

«TRAGIC IRONY» IN THE AJAX OF SOPHOCLES

The tragic irony of the Ajax of Sophocles¹ is a considerable dramatic device to which the play owes much of its peculiar pathos.

In this paper we shall trace some notable instances of this effect.

I. In the opening scene Athena is portrayed by the dramatist playing with Ajax in what seems a sinister, merciless spirit, taking what he says at its face-value and addressing him in a sarcastic way (cf. 90, 94—95, 97, 101—102, 107, 109).

When Ajax rejects Athena's request to show mercy to Odysseus (111), the following exchange takes place:

Aθ. σὺ δ' οὖν, ἐπειδὴ τέρψις ἦδε σοι τὸ δρᾶν,
χωρῶ χειρὶ, φείδου μηδὲν ὧν περ ἐννοεῖς.

Αι. χωρῶ πρὸς ἔργον τοῦτο σοὶ δ' ἐφίεμαι,
τοιάνδ' αἰεὶ μοι σύμμαχον παρεστάναι (114—17).

Here Ajax's utterance is a good example of dramatic irony of unconscious type. «I go back, Ajax says, to my work; and this is what I bid you—always stand at my side as an ally in this way». In fact for Ajax, ἔργον² means the 'whipping of Odysseus until he dies, bloodred' (cf. 110), but for the audience the 'work' he goes to do is the torture of a helpless animal. The words τοιάνδ' αἰεὶ μοι σύμμαχον³ παρεστάναι are also ambiguous. Ajax, by bidding the goddess to stand by his side 'in such alliance as this', thinks that Athena's action (as described in 51 ff.) was friendly; but the audience know that the 'ally' whom he so cavalierly addresses is a ruthless goddess determined to destroy him.

II. We come now to examine a pair of passages of tragic irony of conscious type, which help us to know Sophocles' method in the use of this species of the effect. We shall take them from the famous «third rhesis» of Ajax (646—692), which—couched in ambiguous language—is, in my opinion, so designed as to conceal the speaker's intention (to commit suicide) and spare Tecmessa and the chorus as much agony as possible⁴. But even though Ajax uses 'compassionate

1) See also G. Markantonatos, «Tragic Irony» in the Antigone of Sophocles, EMERITA 41, 1973, pp. 491 ff.; also «Tragic Irony» in the Trachiniae of Sophocles, ΠΛΑΤΩΝ, 26, 1974, pp. 73 ff.

2) It should be noted that almost the same phrase (πρὸς τὰ ἔργα ἐχώρου) is used by Thucydides (III. 83) to describe 'savage recourse to violence in Corcyra'. See B. M. W. Knox, The Ajax of Sophocles, HSCPh, 65, 1961, p. 5.

3) Since the word σύμμαχος reminds the audience of the line 90, where the same word is spoken sarcastically by Athena, the irony here becomes even more effective.

4) This speech of Ajax (646—92) has caused a great dispute among scholars and critics that is still alive. Briefly speaking there are two schools of thought: Some people (cf. Thirlwall, On the Irony of Sophocles, in «Remains, Literary and Theological», ed. J. J. S. Perowne, London 1878, vol. III, pp. 33—9; F. Welker, Über den Aias des Sophokles, Rhein. Museum, 1829, pp. 229—39; T. B. L. Webster, An Introduction to

ambiguities' as W. B. Stanford remarks⁵, they are full of a bitterest humour, which adds too much to the intensity of the situation.

In 654—60

ἀλλ' εἶμι πρὸς τε λουτρὰ καὶ παρακτίους
 λειμῶνας, ὡς ἂν λύμαθ' ἀγνίσας ἐμὰ
 μῆνιν βαρεῖαν ἐξαλύξωμαι θεᾶς·
 μολῶν τε χῶρον ἐνθ' ἂν ἀστιβῆ κίχῳ
 κρύψω τόδ' ἔγχος τοῦμόν, ἔχθιστον βελῶν,
 γαίας ὀρύξας ἐνθα μή τις ὄψεται·
 ἀλλ' αὐτὸ νύξ "Αἰδης τε σφζόντων κάτω.

Ajax uses language which Tecmessa and the chorus take as a statement that he intends to seek purification of his defilements and to submit to the gods and to the Atreidae, though to him and to the audience it expresses his determination to kill himself. We must stress here the speaker's ominous allusions to his imminent journey to the underworld in the phrases ἀλλ' εἶμι πρὸς τε λουτρὰ καὶ παρακτίους λειμῶνας and μολῶν τε χῶρον ἐνθ' ἂν ἀστιβῆ κίχῳ, the real meaning of which Tecmessa and the chorus are not able to grasp; on the contrary they cannot but infer that he really wishes to go: to the bathing-places and the meadows by the sea so as to 'purify' his defilements and 'escape' the goddess' heavy wrath, and try to rid of the unlucky sword by burying it in the earth there where nobody will be able to see it. Similar hints at Hades, the unseen place, may be traced also in the last two lines. We must also stress the ambiguity of the words λύμαθ' and κρύψω. In fact λύματα means to Tecmessa and the sailors «off scouring», «defilement», but to the spectators «shame», «disgrace» (ch. Oed. Col. 805); thus it appears as a clear suggestion to the audience that Ajax is going to purify «his disgrace» - a thing which according to his heroic ἦθος can be achieved only by death. The word κρύψω⁶ is also intended to be double-edged; for, while it means to Tecmessa and the chorus the 'hiding' of the sword in the earth, for the audience it has another ring: the 'hiding' of the

Sophocles, London, 2nd ed. 1969, pp. 96—7; C. M. Bowra, Sophoclean Tragedy, Oxford, paperback ed. 1965, pp. 39 ff.) think that Ajax is speaking sincerely here and that he has decided to give way to divine and human authority, but his decision is frustrated because the frenzy reappears and strikes him again. Perhaps other scholars (cf. R. C. Jebb, Sophocles, the Plays and Fragments, Part VII: The Ajax, Cambridge 1896, p. 35; T. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles, Berlin 1917, pp. 63 ff.; W. Schadewaldt, Sophokles, Aias und Antigone, in «Neue Wege zur Antike VIII, 1929, pp. 72 ff. P. W. Harsh, A Handbook of Classical Drama, Stanford 1944, p. 100; C. H. Whitman, Sophocles: A Study in Heroic Humanism, Cambridge, Mass. 1951, pp. 74 ff. J. C. Kamerbeek, The Plays of Sophocles: Commentaries: Part I: The Ajax, Leiden 1953, pp. 11 and 134; M. Pohlenz, Die griechische Tragödie, 2nd ed., Göttingen 1974, pp. 176 f.; W. B. Stanford, Sophocles, Ajax, London 1963, pp. 282 and 287 n. 13) are right in thinking that Ajax still intends to commit suicide and deliberately uses ambiguous language so that he can mislead Tecmessa and the chorus and kill himself without hindrance.

5) W. B. Stanford, Ajax, op. cit., p. 286.

6) On the word κρύπτω in the meaning of ὀάπτω see Hesiod., Works and Days 137; Soph., Oedip. Col. 621; Herodot. I. 216, etc.

sword in Ajax's bosom (cf. κρυφαίω in 899, and περιπετές in 907), or perhaps its ultimate burial with Ajax in his grave (cf. 577).

Ajax ends his speech with some directions for the future, and in ambiguously expressed hope which his hearers on the stage and the orchestra once more take as evidence that he has abandoned his intention to commit suicide :

σὺ δὲ

εἴσω θεοῖς ἐλθοῦσα διὰ τέλους, γύναι,
 εὔχου τελεῖσθαι τοῦμὸν ὧν ἐρᾷ κέαρ.
 ὑμεῖς θ', ἐταῖροι, ταῦτά τῃδέ μοι τάδε
 τιμᾶτε, Τεύκρω τ', ἦν μόλη, σημήνατε
 μέλειν μὲν ἡμῶν, εὐνοεῖν δ' ὑμῖν ἅμα.
 ἐγὼ γὰρ εἴμ' ἐκεῖσ' ὅποι πορευτέον·
 ὑμεῖς δ' ἂ φράζω δρᾶτε, καὶ τάχ' ἂν μ' ἴσω
 πύθοισθε, κεῖ νῦν δυστυχῶ, σεσωμένον. (684—692)

The effect of irony depends here on the following ambiguities : the phrase εὔχου τελεῖσθαι τοῦμὸν ὧν ἐρᾷ κέαρ means to Tecmessa and the chorus 'the reconciliation with the goddess and his salvation', but for the audience it is a clear hint at what Ajax really longs for, namely θάνατος. Ajax has decided to go ἐκεῖσ' ὅποι πορευτέον, while his comrades will soon learn him σεσωμένον, even though he is now in misery. We have here two ambiguities ; by the first phrase ἐκεῖσ' ὅποι πορευτέον Ajax's friends understand 'where I must go now', that is εἰς τὰ λουτρά to purge himself of the stains, but for the audience it has quite another ring : 'where I feel I must go', that is to the underworld. Similarly the word σεσωμένον is a fresh cause for hope in Tecmessa and the chorus as meaning to them «cured of his νόσος» «recovered from his sickness» (cf. Hipp. Progn. 138 ; Isaeus 3b) after his purification, whereas it suggests to the audience «saved by death from the sufferings of life», or «cleared of the awful dishonour by death» (cf. Iph. at Aul. 1440).

III. One use of tragic irony, very characteristic of Sophocles, is the ringing of a note of joy just before the disaster. This usually takes the form of a choral song, called ὑπόρχημα⁷. Such an hyporchema is contained in 693—718. The cheerful utterances of the Salaminian sailors, after Ajax's 'reconciliation speech', contrast sharply with their impending despair on hearing of their master's suicide.

The chorus break into a passionate song and dance of joy ; they call on the gods of pleasure and comfort, Pan and Apollo, to join their dance and gladness. Now darkness of horror and shame is lifted away, since Αἴας μετενεγνώσθη (717). Then they welcome the prospect of better days now that their master has left his wrath and time has done its work of healing.

IV. Finally it is worth tracing a pair of passages containing moving effects of irony (unconscious).

In 735—6

οὐκ ἔνδον, ἀλλὰ φροῦδος ἀρτίως, νέας
 βουλάς νέοισιν ἐγκαταζεύξας τρόποις

7) See A. M. Dale, Stasimon and Hyporcheme, ERANOS 48, 1950—52, pp. 19 ff. Sophocles also uses this technique of introducing a sudden burst of hopeful rejoicing followed soon afterwards by sad disillusionment in Oed. Tyr. 1086 ff. ; Antig. 1115 ff. Trach. 205 ff and 633 ff.

the words φροῦδος, νέας βουλὰς and νέοισιν... τρόποις are intended to be ambiguous. The epithet φροῦδος for the chorus and the messenger means simply 'gone away', 'departed', but for the spectators who know that Ajax has sought a secret place to kill himself it means 'dead', 'ruined' (cf. Eurip., Med. 722; Heracl. 703; Orest. 390). Likewise the emphatic repetition of the epithet νέος in the phrases νέαι βουλαὶ «new plans» and νέοι τρόποι «new dispositions», while meaning to the chorus Ajax's supposed decision to 'propitiate gods and men' and 'reject the idea of suicide', suggests to the audience just the reverse; namely, that Ajax's purposes and intentions are not «new» at all, but always the same from the very moment that he felt how ἄτιμος ὧδε πρόκειται (426—7).

In 743—4

ἀλλ' οἴχεται τοι, πρὸς τὸ κέρδιον τραπεῖς
γνώμης, θεοῖσιν ὡς καταλλαχθῆ ἄλλου

the word οἴχεται (cf. Aesch., Persae 1) is used here with an ominous nuance. In fact the audience are aware that Ajax is not simply 'departed', but 'departed this life' (cf. also the euphemistic use of οἴχομαι instead of θνήσκω in Soph. El. 146). In addition the spectators know that πρὸς τὸ κέρδιον τραπεῖς γνώμης is not to change his mind πρὸς τὸ κέρδιον and reconcile⁸ with Athena but to carry out his 'hidden purpose', that is, to put an end to his life.

Π Ε Ρ Ι Λ Η Ψ Ι Σ

Ἡ 'τραγικὴ εἰρωνεία' εἰς τὸν «Αἴαντα» τοῦ Σοφοκλέους ἀποτελεῖ ἐν ἀξιόλογον δραματικὸν στοιχεῖον συμβάλλον εἰς τὴν ἔντασιν τοῦ τραγικοῦ πάθους. Εἰς τὴν παροῦσαν μελέτην ἐξετάζονται μερικὰ ἐκ τῶν πλέον σημαντικῶν παραδειγμάτων 'τραγικῆς εἰρωνείας' ἀπαντῶντα εἰς τὸ ἐν λόγῳ ἔργον. Εἰς τὰ χωρία 654—60 καὶ 684—92, ἡ εἰρωνεία εἶναι «συνειδητῆς» μορφῆς καὶ ἐδράζεται ἐπὶ τινῶν σκοπίμως χρησιμοποιουμένων ἀμφιλογιῶν, ἐνῶ εἰς τὰ χωρία 114—17, 693—718, 735—6 καὶ 743—4, ἡ εἰρωνεία εἶναι «ἀσυνειδητῆς» μορφῆς καὶ ἐξαρτᾶται ἐκ τινῶν, ἀνεπιγνώστως προφερομένων, λέξεων ἢ φράσεων.

8. Cf. also the schol., ad loc.: ὡς τοῦ τῶν θεῶν χάλλου λήξῃ καὶ τοῖς θεοῖς καταλλαχθῆ.