In pointing out the distorting presuppositions of others, I do not pretend that I am free of them myself. My account of Agamemnon is admittedly that of an ἰδιώτης who is incorrigibly insubordinate towards ἄρχοντες. I hope to have illustrated, none the less, how characterization in Homer is not a self-sufficient element which can be extracted by itself. It is indivisible from critical interpretation in all its aspects.

# 4

# Constructing Character in Greek Tragedy

P. E. EASTERLING

A dream of a shadow is man.

Critics of ancient drama are still keenly engaged in a long-running debate about character, despite a readiness on everyone's part nowadays to acknowledge significant differences between play-worlds and ordinary social reality. No one any longer asks the equivalent, in relation to Greek tragedy, of the question 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?', naïvely supposing that the stage figures can be studied as if they were beings with a continuing off-stage existence. And most critics are much more willing to recognize that the old certainties about character and personality can no longer be taken for granted. But there is still plenty of room for disagreement, and in this chapter I try to suggest why this should be so, without pretending to wish away, let alone resolve, the difficulties that arise.

A couple of contrasting examples will provide a starting-point. In 1973 Brian Vickers wrote:

> Tragedy is about people, and what they do to each other ... The plays translate the clash of will and motive into forms, which although obeying complex literary conventions, still represent human actions, and convey them with intensity, if we are prepared to accept the conventions. Since they deal with fundamental behaviour they have an immediacy which can affect us as powerfully as any other works of literature. To appreciate it we need only to be able to think and feel.[1]

More recently, Simon Goldhill, defending his use of Barthes's distinction between a *figure* in a text and a *person* with 'a future, a consciousness, a soul', sums up his position as one which recognizes *both* 'the necessity of a (not *the*) concept of character

[1] *Towards Greek Tragedy* (London, 1973), 3.

in literary texts' *and* the fact 'that literary characters cannot be treated simply as individual, real, psychologically endowed people'.[2] Paradoxically enough, these two critics have something in common: both start from the premiss that we know what 'people' are (though to be fair to Goldhill, he draws attention to the fact that the self is differently perceived and constituted at different periods, and he insists on the difficulty of defining such notions as 'personality', 'identity', and 'individuality').

The underlying assumption of these, as of most contributions to the debate,[3] is that 'real people' and the 'real world', as opposed to stage-figures in the world of make-believe, are relatively stable and definable and can serve as some sort of yardstick (for comparison or contrast) when we come to think about theatrical creations. And of course in day-to-day living we have to behave and speak and be treated by others as if everyone knew what constitutes a person in the real world. But as soon as we look critically at these everyday assumptions we find them challenged on all sides: philosophers have long wrestled with the difficulty of defining what a person is;[4] psychologists offer different models of the self which are just as radically problematic;[5] sociologists and anthropologists looking at the interactions of human social life find the notion of 'reality' intimately bound up with that of role-playing.[6] Erving Goffman puts the matter neatly in relation to the theatrical analogy: 'All the world is not of course a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify.'[7] Keir Elam adds the reminder that even our understanding of language is dependent on the dramatic model: he quotes John Lyons's remark that 'the use of [the term 'person'] by grammarians derives from their metaphorical conceptions of the language-event as a drama in which the principal is played by the first person, the role subsidiary to his by the second person, and all other roles by the third person'.[8] One might compare R. D. Laing's comment that the vocabulary of psychology is deeply implicated with theatrical terminology: illusion/delusion/collusion/elusion.[9]

[2] 'Goldhill on Molehills', *LCM* 11/10 (1986), 163. On 'figures', cf. M. Pfister, *Das Drama* (München, 1977), 221.

[3] My own included: 'Presentation of Character in Aeschylus', *G & R* 20 (1973), 3–18; 'Character in Sophocles', *G & R* 24 (1977), 121–9.

[4] See e.g. B. A. O. Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge, 1973); A. Rorty (ed.), *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley, 1976); M. Carrithers, S. Collins, and S. Lukes (edd.), *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History* (Cambirdge, 1985).

[5] See e.g. R. D. Laing, *Self and Others* (2nd edn., London, 1969; Harmondsworth, 1971), esp. 33–43, 81–2; J. Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, trans. A. Wilden (Baltimore, 1968); T. Mischel (ed.), *The Self* (Oxford, 1977); R. Harré, *Personal Being* (Oxford, 1983).

[6] See E. Burns, *Theatricality* (London, 1972), 122–43; E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), esp. 496–576.

[7] *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth, 1969), 78.



Once we are willing to give more weight to the idea that our working assumptions about 'reality' and 'real people' are in fact quite provisional, we may be able to learn something relevant to the drama—Greek drama included—from sociology and its study of the mechanisms of social interaction. Goffman's book *Frame Analysis* is particularly helpful in this respect. The essential question it addresses is 'What is it that is going on here?', a rephrasing of William James's 'Under what circumstances do we think things real?'[10] This question must always relate to the perspective of those involved; Goffman uses the terms 'strip' and 'frame' to distinguish between 'any arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of ongoing activity' on the one hand and a 'definition of a situation . . . built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events' on the other, in each case as seen from the point of view of the participant (10). Such definitions of a situation are made in terms of what he calls the primary frameworks by which a particular society organizes its understanding (e.g. in the distinctions it makes between natural and social events—say, a thunderstorm as opposed to a fight), and also in terms of secondary frameworks, which fall into two main groups. He borrows from music the term 'key' for the first of these, which he describes as the 'set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to

[8] K. Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London, 1980), 133–4. Cf. R. Barthes, 'Structural Analysis of Narratives', in id., *Image, Music, Text*, trans. S. Heath (London, 1977), 104–14.

[9] *Self and Others*, 108.

[10] From 'The Perception of Reality', first published in *Mind*, July 1869, = *The Principles of Psychology*, ii (London 1890), 283–324, at 287.

be something quite else' (43–4). Thus a fight can be staged, imagined in fantasy, described in retrospect, analysed, ritually mimicked; and there is a functional likeness in the keying involved in many different kinds of activity. In, for example, make-believe in its various guises—contests and games, ceremonials, rehearsals, discussions, group psychotherapy, and psychological experiments—the key is what determines 'what it is we think is really going on' (45). The other main type of transformation is the fabrication, 'the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on' (83). Both are of interest to the student of the drama.

As the detail of Goffman's argument, particularly in his chapters on 'The Theatrical Frame' and 'The Frame Analysis of Talk', makes clear, the connection between on-stage and off-stage reality is intricate. Not only do we have to bear in mind the fact that the characters and onlookers of the drama are at the same time flesh-and-blood actors and theatre-goers, we also have to be aware of the extremely complex interplay between dramatic roles and roles in unscripted life; and of the peculiarities of 'the onlooking aspect of the audience activity', which is 'not something that is a staged and simulated replica of a real thing, as is the action on-stage. The off-stage version of onlooking is not a model for the theatrical kind; if anything the reverse is true. Onlooking belongs from the start to the theatrical frame' (130).[11] Elizabeth Burns makes a similar point:

> In relation to the theatre, reality and illusion are shifting terms. They do not denote opposites. Everything that happens on the stage can be called real, because it can be seen and heard to happen. It is perceived by the senses and is therefore as real as anything that happens outside the theatre. On the other hand there is an agreement between all those who take part in the performance, either as actors or [as] spectators, that the two kinds of real event inside and outside the theatre are not causally connected.[12]

This agreement, or 'collaboration' (Goffman, 135–6), is established by means of sets of conventions, which differ from

[11] Cf. Elam, *Semiotics*, 88, who distinguishes between 'dramatic' and 'theatrical' levels of reality.

[12] *Theatricality*, 15.



one tradition to another and from one medium to another (stage, radio, film) but are remarkably similar in their functions. The distinctive features of the Greek tradition, particularly the use of the mask, have perhaps been too much emphasized, under the powerful influence of John Jones:[13] it seems that in *all* cases the job of conventions, whether masks or stylized language or spatial or temporal brackets (stage line, marked-out acting area, curtains, etc.) is, as Goffman puts it, to 'mark the *difference* between actual face-to-face interaction and that kind of interaction when staged as part of a play' (138).[14] It is a difference which enables us to remain aware that 'Oedipus' has not in fact just blinded himself, and that 'Medea' is not about to kill flesh-and-blood children, a difference that makes simultaneously possible deep engrossment in the fictive world represented in the drama and detached critical appraisal of the kind necessary for awarding prizes to the best actor or for the best play.[15] The particularly interesting point emphasized by Goffman (186) is that the techniques used by the audience in 'following along' and 'reading off' what is happening by attending to the relevant framing cues are the *same techniques* as they use in relation to other, off-stage, events which they experience as onlookers.[16] For the theatrical frame, though distinctive, is not unique: there are many respects in which it resembles other frames, and the mechanisms used for interpreting it are not fundamentally different from those by which other sorts of 'keying' or 'fabrication' are identified: rituals, for example, or games, or practical jokes.

If it is true, for the reasons sketched out above, that the world of the drama is felt by the audience to be 'a lie that is not a lie',[17] that we perceive its essential difference while 'reading it

[13] J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London, 1962).

[14] Burns, *Theatricality*, distinguishes between these 'rhetorical' conventions, 'the means by which the audience is persuaded to accept characters and situations whose validity is ephemeral and bound to the theatre' (31) and what she calls 'authenticating' conventions, which '"model" social conventions in use at a specific time and in a specific place or milieu' and suggest 'a total and external code of values and norms of conduct from which the speech and action of the play are drawn' (32).

[15] Cf. Elam, Semiotics, 108.

[16] Cf. Burns, *Theatricality*, 17; Elam, *Semiotics*, 77, 103–5, 173.

[17] Mario Vargas Llosa, interviewed in the *Guardian*, 21 Feb. 1987. This recalls Gorgias' paradox about the 'deception' (ἀπάτη) of tragedy, in respect of which 'the deceiver is juster than the non-deceiver and the deceived wiser than the non-deceived' (23 D-K).

off' *as if* it were real, then there are important implications for the discussion of character.

First, this approach encourages us to attend to the *dynamics of action and interaction* rather than look for static 'character portraits' with the notion of a unitary character as our starting-point. In constructing for ourselves—with or without the help of a particular staged performance—the meaning to be attributed to the behaviour of the stage figures, we are engaged in an activity which is *both* familiar from everyday social interaction *and* entirely inconclusive: familiar because we use the same techniques to interpret other frames, and inconclusive because there is always the awareness that it is a 'counterfactual construct' which, as Elam puts it, 'the spectator allows the *dramatis personae*, through the actors, to designate as the "here and now" '.[18] There is never any way of checking our constructions against some absolute 'truth', and there is no limit to the number and variety of constructions to be made—by the different actors who play a particular part, by different members of a given audience, and by all the readers and spectators of different periods and cultures, with their different conceptions of the self, who attempt to engage with the work as a whole.[19]

This leads to a second point. In practice, of course, the process of engagement and interpretation—the making of the construction—may be obstructed in all kinds of ways. Unfamiliar conventions of style, language, and theatrical presentation may leave an audience baffled, and again, the world evoked by the play—the social structure, values, and attitudes implied by the characters' behaviour—may seem too remote and alien to be 'construed'. But conventions, like grammars and codes, can be learned,[20] and at least some sort of shift can be made to apprehend the thought patterns of different cultures.[21] There is no need to fall back on a monolithic view of 'unchanging

[18] *Semiotics*, 114.

[19] Cf. ibid. 95: 'Every spectator's interpretation of the text is in effect a new *construction* of it according to the cultural and ideological disposition of the subject.' Cf. also ibid. 170.

[20] Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 244, notes 'the great capacity of audiences to adjust and calibrate in order to get on with getting involved'.

[21] For recent attempts in the case of Greek tragedy, see e.g. C. P. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); S. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1986).



human nature' in the style of Vickers (or my own earlier articles) in order to explain how it is that texts composed long ago or in a completely different cultural context can be (relatively) accessible: it is plain enough that human nature does change, just as models of personality change, and notions of what it is appropriate and natural for human beings to do (shifting gender distinctions are a good example from our own time). But provided that we can rely on the continuing existence of mechanisms for 'reading off' the actions of others, whether on or off stage, we have at least some hope of being able to *approach* 'what it is that is going on' in drama like that of ancient Greece. Elam makes a similar point:

> It is only because our notion of the world and its individuals and properties is founded on a certain epistemological (and thus ideological) order—rather than on absolute and fixed universal laws—that it is possible to have access to other conceptual organizations or worlds. The individual, for example, is not a simple given but a cultural construct: the essential properties ascribed to 'man' are subject to radical changes from culture to culture and from period to period, as, indeed, are the worlds defined as real and possible.[22]

Thirdly, there is the curious paradox to be borne in mind that despite, or even because of, their fictive status, the figures of drama are often felt to be in some way 'more real' than flesh-and-blood persons met in everyday life. This impression has nothing, of course, to do with naturalism: a play about supernatural or emblematic beings enacted by puppets or robots can be just as 'real' as any other kind.[23] What is important is that drama is much more intensely concentrated and meaningfully shaped, 'purer' than ordinary unscripted experience, so that everything the stage figures do and say, and everything said about them, has to be taken as significant, even their names.[24] To quote Susanne Langer: 'We do not have to find what is significant: the selection has been made—whatever is there is significant, and it is not too much to be surveyed *in toto*.'[25] At

[22] *Semiotics*, 108.

[23] Cf. ibid. 107.

[24] On names, cf. Pfister, *Das Drama*, 221–2.

[25] Quoted by Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 144. Cf. I. Dilman, 'Dostoyevsky: Psychology and the Novelist', in A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.), *Philosophy and Literature* (Cambridge, 1984), 113–14; Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 89; Elam, *Semiotics*, 12: 'things serve only to the extent that they mean'.

the same time, because they are counterfactual these intensely engrossing figures are not personally threatening to the spectator, who can observe them as a privileged onlooker and is not required to make an interactive response.[26]

Here, perhaps, is one factor that helps to explain the endless fascination of drama (and indeed of all forms of make-believe, including psychotherapy). The figures who people it, thanks to their special status, have the power to perform a wide-ranging *service* for their audiences.[27] Protected by their very fictiveness, they can cause the spectators to confront the complexities of emotional experience and to face the problems created by external necessity, whether natural or man-made: old age, disease, death, war, economic circumstances, political and familial conflicts, the boundaries of male and female, public and private, sacred and profane. We might call this the dialectical power of drama, if we can include under that heading the capacity to disrupt as well as to explore (the Greeks might also have said to console). The actor/director Bruce Myers put the matter succinctly: 'Who you are and what is the right way to behave: these are the great questions of theatre.'[28] In practice these are hard questions to keep separate, and 'Who you are' of course raises both ontological issues ('What is a man, what is he not? A dream of a shadow . . .') and questions of identity ('Who is Oedipus?'). What is important is that these are all real questions—one more reason for abandoning the idea of drawing a neat dividing line between drama and 'real life'.

The next step is to take a particular Greek play and look at some specimen passages, to see if this general approach is helpful when we confront the detail of a text. But first we should ask how well this way of looking at character accords with the trend of recent critical work on the tragedians. Interestingly, despite wide divergences of emphasis, there is a general readiness these days to recognize that the business of defining character and personality, let alone the self, is problematic, and that there is no single perspective on tragic action that we can safely take for granted. Christopher Gill has argued that two major

[26] Cf. Dilman, 'Dostoyevsky', 108: 'The safety we find in the make-believe character of art enables us to see through, if only for a moment, the make-believe of real life.'

[27] Cf. Burns, *Theatricality*, 34–5; Elam, *Semiotics*, 134.

[28] Interviewed in the *Guardian*, 16 July 1986.



perspectives coexist in tragic texts, the 'character-viewpoint', which invites us to evaluate moral action, and the 'personality-viewpoint', which offers us 'psychologically strange but compelling phenomena that we cannot disregard as unimaginable or dismiss with simple condemnation'.[29] Charles Segal has made use of psychoanalytical studies to trace a relation between dramatic performance and the unconscious of the spectators, with the stage itself functioning as a kind of dream world, a privileged space in which we can 'evade the censor' and see 'our most buried fears and fantasies' acted out.[30] And both he and Simon Goldhill in their different ways have explored the vocabulary of the mind in Greek tragedy, Segal with the emphasis on the 'complex inner life of motives, desires, and fears' which he finds everywhere implicit,[31] Goldhill drawing attention to conflicting viewpoints, shifting perceptions, and differing attitudes 'towards other people, other ideas'.[32] Adrian Poole strikes a comparable note: 'Tragedy teaches us that the objects of our contemplation—ourselves, each other, our world—are more diverse than we had imagined, and that what we have in common is a dangerous propensity for overrating our power to comprehend this diversity.'[33]

The importance of setting the presentation of character in this broader, more 'philosophical' context is strongly brought out in John Gould's influential article 'Dramatic Character and "Human Intelligibility" in Greek Tragedy'.[34] Taking his cue from D. A. Traversi's work on Shakespeare,[35] he suggests that the dramatic persons are to be seen 'not as human agents

[29] 'The Question of Character-Development: Plutarch and Tacitus', *CQ*, NS 33 (1983), 469–87; 'The Question of Character and Personality in Greek Tragedy', *Poetics Today*, 7/2 (1986), 251–73; cf. his discussion in Ch. 1 above. The quotation is from *Poetics Today*, 266. As Gill points out, the ancient critics strongly preferred a character-viewpoint in their discussion of tragedy; cf. S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London, 1986), 150–65; C. Gill, 'The *Ethos/Pathos* Distinction in Rhetorical and Literary Criticism', *CQ*, NS 34 (1984), 149–66.

[30] *Interpreting Greek Tragedy* (Ithaca, NY, 1986), 295. For bibliography on psychoanalytic criticism, see 'Pentheus and Hippolytus on the Couch and on the Grid', in the same book (268–93); R. S. Caldwell, 'Selected Bibliography on Psychoanalysis and Classical Studies', *Arethusa*, 7 (1974), 115–34.

[31] *Interpreting Greek Tragedy*, 99.

[32] *Reading Greek Tragedy*, 179–80. See esp. chs. 4 and 7.

[33] *Tragedy: Shakespeare and the Greek Example* (Oxford, 1987), 1.

[34] *PCPS*, NS 24 (1978), 43–67.

[35] *An Approach to Shakespeare* (2nd edn., London, 1957).

in isolation ... but, through their language, as parts of a "world" of metaphor which transcribes and reshapes our experience in a new mould'. He continues:

> I take the paradigmatic force of *Agamemnon* to consist, not of a number of human figures behaving in ways in which, from my experience of myself or of others, I can imagine human figures separately behaving, but in the total image of human existence that the play presents. The play as a whole, that is, is the 'meaning' that is to be humanly intelligible, the play as a whole being an image, a metaphor of the way things are, within human experience—not a literal enactment of 'the way people behave'.[36]

This is a valuable reminder, and all I should want to add is the gloss that 'the way things are' may be something approachable *only* by means of metaphor. Its very elusiveness is what makes the different images representing it so interesting; perhaps 'the way things might be' or 'could have been' would be a more precise formulation.

In other respects Gould's article stands a little apart from recent work. The main thrust of his argument is his claim that the formal aspects of Greek tragedy mark it off as distinctively different from later drama, which is preoccupied, by contrast, with 'the workings of a complex inner personality'.[37] In stressing the stylization associated with the use of masks and special costume, with the presence of the chorus, and with the non-naturalistic form of the texts themselves he seems to give too much weight to one particular set of conventions. This leads him to the rather surprising conclusion that 'it is the function of the existence and use of ... such different forms as rhesis, stichomythia, aria and *amoibaion* that in a marked degree both the action and the stage figures should be seen and felt by us, the audience, as fragmented and discontinuous'.[38] But then his argument shifts to a contrast between Sophocles and Euripides in their use of these formal modes, showing (to very telling effect) how the differences between Sophocles' more fluid and Euripides' more sharply articulated forms affect our reading of the figures in the plays. This is entirely convincing, yet it seems

[36] 'Dramatic Character', 61–2; cf. 48.
[37] Ibid. 45.
[38] Ibid. 50.



to militate against the general claim quoted above, that the use of the different formal features *in itself* conveys an impression of 'fragmentation and discontinuity'. And in any case, if it is right to see reality itself as elusive, a different approach to the formal modes may be more fruitful. Perhaps they could be 'seen and felt by us, the audience' as suggesting different perspectives from which a problematic situation might be explored, and thus as potentially offering a more suggestive model of reality than a more homogeneous level of discourse might evoke. Certainly in the *Antigone*, which I have chosen as my sample for discussion, the interplay between the lyric exchanges of actors and chorus (806–82; 1261–1347) and the scenes of iambic dialogue can be seen as an integrating force, giving further depth and complexity to the situation created by Creon and Antigone.[39]

It is time to look closely at a particular text. Notoriously, *Antigone* is a play that invites judgement of its stage figures: a great deal of the critical literature in fact reflects the way it encourages its readers to take sides. Perhaps, though, we should hesitate to go as far as Gill, who writes that 'the protagonists stand before us as "characters", as responsible, choosing agents who luminously explicate their motives for action and invite evaluation on these grounds'.[40] The 'definition of the situation' given respectively by Antigone, Ismene, Creon, and Haemon has to be set against the impression they 'give off' of their motives and feelings, and both are to be interpreted as part of the larger pattern suggested by the play as a whole—for example, in its meditation on the history of the house of Labdacus, with *atē* hovering over the play as Polyneices the raven-ing eagle hovers over Thebes in the *parodos*; in the language of Eros and Dionysus and Hades and the bridal chamber of the Bride of Death; in the mythological analogies of Niobe, Danae, Lycurgus, and Cleopatra; in the mysterious phenomena of the dust storm and the corrupted sacrificial offerings; and in the imagery of wild nature and man's unceasing attempts to control it.

If I now concentrate attention mainly on the issue of motives,

[39] Cf. P. E. Easterling, 'The Second Stasimon of *Antigone*', in R. D. Dawe *et al.* (edd.), *Dionysiaca* (Cambridge, 1978), 155, on the relationship between the choral odes and the iambic dialogue.
[40] 'The Question of Character and Personality', 269.

it is not because I want to suggest that this should be the limit of our enquiry, but in order to illustrate the way the text invites us to be actively involved in making constructions.

First there is the scene in which Ismene, challenged by Creon, claims to have shared with Antigone in the burial of Polyneices. The important structural point to note is that the scene is a replay for Creon's benefit of something the audience has itself witnessed. In the Prologue Antigone tells Ismene about Creon's decree, making it clear that she will not hesitate to disobey in order to do what she sees as the right thing by Polyneices: she will be 'a holy criminal' (*ὅσια πανουργήσασ[α]*, 74). Ismene is at first bewildered, and then rejects Antigone's plan as dangerous folly, Her language is strong: 'poor wretch' (*ὦ ταλαῖφρον*, 39) she calls Antigone, and 'too bold' (*σχετλία*, 47). 'There is no sense in going to extremes' (*τὸ γὰρ | περισσὰ πράσσειν οὐκ ἔχει νοῦν οὐδένα*, 67–8). Antigone is in love with the impossible (*ἀμηχάνων ἐρᾷς*, 90), and 'senseless' (*ἄνους*, 99). Why? Because the burial is forbidden by the powers that be: Ismene equates the will of the city (44) with Creon (47), with law and the 'vote'—or 'decree' (*ψῆφον*)—'and powers of the rulers' (59–60), with 'those who are stronger' (63), with the citizens (78–9). She does not dispute the rightness of burying Polyneices; she simply regards it as bound to fail, because she and Antigone are women, and those in control have greater power. She evokes the shadow of the family's troubles, seeing what could happen to Antigone and herself as the worst in the whole horrible sequence. But although Antigone can't win, Ismene will try to protect her by keeping her plan secret: she values what Antigone is trying to do. 'Senseless as you are, you are truly dear to those who love you' (*ἄνους μὲν ἔρχει, τοῖς φίλοις δ' ὀρθῶς φίλη*, 99).

Now we have Ismene summoned by Creon to answer the charge of conspiracy with Antigone (489–90). Creon says he has seen her indoors, 'raving and not in control of her wits (*φρένες*)', which to him proves her guilty conscience (491–4). We may want to construct a different explanation for her anguished state (e.g. despair at the news that Antigone has been apprehended) and be tempted to read Creon's reading of Ismene as a sign of paranoia (already suggested by his suspicions of bribery and conspiracy in his conversation with the



Guard). Before Ismene arrives, Antigone claims that the Elders would express their approval of what she has done if they were not muzzled by fear (504–5, 509). The question of *their* response is thus explicitly raised: we are warned to recognize that they may say one thing and mean another. Interestingly, they describe Ismene's distraught state as caused by her feelings towards her sister: 'Here is Ismene, shedding such tears as fond sisters weep: a cloud on her brow shadows her darkly flushing face, raining tears on her lovely cheeks' (526–30)—striking language (especially the rare word *ῥέθος*, 'countenance'), which is in sharp contrast with Creon's denunciation: 'you who were lurking in my house like a viper, secretly drinking my blood, while I didn't realize I was nurturing two curses (*ἄτα*), to rise against my throne . . .' (531–3). This looks grotesquely wrong (though *ἄτα* is ominous and has links both with language used by Antigone, Ismene, and the chorus to characterise the Labdacid inheritance (185) and with Creon's own statement of his civic programme (314) ). But Ismene does not contradict Creon; instead she claims to have shared in the burial and to want a share in the punishment: 'I have done the deed' (*δέδρακα τοὔργον*, 536).

Being a replay of something already presented to the audience, this is bound to provoke questions: Ismene refused to do the deed earlier, so why does she now say she did it—'if Antigone allows my claim (*εἴπερ ἦδ' ὁμορροθεῖ*)?[41] Is there any sense in which her claim could be serious? She didn't question the rightness of Antigone's intention, and she offered to keep the plan secret, so she could be called an accessory, though she does say (556) that she tried to dissuade her. She goes on to claim that 'the offence is equal' (558)—which Jebb paraphrases as 'and yet,—though I *did* shrink from breaking Creon's law,—I am now, morally, as great an offender as you, since I sympathise with your act'. As to *why* she makes this claim, the constructions made by readers and critics are revealingly varied. Is it a manœuvre to save Antigone, a futile attempt to share her herosim, 'an impulse of a sentimental and

[41] Nauck's *εἴπερ ἦδ'· ὁμορροθῶ* is an unnecessary change, which draws attention away from the crucial question: How are we to interpret what Antigone and Ismene now say about what they said and did earlier?

almost hysterical kind'[42]—and so on? As Steiner says, the debate persists.[43] Antigone's position is just as elusive. Is she right to claim (555) that Ismene 'chose to live' if that meant life without Antigone? These were not quite the terms in which Ismene formulated the argument in the Prologue. And why in any case does Antigone say what she does? Is she angrily rejecting Ismene's wish to share the deed, or is she protecting Ismene from Creon, as some critics, starting with one of the scholiasts, have thought? The point, of course, is that we have no means of knowing, but the audience is encouraged to think about the implications of the sisters' different versions of something it has itself witnessed, and only if we are willing to make constructions from their words can we become involved in the issues raised by their different points of view. (Not that we shall have to plump for a simple answer: rejection and protection could even coexist.) The language of the scene seems to encourage this process. At 561–5 Creon says 'One of these two has just been proved senseless (*ἄνουν*), the other has been so always', and Ismene replies that the sense (*νοῦς*) people have by nature leaves them when they are in trouble. 'Yours evidently has', says Creon. One of the questions raised by the scene is surely 'Who *has* got sense around here?' (We are reminded of the end of the Prologue (99), when Ismene claims that Antigone is senseless, and Creon later uses the same language to dismiss the chorus's suggestion that the hand of a god might be seen in the burial of Polyneices (281).) And the question of who has sense points up the larger question of the rights and wrongs in the conflict between Creon and Antigone.

Critics have often noted[44] that this debate is articulated through insistent emphasis on words for sense, mind, judgement, wisdom, sanity—and clearly this insistence suggests an interest in the springs of action, the 'inner life'; it is also dramatically signalled in such a way as to stimulate us to make

[42] R. C. Jebb, comm. on *Antigone* (3rd edn.), introd., p. xxix.

[43] G. Steiner, *Antigones* (Oxford, 1984), 151. This book well illustrates the play's continuing dialectical power; cf. M. Hollis, 'Of Masks and Men', in Carrithers *et al.* (edd.), *The Category of the Person*, 222–3, on the issues raised by *Antigone*: 'The trappings are antique but the puzzle is wholly modern.'

[44] E.g. G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama* (Ithaca, NY, 1958), 233–8; R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1980), 121–2; Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, 175–80.



constructions. When at 176 Creon says it's hopeless to think you will understand any man's soul (*ψυχή*) and quality of mind (*φρόνημα*) and judgement (*γνώμη*) until he has been exposed to responsibility, this encourages us to look at what *his* *ψυχή* and *φρόνημα* and *γνώμη* will be like, and we are given repeated reminders that this is a crucial question. The scene with Haemon is one example.

It opens with the focus on Haemon, the chorus asking the question 'What is Haemon's state of mind?'[45] Does he come 'grieving for the doom of his promised bride Antigone and bitter for the baffled hope of his marriage' (627–30, Jebb's translation)? Creon takes up the question: 'We'll soon know, better than *seers* could tell us. Surely, son, you aren't enraged with your father, or are we dear to you [your *φίλοι*] however we act?' (631–4). There could hardly be a more pointed invitation to 'read between the lines' of what Haemon says, and the irony in *φίλοι* is heavy. When Haemon replies to Creon's long speech he first picks up the chorus's tactful 'wisely (*φρονούντως*) spoken' (682), with a gnomic evaluation of 'wisdom' (*φρένες*) (ambiguous, because the definition of 'right thinking' is precisely what is under review), then respectfully evades taking responsibility for a judgement on Creon's words, simply allowing the possibility that a different view might validly be held. His next move is to repeat what he hears people saying in secret—in secret because they are afraid to say it openly to Creon. 'In the dark', Haemon implies, he hears things that are *true*; the idea of the secrecy of the criticism is emphasized by 'in the dark' (*ὑπὸ σκότου*) at 692 and 'dark rumour' (*ἐρεμνὴ . . . φάτις*) at 700. In the first scene with the Guard Creon had himself envisaged secret mutterings on the part of people discontented with his edict (289–92). We presumed he was deceiving himself when he accused those people of paying for the burial of Polyneices, but the 'secret voices' remain a possibility—recalled, indeed, by Antigone's claims about what the Elders 'really' think.

Now Haemon spells out what the voices say. The city is distressed (*ὀδύρεται*): the citizens think Antigone is *most* underserving (*ἀναξιωτάτη*), suffering *most* evilly (*κάκιστ[α]*) for deeds *most* glorious (*εὐκλεεστάτων*). She saved her own brother from

[45] Cf. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles*, 93–4.

being left unburied, to be destroyed by dogs and birds: isn't that worthy of golden honour (693–9)? We note the emotional intensity of the language. Of course its status as 'truth' is indefinable since there is *no* off-stage reality to which it refers—and no representatives of the people come on later to confirm what Haemon says (Tieresias takes up the issue at a different level). In any case we know Haemon to be biased in Antigone's favour. We can't rule out the possibility that what he offers as a report of public opinion is his own construction designed to influence Creon. 'In the dark' and the 'dark rumour' perhaps give warning that Haemon's report is not easy to evaluate. How do we take those superlatives—as evidence of *his* emotion, or as a strict report of what people are saying? What is important is that the passage offers an alternative reading of Antigone's action for us to think about, and it prepares for Haemon's debate with Creon about the source of authority. A disjunction is now emphasized between the city and the ruler—contrary to the assumptions of Ismene in the Prologue, and of Creon and the chorus up to this point.[46] Now Haemon claims that the *whole city* (*δμόπτολις λεώς*, 733) denies Antigone's guilt, and Creon asks 'Is the city going to tell me how to rule?' (736).

To revert to the point about wisdom. Haemon follows up his remarks about the voices with an appeal to his father to be willing to accept other views: 'for whoever thinks that he alone is wise, or that in speech or mind he has no equal—such a person when laid open is seen to be empty' (707–9).[47] We are reminded of the question posed by Creon about understanding a man's soul and mind and judgement (176), and one answer is now suggested in Creon's case. But it is still provisional: the language of 'emptiness' is used again at the end of the scene, in the violent quarrel between father and son, when Haemon accuses Creon of having 'empty resolves (*κενὰς γνώμας*, 753), and Creon retorts with the claim that Haemon is 'empty of wisdom' (*φρενῶν . . . κενός*, 754). The issue is taken up again and again as the play goes on: is it Haemon who is mad, driven by Eros, or Creon who is mad, like Lycurgus maddened by Dionysus?[48] It is the mind of Creon, says Teiresias, that has made the city sick (*τῆς σῆς ἐκ φρενὸς νοσεῖ πόλις*, 1015; cf. 1141).

[46] Contrast 736–9 with 44, 59–60, 63–4, 78–9 (Ismene); 209–10, 661–72 (Creon); 211–14 (chorus).

[47] Cf. B. M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper* (Berkeley, Loss Angeles, and London, 1964), 75, 103, 110; Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles*, 127.



All the time we are led to make new constructions, and the constructions always lead to larger questions, ensuring that character and action can never be kept tidily separate. And the desire to construct is perfectly compatible with the knowledge that strictly speaking there is nothing there at all.[49] It is the very elusiveness of the 'inwardness' of other people, real or fictive, let alone of ourselves, that gives drama its extraordinary appeal. William James put the point nicely when he remarked, 'The mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities.'[50]

[48] Cf. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles*, 94, 103–4.

[49] Cf. Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 147: 'There is nothing beneath.'

[50] *The Principles of Psychology*, i (London, 1890), 288.

# Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature

EDITED BY

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CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD
1990