

ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS IN SOPHOCLES' *ELECTRA**

"It is not possible to abolish the stories that have been handed down – for example, that of Clytaemestra being killed by Orestes or Eriphyle by Alcmeon; rather, the poet must himself find a way to make good use of the traditional material."

Thus Aristotle (*Poetics* 1453b22-25); and we can safely assume that in all the Orestes- and Alcmeon-tragedies known to him, these basic mythical data were respected. It is, nevertheless, curious that he should have chosen, to illustrate his point, two items of myth which one poet at least, Homer, *had* to all appearance abolished or at least elided. As is well known, it is nowhere stated in the *Odyssey* how Clytaemestra died, and even the fact of her death is mentioned only once, indirectly, in a reference to the feast given by Orestes to the Argives for the funeral of her and Aegisthus (3.309-310). Aristarchus was uncertain whether this passage did or did not imply that Orestes had killed Clytaemestra as well as Aegisthus¹, and at least one other ancient scholar felt justified in affirming positively that Homer did not know of Orestes' matricide²; to mention the funeral without mentioning the death, however, suggests evasion more than it suggests ignorance, and most modern scholars suppose, with some ancient support³, that the poet knew of the matricide and deliberately suppressed it⁴, because it would disturb the parallel he wished to draw between the constellations Agamemnon-Clytaemestra-

* I owe the original idea for this paper to discussions with my research student, Stephen Dailly, though its conclusions are rather different from those we reached then!

¹ Σ *Od.* 3.309-310 ὁ δὲ Ἀρίσταρχός φησιν ὅτι διὰ τούτων παρυποφαίνεται ὅτι συναπώλετο Αἰγίσθω ἢ Κλυταιμνήστρᾳ· τὸ δὲ εἰ καὶ ὑπὸ Ὀρέστου ἄδηλον εἶναι.

² Σ *Od.* 1.300 οὐκ οἶδεν ὁ ποιητὴς τὸν Κλυταιμνήστρας ὑπὸ τοῦ παιδὸς μόρον.

³ Σ *Od.* 3.310 φεῖδεται διὰ τούτων τοῦ Ὀρέστου. τὸ μὲν γὰρ εὐφημότερον εἶπεν ὅτι ἔθαψε τὴν μητέρα, τὸν δὲ θάνατον παρεσιώπησεν.

⁴ So e.g. A.F. Garvie, *Aeschylus: Choephoroi*, Oxford 1986, xi-xiii, and S.R. West in A. Heubeck et al. *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey, Volume I*, Oxford 1988, 60. A somewhat different view is that of J.F. Davidson, *Homer and Sophocles' Electra*, "BICS" 35, 1988, 45-72, at p. 51, who claims that "the matricide is implied" in the reference to the double funeral; but if anything the passage insinuates, without asserting, the contrary. The very sentence that mentions the funeral says that it was held after Orestes had killed *Aegisthus* (ὁ τὸν κτείνας); moreover, as was observed by R.C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments, Part VI: The Electra*, Cambridge 1894, xi n. 3, "the Argives" would hardly have been willing to come under the roof of a matricide and partake of his food. A hearer (such as Telemachus) who did not know the details for certain would be almost bound to infer that Clytaemestra had committed suicide, in grief, shame or despair, after the death of her lover. It is just possible that such a version of the myth was actually imagined by an archaic poet on the basis of the Homeric passage, and that Aesch. *Cho.* 978-9 ξυνώμοσαν... ξυνθάνεισθαι is a detail ultimately derived from it.

Aegisthus-Orestes and Odysseus-Penelope-Suitors-Telemachus and/or because it is the general policy both of the *Iliad* and of the *Odyssey* to suppress or tone down the more grotesque or atrocious features of inherited myth⁵. The latter motive is the one that seems to have been at work in *Odyssey* 11.326-7 and 15.244-8, in both of which Eriphyle's betrayal of her husband is mentioned but her death is not (even though Alcmeon is actually named in 15.248)⁶.

After Homer, so far as we know, it is never questioned that, as a matter of mythic fact, Orestes did kill his mother. But if the tragic dramatists apparently refrained from ever altering this datum, they were under no obligation to refrain from playing with the possibility that it *might* be altered. The device of foreshadowing a major mythical innovation, and then not delivering it, is one that tragedy frequently employs. It can take three basic forms.

(1) The mildest, and commonest, variant is that in which the characters, or some of them, anticipate a development which the audience know to be contrary to established myth (and sometimes to indications already given within the play itself), and the audience's perception of the characters' error or blindness is exploited for dramatic and tragic effect. This is of course one of the basic forms of dramatic irony, and is found, for instance, in six of the seven surviving plays of Sophocles⁷; it depends for its effectiveness on the audience *not* being deceived.

(2) At the other extreme, as in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and Euripides' *Orestes*, an entire plot may be on the point of reaching a dénouement radically

⁵ On this policy see e.g. J. Griffin, *The Epic Cycle and the uniqueness of Homer*, "JHS" 97, 1977, 39-53, esp. 44.

⁶ Is it accidental that Odysseus breaks off his catalogue of women (11.328) at the very moment when he might have been about to speak of Eriphyle's death as he had spoken of the deaths of Epicaste (277-9) and, just before, of Ariadne (324-5)? In this case, however, we have no evidence that any ancient scholar thought Homer had suppressed the matricide; both Σ *Od.* 3.309f (citing Aristarchus) and Σ *Od.* 15.248 say Homer "does not know" of it.

⁷ In each of his four earlier plays, the chorus at some point anticipate a happy outcome only to be tragically disillusioned (usually quite soon), and each time one of the principals shares in the misapprehension: *Trach.* 200ff (chorus and Deianeira: safe and triumphant return of Heracles); *Aj.* 693ff (chorus and Tecmessa, cf. 787-8, 807: Ajax's supposed renunciation of suicide); *Ant.* 1115-54 (chorus and Creon: release of Antigone – but Teiresias has already foretold Haemon's death, 1066-7); *OT* 1076-1109 (chorus and Oedipus: Oedipus as child of Fortune or of a god – but Iocaste's final words and exit, 1056-75, have shown that she realizes whose child he actually is). In *Electra* the effect is reversed, as the false tale of Orestes' death is believed by everyone who hears it. At the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* Antigone asks for herself and her sister to be helped to return to Thebes in the hope of making peace between their brothers (*OC* 1769-72); we know – having been encouraged to think of *Antigone* by Polyneices' request to his sisters (1407-10) to see to his burial if necessary – that this mission will end not only in failure but in Antigone's death.

contrary to tradition and threatening the integrity of large sections of the accepted corpus of myth, until the arbitrary intervention of a *deus ex machina* puts it back on its 'proper' course. In such cases the dramatist in a way has his cake and eats it: the innovative plot is allowed to run its full course, yet without invalidating the traditional story. In this case the effectiveness of the device requires that the audience *should* be deceived. While the innovative plot is progressing, they must be sufficiently captivated by it to disregard their 'knowledge' that in mythical 'reality' things turned out differently: Neoptolemus' sacrifice of glory and acceptance of peril, for the sake of being true to his *philia* with Philoctetes, will be meaningless if the spectator is busy wondering how these developments are going to be reconciled with the mythical datum that both men went to Troy.

(3) Intermediate between these two varieties is a third, with which this paper will be mainly concerned, in which, while the course of the action itself is broadly in line with tradition, clues are planted by the author to mislead the audience into believing that he means to effect a major innovation; or alternatively, after encouraging the audience to expect an innovation of a particular kind, he surprises them with a quite different one. A well-known example of the latter pattern is the prologue of Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Our evidence suggests⁸ that, in most earlier versions of the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus, Phaedra had killed herself after Hippolytus' death, when in some manner or other⁹ it had become known to Theseus and the world that she had not only fallen in love with Hippolytus but had made or authorized an adulterous proposition to him. The order of events was approximately: (a) Phaedra, rebuffed by Hippolytus, accuses him to Theseus of actual or attempted rape; (b) Theseus curses Hippolytus and he is killed; (c) the truth about Phaedra's passion is revealed to Theseus; (d) Phaedra takes her own life. At the beginning of Euripides' second *Hippolytus*, as always, the audience will have been expecting a treatment of the story that will be to some degree novel¹⁰, but the extent and nature of the innovations will have been

⁸ See W.S. Barrett, *Euripides: Hippolytos*, Oxford 1964, 6-45; M.R. Halleran, *Euripides: Hippolytus*, Warminster 1995, 21-37.

⁹ In some versions possibly through her own confession, as in Seneca's *Phaedra* (1159-1200).

¹⁰ Thus in one sense the oft-repeated cliché that "the facts of most Greek plays were not a matter for invention, but were part of every Athenian child's store of legend" (H.W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, 2nd ed. rev. Sir E. Gowers, Oxford 1965, 305, s.v. *irony*) is the exact opposite of the truth: the one thing of which the spectators could be certain (and of which the dramatist knew they would be certain) was that the story they were going to see enacted would *not* be identical with any version of "the same" myth that they had seen or heard before.

unknown to them. Aphrodite considerably tells them what will happen: Phaedra, though smitten with love for Hippolytus, is keeping silent and confiding in no one; however, "that is not the destined outcome of this passion; I will reveal the matter to Theseus, and it will be brought into the open. And the young man who is my enemy will be slain by his father with the curses which the sea-lord Poseidon granted him...; and Phaedra will perish with a good name, but will nevertheless perish" (*Hipp.* 41-48).

In terms of the older tale, Aphrodite mentions coming events in the order (*c-b-d*), indicating one other modification (that Phaedra will die "with a good name"), and omits (*a*) altogether. This may well bewilder the spectator. In its context, "the matter" (πρῶγμα) ought to refer to "this passion"; if Theseus knows about that before he has cursed his son, how comes it that he utters the curse at all, and how can Phaedra possibly die with a good name? Again, no mention has been made of the rape allegation, and Theseus' early knowledge of Phaedra's passion would seem to leave no place for it: what entirely new twist, then, is Euripides meaning to substitute for it? Only as the action develops will it be realized how Euripides has played fast and loose with his audience. Aphrodite has not told any lies, but she has not told the whole truth, and what she has told she has put in a misleading order. The actual order of events turns out to be close to (*d-a-b-c*). The rape allegation is there after all, though it is made posthumously and Phaedra's motives for it are in part¹¹ different from those portrayed in earlier treatments. The curse and Hippolytus' fatal injury occur, as tradition and logic require, *before* Theseus knows the truth, though he – and Hippolytus himself – are undeceived before Hippolytus dies. Aphrodite has led the spectator to expect far-reaching plot innovations; only one such innovation actually occurs (the retiming of Phaedra's suicide), and it occurs *contrary* to what Aphrodite's words seemed clearly to imply.

A more subtle use of the same device is found in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*. There is reason to believe that before Sophocles, Deianeira had been thought of as an active, assertive woman, capable of engaging in war, who resented Heracles' continual infidelities and, when he capped them all by bringing Iole home, killed him with full intent and premeditation¹². Through the first 530

¹¹ Only in part, for she is still concerned, as earlier Phaedras must have been, to avenge an insult (728-731) and to protect her reputation by forestalling an accusation by Hippolytus (689-692, 720-1) – though in this version his accusation, if made, will be a false one, and the practical benefits of Phaedra's preserved good name will accrue not to her but to her children (717, cf. 421-5), the Athenian heroes Acamas and Demophon.

¹² The evidence is discussed by J.R. March, *The Creative Poet*, London 1987, 47-60. T.R. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*, Baltimore 1993, 864-5 nn. 88, 90, is sceptical but does not take account of evidence that Deianeira was of-

lines of *Trachiniae* Sophocles does all he can to create a Deianeira who is the exact opposite of this. She has never taken an initiative of any kind in her life. She would have submitted to marriage with the repulsive Achelous if Heracles had not "set [her] free" by overcoming Achelous in fight (9-21) while she sat at a distance, too terrified even to watch (21-25, cf. 523-8). She has accepted the frequent and lengthy absences of Heracles from home (28-35), and though the latest of them has lasted fifteen months and caused her great distress (37, 41-42, 46-51), she does not even think of taking active steps to seek news of him until prompted by her nurse (52-57). Lichas' lies impose on her completely, and when she questions him about the noble-looking woman captive (who is in fact Iole) and gets answers that are plainly evasive (310-9) she does not press the matter; then, when her other informant (the *angelos*) tells her who the girl really is, the much younger women of the chorus curse Lichas (383-4) but Deianeira, the party actually injured, does not, and when Lichas returns and repeats his lie (401) it is not Deianeira but the *angelos* who confutes him. When Deianeira speaks to him again, she says not one word of anger either against him or against Heracles; she has no right, she says, to condemn either Heracles or Iole for being unable to resist the power of Eros (439-49), any more than she has ever condemned any of Heracles' countless other mistresses (459-63). To do so would be to engage in a hopeless fight against a god (491-2). Both before and after she learned who Iole was, her overwhelming feeling towards her has been one of pity (298, 312, 330-1, 463-7); Lichas' request to her to treat the woman kindly (486) is unnecessary because that was what she meant to do anyway (490). All the signs¹³ are that, having long since accepted her husband's incurable promiscuity, she will quietly accept this latest manifestation of it as she has passively accepted every other misfortune of her life – and at this point the chorus are made to remind us of this by singing of the contest between Heracles and Achelous, during which Deianeira "sat waiting" (525, 528) and then followed the victor "like a lonely heifer" (530). And yet it is one of the certainties of myth that the capture of Oechalia and of Iole was almost immediately followed by Heracles' death – and at the hands of Deianeira. How on earth will this Deianeira be capable of doing it, and what motive could she have that she has not already disavowed? We learn the answer shortly: she

ten portrayed as a warlike character (Bacch. 5.165-175, φῶν ἀλιγκία to her brother Meleager; Σ Ap. Rh. 1.1212; Apoll. 1.8.1; Nonnus 35.89-91).

¹³ One small hint is dropped just before the choral song, when Deianeira says that Lichas must take some gifts back with him (494-6); but even those who catch that hint, and realize that one of the gifts will probably be the poisoned *chiton*, will be most unlikely to fathom what could have made Deianeira send it (if with March, *op. cit.* [n. 12] 62-63, we assume that Bacch. 16 is later than *Trach.*).

too is not strong enough to resist Eros; she has decided to use magical means to win Heracles' sole devotion, and the charm is a *chiton* (580) smeared with relics of Nessus and of the Hydra. Told so much, we know the rest at once.

Returning now to the death of Clytaemestra, I wish to explore the ways in which Sophocles in *Electra* conditions his audience's expectations concerning this event. Modern studies have expressed the most diverse views on this matter. On one side we are told that "the matricide... is kept before us throughout"¹⁴, on the other that "we are never allowed to dwell in advance on the matricide; in fact Klytaimestra's murder is first spoken of... just a few verses before Orestes and Pylades go into the palace to kill her"¹⁵. It would seem desirable, then, to examine closely the actual references in the play to the event, before it happens, always bearing in mind, firstly that the established and expected scenario was that Orestes, with Pylades, would kill Aegisthus and Clytaemestra¹⁶, secondly that this was in principle capable of being modified in two ways: *either* Orestes might kill Aegisthus alone, with Clytaemestra committing suicide (as half-suggested in the *Odyssey*), *or* Clytaemestra might be killed by some person other than Orestes, say by Pylades alone or even by Electra¹⁷. Sophocles, as we shall see, plays with both these options.

References to the revenge in the prologue neither call in question, nor

¹⁴ C.P. Segal, *The Electra of Sophocles*, "TAPhA" 97, 1966, 473-545, at p. 474; cf. J.T. Sheppard, *Electra again*, "CR" 41, 1927, 163-5, at p. 164, and C.M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy*, Oxford 1944, 218.

¹⁵ March, *op. cit.* (n. 12) 105; cf. A.S. Owen, *Τά τ' ὄντα καὶ μέλλοντα*, "CR" 41, 1927, 50-52, and G. Ronnet, *Sophocle poète tragique*, Paris 1969, 222.

¹⁶ This was clearly the canonical order, reflected in many artistic representations of the death of Aegisthus (see A.J.N.W. Prag, *The Oresteia: Iconographic and Narrative Traditions*, Warminster 1985, 10-34, and D. Knoepfler, *Les imagiers de l'Orestie: mille ans d'art antique autour d'un mythe grec*, Kilchberg/Zürich 1993, 42-49) and taken for granted by Aeschylus – whose Orestes, on discovering that Clytaemestra is at home and Aegisthus out, does not think of doing anything but gain entry to the palace and await Aegisthus' arrival; it is also the logical order, since Aegisthus, being a man, is presumed to be the more dangerous enemy, whom a tiny band of conspirators can hope to kill only if they take him by surprise. Sophocles' reversal of the order is not prepared for in any way before it is announced at 1368 ("now is the time to act; now Clytaemestra is alone...").

¹⁷ In Euripides' *Electra*, Electra is a full participant in the murder and arguably the most guilty of the three: she urges a reluctant Orestes to go through with the act (962-84) although she, unlike him, had received no injunction from Apollo to do it (1303-4). I do not wish in this paper to enter into the endlessly debated question of priority between these plays, except to remark that Sophocles' raising, discussed below, of the *possibility* that Electra might have a role in Clytaemestra's murder would seem very second-hand, rather than intriguingly novel, to an audience that had previously seen her *actual* role in Euripides' play (cf. M. Cropp, *Euripides: Electra*, Warminster 1988, xlix-l, who develops a rather different argument for the priority of Sophocles' play also based on "the centrality of Electra").