

VI.—Two Structural Features of Sophocles' *Electra*

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The two features discussed, the second scene with Chrysothemis and the order in which Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are killed, both owe their existence and their nature to the fact that this play is an adaptation and expansion of the part of *Electra* in the *Choephori*: the chief purpose of the second Chrysothemis scene is to show *Electra* acting on the assumption that she must carry out the revenge alone; her part is thus transformed into an active and essential one. Study of *Electra*'s appeal to Chrysothemis in this scene shows that Sophocles neither condones the matricide nor disregards its implications. The structure of the closing part of the play is designed to keep *Electra* in the foreground rather than *Orestes*. Clytemnestra's death is the climax of the play.

In the *Choephori*, *Electra* prays to her father (140-1), "To me myself, grant that I be far more modest than my mother, and more pious in my acts." In Sophocles' play, *Electra* concludes the bitter statement of her position which follows the *parodos* with the following words, addressed to the Chorus: "In such circumstances as these, then, my friends, it is not possible to be modest or to be pious. No: in the midst of evil, there is strong compulsion to practice evil" (307-9). The verbal similarity of these two passages, the repetition of *σωφρονεστέρα* and *εὐσεβεστέρα* in *σωφρονεῖν* and *εὐσεβεῖν*, shows that Sophocles is consciously recalling and transforming the thought of the Aeschylean passage. These two sentences are a summary of the relationship between the two plays; they show how Sophocles takes one element in the *Choephori*, namely *Electra*'s relationship to the events of the story, and develops it into a new tragedy, the tragedy of *Electra*. The Sophoclean passage, moreover, expresses clearly the tragic idea on which Sophocles' play is based: *Electra* recognizes that she does not possess those paramount qualities for which Aeschylus' *Electra* prayed, modesty and piety. She feels that she is bound to act contrary to them, to "practice evil," that is, to do all she can to bring about the revenge, because if she does not do so, if the criminals are allowed to go unpunished, then, as she tells the Chorus in an earlier passage (249-50), "All reverence and all piety would vanish from mankind." *Electra* is caught, forced to relinquish one kind of *εὐσέβεια* whatever she does. Of this terrible moral dilemma she is vividly aware, and it is her

awareness of it and her behaviour in consequence of it that form the basis of Sophocles' tragedy.

The foregoing interpretation of the relationship between the *Choephoroi* and the *Electra*, and of the basis of the Sophoclean play, has been presented by J. T. Sheppard, in the course of an important and illuminating series of essays on the *Electra*, designed chiefly to refute the long-standing notion that Sophocles disregards the moral issue of matricide.¹ The present paper is based on the assumption that such a relationship does exist between the plays, and that the basis of the *Electra* is that outlined above. The two points of structure to be discussed, the second scene with Chrysothemis and the reversal of the order in which Clytemnestra and Aegisthus die, both owe their existence, I believe, to exigencies arising from this adaptation of a part of Aeschylus' theme. Examination of these two incidents will provide, moreover, some further corroboration of Sheppard's interpretation of the play.²

In adapting the story to his own dramatic end, the tragedy of *Electra*, Sophocles had two major difficulties to overcome. First, he had to make *Electra*'s part, which was in the tradition he received both passive and unimportant to the plot, into an active and central one.³ For whether or not one concedes to Aristotle that a play must have action,⁴ it is beyond question that where there is a central and significant action, as there is in this play—the revenge and above all the matricide—the chief figure must have an active and essential relation to it. For *Electra* to be left on the outskirts of the action would throw the whole drama out of balance and damage its unity. Second, Sophocles must retain Orestes, since he is essential to the plot, but he must not let his part overshadow or equal *Electra*'s in interest or importance. The two structural elements to be examined are designed expressly, I believe, to overcome these two difficulties.

¹ CQ 12 (1918) 80–88; CR 41 (1927) 2–9, 163–165; *Aeschylus and Sophocles* (New York, 1927) 58–68; CAH 5.130.

² Corroboration of Sheppard's interpretation would seem not to be idle, in spite of the excellent case which he has made, for the traditional view is still widely maintained, e.g., by H. Weinstock, *Sophokles* (Leipzig, 1931), K. Reinhardt, *Sophokles* (Frankfurt am Main, 1933), A. S. Owen, *Greek Poetry and Life* (Oxford, 1936) 146–147, T. B. L. Webster, *An Introduction to Sophocles* (Oxford, 1936) 19, J. D. Denniston, *Euripides' Electra* (Oxford, 1939) xxiv–xxv.

³ Cf. Weinstock, *op. cit.* (see note 2) 12: "Der Dramatiker hatte die Aufgabe, dies liederfüllte Sein in Bewegung zu setzen."

⁴ *Poetics* 1449^b 23: τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως.

If the second incident in which Chrysothemis and Electra are together were omitted, along with the following stasimon, the thought of which develops directly out of it, the course of the play's action would not be modified in the least. So far as the framework of the plot is concerned, then, this scene is entirely otiose. In view of this we are justified in expecting it to make some other important contribution to the total effect of the play. This it does make, in Electra's passionate and pitiful appeal to Chrysothemis to join her in accomplishing the revenge. Electra's words here have a double significance: the fact that she now reveals her determination to carry out the revenge, and the manner in which she does so, are both of great importance for her relation to the main business of the play and for her attitude toward it.

The fact of Electra's revelation is important because her part is now for the first time invested with an active and essential relationship to the revenge. Before, she only hoped for Orestes' return and longed for revenge; her own activity was limited to a refusal to coöperate with her mother and Aegisthus, and to waging a purely verbal battle with them. Now she is acting on her own, and hers is the central rôle. The significance of the incident is not lessened by the fact that Electra's activity comes to nothing, and is based on a false supposition. The important thing is that Electra believes that her conduct now has an essential connection with the revenge; in this way her part is made more vital and active than it could otherwise be. There is an incident with a similar purpose in the earlier scene with Chrysothemis, when the younger sister reveals that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus intend to shut Electra up in a cave.⁵ Like Electra's plans in the later scene, this threat never comes to anything, actually. But like the later incident, although in a much slighter way, it helps to place Electra in a central position in relation to the action of the play.

The manner in which Electra makes her appeal to Chrysothemis is also of great importance; for in this speech her inmost feelings about what lies before her are strikingly revealed. She addresses her sister in these words (954-7): "Now, since he no longer lives, I look to you, in hope that you will not shrink from joining your sister in killing the murderer of our father, Aegisthus. For I need no longer conceal anything from you." A long and solemn sentence leads up to the single name Aegisthus. That one word is strongly

⁵ 379-382.

emphasized by enjambement.⁶ The deliberate emphasis placed on the single word *Αἰγισθον* here is significant. Why does Electra propose to kill Aegisthus only? The traditional answer⁷ is that since Aegisthus is in this play the chief villain, this is quite natural; and the passage is seen to be an instance of Sophocles' avoidance of the unpleasant business of matricide. Sheppard⁸ thinks that Electra has not yet arrived at the stage of her tragedy where she can contemplate matricide. But in fact Electra has already told her mother that she is nurturing Orestes to bring vengeance upon her, and that she would do it herself, if she had the strength: *καὶ τόδ', εἴπερ ἔσθενον, ἔδρων ἄν, εὖ τοῦτ' ἴσθι* (604-5). Now, in the face of the challenge of Orestes' death, she has, or thinks she has, acquired the strength. It must be assumed that in one of the two conflicting passages Electra is not, whether purposely and consciously or not, speaking her whole mind. I hope to show that the untrue, or rather incomplete, revelation is the one in the passage under discussion.

After revealing her decision, Electra appeals to Chrysothemis for aid, and paints, in glowing colors, the rewards to follow success: "Praise for piety, from our father" (967-8), "suitable marriage" (969), "glory" (973), "love" (981), and so on. What an astonishing contrast these hopeful words form with Electra's earlier statements about her situation: "Piety and moderation are impossible," "in the midst of evil one must practice evil" (307-9), "shame holds me" (616), "I know that my conduct is unseemly" (618), "evil deeds are taught by evil" (621). The contradiction is entirely parallel to the contradiction as to whether Electra means to kill Clytemnestra. The importance of the word *εὐσέβεια* for Electra's attitude has been mentioned above. Before the Chorus she declared it to be impossible for her; to her mother she openly admitted a feeling of shame; yet now, afterward, she speaks of *εὐσέβεια* as well as of glory, love, and fame as products of the revenge. The reason for the discrepancy between the scenes is clear: before, Electra was facing the full horror of the situation; now, because she is trying to persuade Chrysothemis, and herself, to act, she does not face the whole situation. Therefore there is no mention of

⁶ 956f. *ξὺν τῇδ' ἀδελφῇ μὴ κατοκνήσεις κτανεῖν
Αἰγισθον.*

The enjambement of a single word for special emphasis is a point of style used much by Homer (e.g. *Il.* 1.2) and elsewhere by Sophocles (e.g. *O.T.* 546).

⁷ Cf. Jebb's note *ad loc.*

⁸ *CQ* 12 (1918) 86-87.

matricide; she names only Aegisthus and speaks of rewards. It is not that Electra here deliberately hides her true thoughts, to make her appeal to Chrysothemis more effective. To assume this makes the whole speech a mere lie, and robs it of all its effectiveness; for if it is a lie it is completely out of harmony with the general picture of Sophocles' heroine: her previous frankness shows that she is no dissembler. She is now deceiving herself, as well as Chrysothemis, for she refuses to think of the worse part of what lies before her.

The addition to the emphatic word *Ἀγισθον* of the strange phrase, "For I need no longer conceal anything from you" (957), proves, I think, that the interpretation of the speech given above is right. Those who follow the traditional interpretation and write a footnote, with Jebb, to the effect that "in this play the fate of Aegisthus forms the climax," find these words at least colorless and unnecessary. In fact, when carefree excision of lines was in vogue, this line was more than once suggested as a candidate for the knife.⁹ But if we accept the significance of the emphasis laid on the name of Aegisthus, and the indications of the whole speech, the words are filled with tragic irony: Electra is, indeed, concealing much from Chrysothemis and from her own conscious thoughts, and at the same time revealing, to us, much about her attitude toward the killing of her mother.¹⁰

Such, then, is the purpose of this scene. It places Electra at the very center of events, and sets her in action. The manner in which she views what lies ahead, with its curious omission and its equally curious contradictions with her own previous express declarations, tells us much about the heroine's feelings about the situation. Of Electra, at least, we can hardly say that there is "no shrinking back, no question of conscience at all."¹¹

The second point to be noticed is the reversal of the order in which Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are killed. This point of structure, like the omission of Clytemnestra's name in the passage just discussed, is generally thought to support the belief that Aegisthus' death is the climax; and the earlier scene is one of the proofs ad-

⁹ It was rejected by Wunder and Nauck; cf. Jebb's critical note *ad loc.*

¹⁰ Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Tragedy* 143, believes that "the whole situation," and the emphasis on the word *Ἀγισθον* indicate that Electra "intends the death of Clytemnestra also."

¹¹ As Gilbert Murray describes the play, *Euripides and his Age* (London, 1913) 152.

duced in interpreting the end of the play thus. As I understand the play, it ranks with that passage as proving that the traditional assertion is untrue. Further, this structural change too is designed to put Electra at the very center of the main action, and to prevent Orestes' part from rivalling Electra's.

The usual view of the Sophoclean order, that it is due to the fact that Aegisthus is the more important enemy in this play and that his death is the climax,¹² is in my opinion both improbable and wrong. It is improbable because the matricide is the *natural* climax and center of the tragedy. This no one denies. It is customary to wonder why Sophocles did not make it the climax, and to answer this perplexing question with the suggestion that Sophocles was following the old, Homeric form of the story,¹³ and hence countenanced or made little of the matricide.

Before considering the structure of the conclusion, I wish to examine the usual allegation that in the course of the play Aegisthus, not Clytemnestra, is shown to be the chief object of Electra's hatred and hence the chief object of the revenge.¹⁴ The longest and most systematic statement of Electra's grievances and hates is her long speech to the Chorus following the *parodos*. When she names her enemies, she begins with the words, *πρῶτα μὲν τὰ μητρός* (261). The fact that Electra thinks first of her grievances against her mother is of some importance. After one sentence on Clytemnestra, a few lines are directed against both of them, and then Aegisthus is abused for seven lines. Then she returns to Clytemnestra for twenty-six lines; and four devoted to Aegisthus follow these. The score, then, is Clytemnestra twenty-six, Aegisthus eleven. But the mathematical proportion counts for less than the nature of Electra's words. Only when speaking of Clytemnestra does she vividly recall individual instances of evilness; only Clytemnestra does she quote.¹⁵ Her hatred of her mother is thus seen to be a more intimate, personal and intense emotion than her feeling toward Aegisthus. This is representative of her references to the

¹² Cf. Jebb's *Electra* 1.

¹³ That this is no answer at all has been pointed out by Sheppard, *CR* 41 (1927) 2-3: ". . . in the Odyssey there is no oracle, and therefore no religious problem; no Electra, and therefore no tragedy of Electra; no matricide, and therefore nothing relevant to our enquiry."

¹⁴ Cf. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (London, 1939) 176.

¹⁵ 289-292, 295-298.

pair throughout the play, with one important exception: the speech to Chrysothemis which has been discussed above. It is this passage that is responsible above all for the idea that Aegisthus is made out by Sophocles to be the chief object of Electra's hate. That the purpose of this passage is quite different has already been contended.¹⁶

In the final scene itself, the fact that Aegisthus' death comes second has, it seems, persuaded critics that it is the climax. There are several possible arguments to support this opinion. It may be felt that the second death must be the climax, because if it is not, it is bound to be an anti-climax. Again, the scene leading up to Aegisthus' death may by its nature seem to be a more suitable climax for the play than that in which Clytemnestra dies. Lastly, since in Aeschylus and Euripides, where Clytemnestra's death is recognized as the climax, it comes second, it is perhaps natural to suppose that the emphasis is reversed in Sophocles' play, just as the order is reversed. This last argument is surely of no value; whatever Sophocles' purpose was, he was in no way bound to adhere to the same order as the other two dramatists.

Before attempting a discussion of the first two of these arguments, I should like to examine Sophocles' reasons for using the order he does use.

First, the Sophoclean order is the natural one for the set-up in this play. The whole action depends on Aegisthus' absence,¹⁷ and so Clytemnestra is the victim nearest at hand. If there is no dramatic objection, there is no reason why Sophocles should not use the natural order. In the *Choephoroi*, too, the natural order would have been Clytemnestra first, Aegisthus second. But this would have meant an interruption of the dramatic continuity, for the onset of the Furies against Orestes follows, and it is dramatically best to have it follow at once upon the matricide, without the inter-

¹⁶ Kitto, *op. cit.* (see note 14) 176, maintains that because Aegisthus "is made to appear as the strong man of the piece" his death is made the natural climax. While it is true that "it is only because Aegisthus is 'in the fields' that the drama is possible at all," all that is important so far as dramatic emphasis is concerned is what is said and done within the play; here Clytemnestra easily comes off better, for she is present for a long and powerful scene, whereas Aegisthus only comes in at the end, to be killed. It is quite natural that references to Aegisthus should be frequent; in this way Sophocles prepares for his eventual entrance.

¹⁷ Cf. 310-313, 516-518.

ruption of Aegisthus' death.¹⁸ Since Sophocles' play ends at this point, there is no need for him to alter the natural course of events for the sake of the dramatic course.

A second reason for Sophocles' reversal of the order is, as Kitto has observed,¹⁹ to avoid too close parallelism with the *Choephoroi*. If he had followed the Aeschylean order closely, the audience, having it in mind, would inevitably have expected the Furies to appear, or at least to be referred to. This would, of course, have brought Orestes into the position of chief interest, and this Sophocles wished to avoid. It is the tragedy of *Electra* that he has to tell.

Sophocles' third reason for introducing the change is this: the death of Clytemnestra, being of prime importance for the tragedy, had to be included in the play; the death of Aegisthus, being of no great importance for this, need not be included, and in fact is not included. By having Aegisthus' death carry over into a region *ἔξω τοῦ δράματος* Sophocles brings the play to a close while the story is still in progress. Thus he achieves an ending that is swift and full of action; and in doing this he avoids any pause for reflection after the action—reflection that must be concentrated on Orestes, in view of the known sequel of the story, which concerns him greatly and *Electra* not at all.

These are Sophocles' reasons, then, for reversing the order of the murders: because his is the natural order of events, because by it he contrives to keep Orestes from assuming a dominant position in the drama, and because he can afford to let Aegisthus' death lie beyond the end, whereas Clytemnestra's must take place within the play.

There remain the questions whether or not Clytemnestra's death is the climax, and, if it is, whether Aegisthus' death is an anti-climax.

On the first of these, a point already mentioned is, to me, conclusive evidence that Clytemnestra's death must be the climax: the fact that Aegisthus' death does not take place within the play. It is going to happen, of course, and we feel no uncertainty about it. It seems strange, nevertheless, to consider an event that does

¹⁸ Cf. Kitto, *op. cit.* (see note 14) 175: ". . . had Aegisthus been killed after her, it would have been an anti-climax and an interruption." That it would necessarily have been an interruption, I agree; whether or not it would have been an anti-climax would depend, surely, on how the playwright handled the situation.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.* (see note 14) 175.

not *actually* happen within the play the climax of the play. If this be thought insufficient, there are other considerations that may be urged. Throughout the play, Electra is beyond question the dominating figure, and Clytemnestra is her chief foe. Of the two death incidents, Clytemnestra's is so contrived that Electra and Clytemnestra are the only actors who speak, with the Chorus supplying a lyrical background. It seems clear that Sophocles arranged the incident in this way for the express purpose of creating an effective climax between the two main figures of the tragedy.²⁰ In this scene, moreover, there is a line expressing a sublimely tragic moment, when Clytemnestra shrieks, from within, ὦμοι πέπληγμαι, and Electra answers savagely, παῖσον, εἰ σθένεις, διπλῆν (1415). The incident preceding Aegisthus' death is more diffuse; Electra's part is small, as compared with the previous incident; there is no peak of tragic intensity, because the incident never reaches its climax. Nor could there be real tragedy here, for the killing of Aegisthus is not tragic, but only revenge that is justifiable and normal, in the absence of legal processes.

If Clytemnestra's death is the climax, is Aegisthus' an anti-climax? I think it is clear that Sophocles did all he could to prevent us from finding it such, by making the second incident as different as possible from the first. Instead of a partially lyrical scene, there is one wholly in iambics; instead of the concentration and tragic intensity of the first scene, there is an incident remarkable for its sustained dramatic pace; above all, in the first the killing marks the central moment, in the second it does not occur. The amazing swiftness of movement of the closing scene, its bitter irony and hatred, its dark and ominous hints of trouble to come, and above all the dramatic thrill when Aegisthus lifts the veil from the face of the dead Clytemnestra, make an exciting and powerful ending that is neither the climax of the tragedy, nor an anti-climax.

In conclusion, I should like to turn briefly to the final words of joy and relief spoken by the Chorus. Critics observe how different the tone is from the final chorus of the *Choephoroi*, and consider it the ultimate proof of Sophocles' serene contentment with the matricide. But why should it resemble the final chorus of the *Choephoroi*? It occurs at an entirely different point in the story. More important than this purely negative consideration is the fact

²⁰ In the *Choephoroi* the dialogue at the climax is between Orestes and Clytemnestra.

that it is very similar to the statement of the Chorus in the *Choephoroi* at the corresponding moment in that play. Just as in the *Electra* so in the *Choephoroi* the Chorus raise a cry of joy, and speak of the end of the troubles of their masters' house.²¹ In the *Choephoroi*, this makes a break between the two parts of the story, the consummation of the revenge and the consequences of this to Orestes. Not being concerned with the fate of Orestes, Sophocles chose to end his play at this break.

²¹ *Choeph.* 941ff. This similarity is noticed by G. Thompson, *Aeschylus and Athens* (London, 1941) 359.