10. HEROISM

Κρ. ...
σὺ δ᾽ εἰπέ μοι μὴ μῆκος, ἀλλὰ συντόμως,
ᾔδησθα κηρυχθέντα μὴ πράσσειν τάδε;
Αν. ᾔδη· τί δ᾽ οὐκ ἔμελλον; ἐμφανῆ γὰρ ἦν.
Κρ. καὶ δῆτ᾽ ἐτόλμας τούσδ᾽ ὑπερβαίνειν νόμους;
Αν. οὐ γάρ τί μοι Ζεὺς ἦν ὁ κηρύξας τάδε, 450
οὐδ᾽ ἡ ξύνοικος τῶν κάτω θεῶν Δίκη
τοιούσδ᾽ ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ὥρισεν νόμους,
οὐδὲ σθένειν τοσοῦτον ᾠόμην τὰ σὰ
κηρύγματ᾽ ὥστ᾽ ἄγραπτα κἀσφαλῆ θεῶν
νόμιμα δύνασθαι θνητά γ᾽ ὄνθ᾽ ὑπερδραμεῖν. 455
οὐ γάρ τι νῦν γε κἀχθές, ἀλλ᾽ ἀεί ποτε
ζῇ ταῦτα, κουδεὶς οἶδεν ἐξ ὅτου ᾽φάνη.
τούτων ἐγὼ οὐκ ἔμελλον, ἀνδρὸς οὐδενὸς
φρόνημα δείσασ᾽, ἐν θεοῖσι τὴν δίκην
δώσειν· θανουμένη γὰρ ἐξῄδη, τί δ᾽ οὔ; 460
κεἰ μὴ σὺ προὐκήρυξας. εἰ δὲ τοῦ χρόνου
πρόσθεν θανοῦμαι, κέρδος αὔτ᾽ ἐγὼ λέγω.
ὅστις γὰρ ἐν πολλοῖσιν ὡς ἐγὼ κακοῖς
ζῇ, πῶς ὅδ᾽ οὐχὶ κατθανὼν κέρδος φέρει;
οὕτως ἔμοιγε τοῦδε τοῦ μόρου τυχεῖν 465
παρ᾽ οὐδὲν ἄλγος· ἀλλ᾽ ἄν, εἰ τὸν ἐξ ἐμῆς
μητρὸς θανόντ᾽ ἄθαπτον <ὄντ᾽> ἠνεσχόμην,
κείνοις ἂν ἤλγουν· τοῖσδε δ᾽ οὐκ ἀλγύνομαι.
σοὶ δ᾽ εἰ δοκῶ νῦν μῶρα δρῶσα τυγχάνειν,
σχεδόν τι μώρῳ μωρίαν ὀφλισκάνω. 470
Χο. δῆλον· τὸ γέννημ᾽ ὠμὸν ἐξ ὠμοῦ πατρὸς
τῆς παιδός· εἴκειν δ᾽ οὐκ ἐπίσταται κακοῖς.

Creon: ...You, tell me, not at length, but briefly, did you know that a proclamation had been issued that this should not be done?
Antigone: Yes I did. How could I not? The matter was absolutely clear.
Creon: And yet you dared to transgress these laws?
Antigone: Yes, for it was not in any way Zeus who proclaimed this to me, nor did Justice, who dwells with the gods below, establish such laws among men, nor did I think that your proclamations, mortal as they were, had sufficient strength to outrun the unwritten and unfailing laws of the gods. For they are not at all for now and yesterday, but live eternally, and no-one knows when they first appeared. I was not going to pay the penalty among the gods for breaking these laws out of fear for any man's purpose. I knew that I was going to die, how could I not? I would have had to even if you had not made your proclamation. And if I die ahead of my time, I count that a gain. For whoever lives, as I do, among many troubles,

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how would that person not gain by dying? Thus for me to obtain this death is no pain to any extent. But if I had endured the dead son of my own mother going without burial, I would have felt pain at that; but I am not pained by this. But if I now seem to you to be foolish in my actions, perhaps I am found guilty of foolishness by a fool.

Chorus: It is clear. The child's breeding is fierce from her fierce father; she does not know how to yield to misfortune. (*Antigone* 446–72)

Antigone's defiant words might be regarded as an archetypal statement of tragic heroism. Faced with a human instruction to leave her dead brother unburied, she fulfils the rites owed to the corpse knowing that this will lead to her death; when the time comes, she treats the tyrant who menaces her, Creon, with disdain. She does this as a powerless young woman, facing an older man in a position of total authority; the contrast between the figures on stage, evident in their costumes and masks, will have accentuated the shocking nature of her response. The chorus show her no sympathy. They are even older men, which makes the female Antigone seem all the more alone; other female characters who challenge the power of males, such as Procne or Euripides' Medea, at least have a supportive chorus of the same gender. So the circumstances in which Antigone finds herself emphasize the bravery evident in her speech, where she shows herself willing to give up her life to treat her brother's corpse as she believes the laws of the gods demand.

In the words of one scholar, 'This noble and deservedly famous passage has been the subject of so much controversial discussion that it is difficult to see one's way clear through the jungle of interpretation, refutation, and generalization with which it has been overgrown.'[1] And that was more than fifty years ago. Reactions to the speech have not always been wholly positive; one highly negative assessment claims that

> the reaction of the Athenian audience, shaped by the perception that the polis had the right to deny burial to certain categories of people, and that all religious discourse was articulated by, and operated under the authority of the polis, would have been 'yes, there are indeed unwritten *nomima* of the gods which no man can overrule, but what makes her think that she knows what they are better than the polis, and what gives her the authority to claim that Kreon's decree contravenes them?'[2]

We need not go as far as this – the play does after all later confirm that Antigone is correct in her view of the unwritten laws, with even Creon

[1] Knox 1964: 94.
[2] Sourvinou-Inwood 1989a: 143.

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admitting as much[3] – but we may still question Antigone's attitude and tactics. For the most recent commentator on the play, Mark Griffith, the speech ends with 'a sarcastic and inflammatory conclusion. . .effectively ruling out any reasonable discussion or compromise';[4] and Antigone's interactions with her own sister show her to be someone who cannot tolerate anything other than active and wholehearted allegiance. Heroic, then, from one perspective; but that word alone is insufficient to sum up her character.

Bernard Knox's influential book *The Heroic Temper. Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* devotes two chapters (out of six) to *Antigone*.[5] Heroism in Sophocles was a concern of modern criticism well before Knox, of course. In 1933 Karl Reinhardt stressed the isolation of the central figures of Sophocles' dramas;[6] and shortly afterwards Gennaro Perrotta anticipated many of the themes which Knox would make famous in the Anglo-Saxon world.[7] For Perrotta, 'in Sophoclean drama. . .the protagonist is everything: he is not only the centre of the action, but the poetic centre of the tragedy.'[8] But the protagonist is not just central – he or she is also to be admired. So with reference to Ajax, for instance, 'Sophocles loved this hero of his, and gave him an enormous personality, so that he completely dominates the drama. Tecmessa has no true personality, because Ajax is everything.'[9] Indeed, Perrotta goes as far as to say that 'in the tragedy, the hero's fault seems effectively to grow faint almost to vanishing point. . .The poet wanted to put in relief the ill-fortune of the hero, not his fault. . .Sophocles the poet wanted to exalt his hero.'[10] Tecmessa is far from possessing no character at all (pp. 79–80 above), but Perrotta puts her down to exalt Ajax, even though that exaltation too is, in ethical terms, at variance with the text: Sophocles' Ajax begins the play

[3] *Antigone* 1113–14. For a more positive assessment of Antigone see Foley 1995.
[4] Griffith 1999 on 469–70.
[5] Knox 1964; see also Knox 1961 = 1979: 125–60.
[6] Reinhardt 1947: 1 = 1979: 1.
[7] Perrotta 1935.
[8] Perrotta 1935: 637: 'Nel dramma sofocleo. . .il protagonista è tutto: esso non è soltanto il centro dell'azione, ma è il centro poetico della tragedia'.
[9] Perrotta 1935: 160: 'Sofocle ha amato questo suo eroe e gli ha dato una personalità gigantesca, in modo che dominasse assolutamente nel dramma. Tecmessa non ha personalità vera, perchè Aiace è tutto.'
[10] Perrotta 1935: 125: 'Nella tragedia, effettivamente la colpa dell'eroe sembra impallidire fin quasi a svanire. . .il poeta ha voluto mettere in rilievo l'infelicità dell'eroe, non la sua colpa. . .Sofocle poeta voleva esaltare l'eroe.'

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having attempted mass murder, something for which he never expresses regret.

An alternative view, itself influential, saw Sophocles as the poet of σωφροσύνη ('safe-thinking', 'modesty'). T. B. L. Webster argued that the poet 'differs from the other two tragedians in directing his whole technique to the presentation of one or at most two great figures', but nevertheless did not share Perrotta's passionate admiration for them.[11] So for Webster, '[Odysseus] is "modest" and the gods love the modest', and Sophocles 'has purified and moralized the Homeric Athena, who only survives in the diseased imagination of Ajax'.[12] In his view,

> Three characters, Odysseus in the *Ajax*, Creon in the *Tyrannus*, Theseus in the *Coloneus*, are embodiments of the modesty which the chief characters always recognize but seldom attain. . .If our interpretation of Sophocles' thought is correct, these three characters with their nobility and modesty come nearer than any to his ideal.[13]

Under this interpretation, the key to Sophocles lies not in his 'heroes', but in the gods and in those characters who most diligently walk in their paths.

Ideas similar to Perrotta's can be traced in Cedric Whitman's book *Sophocles. A Study of Heroic Humanism*, which rejects 'pietist' scholars for taking the plays at face value: 'if we trust the chorus, Sophocles wrote about nothing but the evil effects of stubbornness',[14] he remarks, asking with justification 'What kind of serene simplicity can embrace the world of Oedipus, or conceive the terrible lines which close the *Trachiniae*? What lessons of prudent restraint can we draw from the fierce and openly justified extremes of Antigone and Electra?'[15] By contrast, 'the Sophoclean hero, all critics to the contrary, seems to be less under the obligation to worship the gods than to fulfill his duty to himself'.[16] Whitman refers to Ajax as a 'disciplined individual whose guide is inner law, and whose infringement of other laws is only incidental to the enormous struggle he passes through in order to preserve himself as

[11] Webster 1936a/1969: 55.
[12] Webster 1936a/1969: 20.
[13] Webster 1936a/1969: 70–1.
[14] Whitman 1951: 31.
[15] Whitman 1951: 14.
[16] Whitman 1951: 40.

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a type of noble behavior'.[17] Again, though, we may wonder what kind of 'inner law' justified Ajax's actions.

For Knox too, the hero is paramount:

> Such is the strange and awesome character who, in six of the Sophoclean tragedies, commands the stage. Immovable once his decision is taken, deaf to appeals and persuasion, to reproof and threat, unterrified by physical violence, even by the ultimate violence of death itself, more stubborn as his isolation increases until he has no one to speak to but the unfeeling landscape, bitter at the disrespect and mockery the world levels at what it regards as failure, the hero prays for revenge and curses his enemies as he welcomes the death that is the predictable end of his intransigence. It is an extraordinary figure, this Sophoclean tragic hero...
>
> in Sophocles it is through this refusal to accept human limitations that humanity achieves its true greatness. It is a greatness achieved not with the help and encouragement of the gods, but through the hero's loyalty to his nature in trial, suffering, and death; a triumph purely human then, but one which the gods, in time, recognize and in which they surely, in their own far-off mysterious way, rejoice.[18]

Yet Knox, like Perrotta and Whitman, never substantiates his claim.[19] Even if we could establish that the gods rejoiced in the triumph of these heroes (a difficult proposition, given the divine involvement so often associated with their fall), it would not follow that the audience should rejoice too; that would imply alignment between the moral judgements of the gods with those of the audience, which would need to be demonstrated.

Focusing on the so-called heroes can reduce the other characters into little more than foils (thus Perrotta on Tecmessa, p. 83 above) – hardly an adequate response to the plays of Sophocles. So (to stay with *Ajax*) for Peter Burian,

> It is by listening to the voices of Tecmessa, the chorus, Teucer, Odysseus, and the rest of the play's polyphony that we step outside the limits of Ajax's brutal, stubborn, self-involved, and grandiose heroism to explore its limits for their world, for the new and different world in which the play was first presented.[20]

The title of his essay, 'Polyphonic *Ajax*', introduces a reading which takes seriously the multiplicity of voices that the play contains, rather than concentrating on Ajax to the exclusion of others. Such an

[17] Whitman 1951: 80.
[18] Knox 1964: 44, 27.
[19] Finglass 2014d.
[20] Burian 2012: 81.

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approach also invites consideration of the place within the plays of co-operative values.[21] From the *Iliad* onwards, achieving personal excellence and striving for the advancement of a wider group (including one's family and intimate friends) are often in tension; tragedy often lies in failing to achieve both goals, as Sophocles' plays frequently exemplify.

The 'hero-worshipping' approach can still be traced, for example in the most recent Sophoclean volumes in the Aris and Philips series, Garvie's *Ajax* and March's *Electra*.[22] Both seem relaxed, for instance, about Ajax's plan – conceived before his madness – to kill the Greek army in their beds, regarding this as evidence for his heroic refusal to compromise, and a justified reaction to dishonour. But there have been sceptical voices too. The last chapter of Winnington-Ingram's monograph, 'Heroes and Gods', criticizes both this approach and its chief rival:

> No two assumptions have more persistently bedevilled the interpretation of Sophocles than these: (i) that the values for which his heroes stand, destroying themselves and others, are, simply and necessarily, right in the eyes of the poet; and (ii) that the will of the gods is not only just but also benevolent and must be seen to be so. The pietists and the 'hero-worshippers' are equally below the measure of the poet's tragic vision, which owes its character both to the limitations of the heroes and to the conditions which the gods impose upon them.[23]

Winnington-Ingram's second assumption, 'pietism', is no longer in vogue,[24] although as late as 1984, Buxton felt the need to warn readers that 'If what we expect in the plays is simple piety, we shall miss the complexity and ambiguity which are actually there.'[25] It is hard to see how such an attitude could have survived the *Niobe* papyrus elucidated by Barrett in 1974, with the horrific cruelty shown by the gods towards the daughters of Niobe (pp. 29–35 above). How could anyone have thought, after that text, that the gods in Sophocles always uphold a moral order worth upholding? As for the complete plays, *Oedipus the King* shows the brutal fall of a beloved and capable leader for unintended offences (pp. 40–3 above). The righteous vengeance of

[21] Carter 2005.
[22] Garvie 1998; March 2001. Also Garvie 2016; and March 1991–3 on *Ajax*.
[23] Winnington-Ingram 1980: 303.
[24] R. Parker 1999.
[25] Buxton 1984/1995: 5.

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Orestes and Electra in *Electra* is prompted by the gods, but the position that Apollo's command has no moral complications is hard to sustain.[26] Hyllus' condemnation at the end of *Trachiniae* of the gods' indifference to mortals chimes with the events of that play (pp. 98–100 below). Antigone may champion the unwritten laws of the gods, but the gods do not prevent her death. And so on.

Winnington-Ingram's first assumption, on the other hand, has proved longer-lasting. Here, too, the contribution of the fragments has been overlooked. According to Sommerstein,

> the 'Sophoclean hero' (or heroine) who stands upright and obstinate against all the storms of circumstance in a noble, if sometimes foolhardy, refusal to yield or compromise…, it is generally agreed, appears in six of the seven surviving Sophoclean tragedies; yet there is no clear example of one among the fragmentary plays…the mismatch should serve as a warning that no generalization about Sophocles based only on seven out of 123 plays can be regarded as a safe one.[27]

The Perrotta–Knox hypothesis hardly fits *Niobe*, nor *Eurypylus*, nor *Tereus*. And, as we have seen, its application even to the plays that survive is tenuous.

'The Sophoclean hero' is a handy phrase, and a catchy concept. But as a way of looking at and responding to the complex characters which stand at the centre of Sophocles' plays, it proves as inadequate as the model advanced by the pietists. A unifying theory of Sophocles' protagonists remains elusive; perhaps paying attention to the fragments will offer fresh paths of investigation.

[26] See Finglass 2007d on *El.* 1398–1441, and pp. 8–10; also pp. 103–4 below.

[27] Sommerstein 2012a: 209. See Sommerstein in Sommerstein and Talboy 2012: xxv for an argument that portrayals of Achilles and Neoptolemus in four fragmentary plays 'tell strongly against the view that for Sophocles an exceptional endowment of one or another virtue (courage, wisdom, endurance, familial devotion) could serve as a free pass to commit any indignity or atrocity'.

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