

EMMANUEL VIKETOS

A STUDY OF ΔΕΙΝΟΣ (SOPHOCLES, *ANTIGONE* 332-333) IN ITS DRAMATIC CONTEXT¹

The word δεινός is a key-word for the interpretation of the first stasimon. The rest of the ode is, to a great degree, an explanation of what is said in the first two lines. This word, a *vocabulum variae potestatis*², has been variously interpreted and translated³. All the interpreters of the ode give to this word the meaning they think that the Chorus wants to express, but they do not remark, so far as I know, that in this dramatic situation this word conveys to the audience a meaning different from that which the Chorus wants to express.

In this paper I will examine the meaning of the word δεινός by studying it in its dramatic context. After defining the meaning that the Chorus wants to signify by the word δεινός I shall argue that this word conveys to the audience connotations different from those which the Chorus wishes to express⁴.

To clarify the meanings intended by the Chorus we need to examine the dramatic situation as well as the mood of the Chorus at that moment⁵. The city of Thebes had just been saved from a great danger. The ode of the parodos illustrates the deep relief and exultation felt by the Theban Elders at the defeat and flight of the Argive army. Their relief and joy are so great that the light of the sun seems to them the most beautiful that has ever shone on Thebes⁶. This exceptional mood implies that the Theban Elders had experienced deep anxiety during the Argive invasion⁷.

When the guard announces the burial of Polyneices, the Chorus' first reaction is to suggest that the burial might have been instigated by the gods (278-279). This comment by the Chorus implies that the Theban Elders did not believe that a man would have dared to perform such a terrible deed, that is, to violate Creon's decree and bury Polyneices⁸. Creon reacts violently to the Chorus' suggestion, becomes enraged at their comment and states that whoever carried out the burial was bribed by his political enemies. Creon's wrath, his intense reaction and his arguments surely must have moved and influenced the Chorus. There are some passages in this ode that illustrate this influence. First, the Chorus' phrase τόλμας χάριν (371), which corresponds to what Creon had said: τίς ἀνδρῶν ἦν ὁ τολμήσας τάδε; (248). Secondly, Creon's view on man's duty as citizen (182f. and 187-191) finds an echo at the second antistrophe of the ode (see Jebb, note at 370f; R.W.B. Burton, op. cit. p. 95). Thirdly, the second antistrophe, especially the three last lines (373-375), is very relevant to the violation of Creon's edict. Here the Chorus is clearly hinting at the transgressor of Creon's decree⁹.

It should also be added that three facts explain why the Chorus was so ready to consider this violation from Creon's point of view. First, the Chorus is composed of Theban Elders who were not only nobles (843, 940), but had also been chosen by Creon for their faithfulness to the Theban king (164-169). Secondly, the Theban Elders had very recently experienced a great danger and threat to their city¹⁰. And thirdly, they have an obvious respect for authority¹¹.

The Chorus' mood and thought is also reflected in the use of the neuter τοῦτο (334), whereby man is introduced as a monstrous creature¹². The phrase also θεῶν | τε τὰν ὑπερτάτων, Γᾶν ἄφθιτον, ἀκαμάτων ἀποτρύεται (337-339) involves no

favourable connotations¹³. The closing of the ode is also indicative of the Chorus' train of thought and mood. The mind of the Chorus is focused on the unknown transgressor and the danger involved in the violation of Creon's edict¹⁴. And it is not accidental but indicative of the Chorus' fears, that at the end of the ode the Elders refer first to man's proneness towards evil and afterwards to his proneness towards good (365-367).

σοφόν τι τὸ μηχανόεν
τέχνας ὑπὲρ ἐλπίδ' ἔχων
τοτὲ μὲν κακόν, ἄλλοτ' ἐπ' ἐσθλὸν ἔρπει

Thus, in this dramatic situation, it is quite natural for the Theban Elders to feel awe for man after they have seen that Creon's edict had been violated—a fact beyond their belief—by somebody who defied death. This terrible deed, seen in the light of the recent events at their city, and under the influence of Creon's wrath and thoughts, makes the Theban Elders express the awe they felt for man, and reflect on men's formidable nature, his boldness, cleverness and strangeness. The Theban Elders discern all these characteristics in the deed's accomplishment. Thus the word δεινός is invested by the Chorus with all these notions. While the notion of marvelling should not be excluded¹⁵, it is not dominant, because in the Chorus' mind, after the violation of Creon's edict, his wrath and his arguments against the burial of Polynices, fears of a new threat to their city predominate. The last antistrophe (365-375) illustrates these fears very well.

The fact suggested by many critics, that δεινὰ (332) echoes Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* (585f.), supports our view, because in the latter δεινὰ (586) is clearly without any favourable connotation.

Let us now examine what meanings the word δεινός may convey to the audience. It is not natural for the audience to see the act of burying from the Chorus' point of view for two reasons: First, the spectators, unlike the Chorus, are quite independent of Creon, as of any other character. Secondly, the spectators are aware of some very important facts that the Chorus does not know. There is no conspiracy as Creon believes and the deed was not done by a man who has been bribed. On the contrary, a young woman, completely alone dared to violate Creon's decree and bury Polynices. The spectators also know that her motives were sisterly love and respect for an unwritten law dictating burial of the dead.

All these facts excite feelings of wonder for Antigone on the part of the audience. Antigone's exceptional personality, her daring deed and her defiance of death convey to the spectator the greatness of man. The spectator in her figure discerns the image of a being endowed with greatness¹⁶. Thus, when the Chorus says πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδεν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει (332-333), it is quite natural for the spectators to see that, in the Chorus' characterization of man, Antigone is perfectly portrayed as a great figure, and, consequently, to attribute to the word δεινός first and foremost the notion of wonder¹⁷, and only secondarily to attach the meanings and the implications intended by the Chorus¹⁸. Sophocles' use of the word δεινός in this passage is an impressive example of dramatic irony and the choice of this word in this dramatic context illustrates once again that Sophocles is a master of language.

NOTES

1. The study of language in its dramatic context has been especially common in Shakespeare in recent decades. Ralph E.C. Houghton (ed.), *King Lear* (Oxford 1957) 10-11 remarks: 'So that

perhaps the most valuable constructive work, on the literary as opposed to the textual side, done in our time has been the study of language in its dramatic context'.

2. See Ellendt-Genthe, *Lexicon Sophocleum* s.v. δεινός.

3. See, e.g., Jebb, G. Müller and Kamerbeek ad loc; G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama* (Ithaca, N. Y. 1958) 206; A. T. Von S. Bradshaw in the *Classical Quarterly* N. S. 12 (1962) 204f; Albin Lesky, *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellenen* Göttingen 1972) 196; R. W. B. Burton, *The Chorus in Sophocles' Tragedies* (Oxford 1980), 96. For a list of various meanings attributed to this word by some critics see R. F. Goheen, *The Imagery of Sophocles' Antigone* (Princeton 1951), 141.

4. It is not uncommon for the Chorus to convey to the audience something different from what the Chorus itself wants to express. Cf. H.D.F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama* (London 1956) 167 'What the Chorus may itself be thinking is one matter; what its words convey to the audience may be another'. Cf. also J. P. Vernant, 'Tensions et ambiguïtés dans la tragédie', in J. P. Vernant & P. Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne* (Paris 1973) 36 'C' est seulement pour le spectateur que le langage du texte peut être transparent à tous niveaux, dans sa polyvalence et ses ambiguïtés'; and, more recently, R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge 1980) 97 'Now it is characteristic of the odes of this play that they tend, ironically, to carry a secondary reference to Creon which cannot be in the minds of the singers'. Cf. also JHS 91(1971) 119 n.1.

5. We cannot precisely define the meaning that the Chorus wants to convey by this word without setting the ode in its dramatic context. As T. B.L. Webster, *An Introduction to Sophocles* (Oxford 1936, 2nd ed. 1969), 126 puts it 'No song in Sophocles is merely an interlude which could be transferred to another place or another play'.

6. Cf. also the Chorus' characteristic address: ὦ χρυσέας ἀμέρας βλέφαρον (103-104).

7. This anxiety is very well expressed by the Chorus in *Septem contra Thebas of Aeschylus*.

8. Cf. 220 and 376-383.

9. Cf. C.M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford 1944) 86; R.W.B. Burton, op. cit. 98.

10. On the influence of the recent events on the Chorus, see I.M. Linforth, 'Antigone and Creon', *U. Cal. Publ. in Class. Phil.* 15 (1961) 198-99.

11. Cf. 872-874 σέβειν μὲν εὐσέβειά τις, | κράτος δ', ὄτω κράτος μέλει, | παραβατὸν οὐδαμᾶ πέλει.

12. See P. Friedländer, *Hermes* 69 (1934), 59; R.W.B. Burton, op. cit., 97.

13. See C.P. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization. An Interpretation of Sophocles*, (Cambridge Mass. and London 1981), 170; Robert Coleman, *PCPS* 18 (1972), 10.

14. See R. F. Goheen, op. cit., 53-54.

15. There are some expressions in the ode which indicate feelings of wonder on the part of the Chorus. Cf. especially 347, 360-361.

16. C. P. Segal, 'Sophocles' praise of man and the conflicts of the Antigone' *Arion* 3.2 (1964), 61 'the image of man's greatness persists throughout the play, but it persists in the figure of Antigone'...

17. This concept of marvelling at the greatness of man is also supported by the Chorus' expressions regarding man's great achievements and resources.

18. No rendering of δεινός is quite satisfactory, because none by itself conveys all the overtones and shades of meaning that the Chorus wants to express, as well as the connotations that this word conveys to the audience. The rendering of this word gives an idea of the insuperable difficulties which are very often confronted by the translators of Sophocles.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΙΣ

Εἰς τὸ σημεῖωμα αὐτὸ διερευνᾶται ἡ σημασία τὴν ὁποίαν θέλει νὰ προσδώσῃ ὁ Χορὸς εἰς τὴν ἀμφίσημον λέξιν δεινός ('Αντιγόνη 332-333) ἐν συναρτησίῃ καὶ συνεξετάσει τοῦ δραματικοῦ πλαισίου εἰς τὸ ὅποιον ἐντάσσεται τὸ σχετικὸν χωρίον. Ἐν συνεχείᾳ ὑποστηρίζεται ὅτι ἡ λέξις δεινός εἰς αὐτὴν τὴν θέσιν τοῦ δράματος ὑποβάλλει εἰς τὸν θεατὴν ἔννοιαν μὴ συμπίπτουσαν πρὸς ἐκείνην τὴν ὁποίαν θέλει νὰ ἐκφράσῃ ὁ Χορὸς.