London, 1962), p. 33.
2. Reading εἶα at 88 with Vauvilliers. There is no justification for bracketing these two lines as in the O.C.T.
3. *Sophocles: A Reading* (Melbourne, 1972), p. 209.
4. See in particular B.M.W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1964), chs. 1 and 2.
5. *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles* (Berlin, 1917, repr. 1969), p. 78.
6. Sophocles later explains Oedipus' failure to recognize Laius as a king by emphasizing that Laius was on a visit to the oracle, with only a modest retinue (750 ff.).
7. *Illinois Classical Studies* 3 (1978), forthcoming.
8. Jebb has a sensitive note on this passage.
9. Euripides, *Alcestis* (London, 1954), p. xxvii.