

«TRAGIC IRONY» IN THE TRACHINIAE OF SOPHOCLES

In the Trachiniae of Sophocles there are a few notable pieces of tragic irony lying in some unintentionally suggestive phrases and joyful anticipations of Deianeira in contrast with the disastrous conclusion, which the aware spectators foresee; some unconsciously ambiguous utterances of the chorus give rise also to moving ironic effects, since they hint at painful events that are going to take place in the course of action. The aim of this article is to trace these pieces.

vv. 24–5 *ἐγὼ γὰρ ἤμην ἐκπεπληγμένη φόβῳ
μή μοι τὸ κάλλος ἄλγος ἐξέυροι ποιέ.*

[It is interesting to note that St. Kapsomenos' arguments (Στις Τραχίνιαι τοῦ Σοφοκλή, ΕΦΣΠΘ, vol. VI, 1947, pp. 165 ff.) strongly defend these lines against the rash athetesis of Dobree, Nauck, Redermacher and Kranz, which not even Pearson found worthy of suggesting.]

At the opening of the play Deianeira recalls the sorrows, which have been her portion long ago (4 ff.); she tells of Achelous' wooing (9 ff.) and her marriage to Heracles after his victory over the river-god (18 ff.). In a moment she remembers the tremendous ἀγὼν between Achelous and Heracles, and utters the words quoted above, which convey an anticipative tragic irony; in fact, the temporarily happy outcome of that combat was to be shown at the end as fatal as Achelous' ruin: her κάλλος is destined to bring ἄλγος to herself, as happened to the princess Iole (cf. 465 τὸ κάλλος αὐτῆς τὸν βίον διώλεσεν).

vv. 200–1. At last, joyful tidings reach Deianeira; a messenger enters and announces that her πολύζηλος πόσις (185) has succeeded in a great victory, and is now σὺν κράτει νικηφόρῳ (186) on his way home. Deianeira breaks into a jubilant prayer, which is, in the light of the catastrophic outcome, marked with an affecting tone of irony:

*ὦ Ζεῦ, τὸν Οὔτης ἄτομον ὅς λειμῶν' ἔχεις,
ἔδωκας ἡμῖν ἀλλὰ σὺν χρόνῳ χαράν.*

She addresses her invocation to Οὔτης Ζεὺς who has at last bestowed χαρὰ upon her heart, and urges the Trachinian maidens of the chorus (202–4) to express their joy with voices. Obviously she cannot forecast that her husband is destined to be burnt on Oeta (cf. 1191–1199), and that her present joy will turn at the end to a horrible grief. Only the audience can understand the deepest grimness of the joke which the oracles of Apollo are playing on her and her husband, and foresee the ruinous conclusion in contrast to her bright anticipations.

vv. 205–7 *ἀνολολύξεται δόμος
ἐφροστίοις ἀλαλαγαῖς
ὁ μελλόνυμφος*

[205 ἀνολολύξετε codd. (LAR); ἀνολολύξεται Elmsley (cf. Agam. 587); ὀλολύξεται πᾶν δῶμα Radermacher.]

A most telling irony can be traced in this utterance of the chorus, the effect of which depends on the ambiguous words δόμος... ὁ μελλόνυμφος «the house that is soon to welcome the husband or the... bride». Obviously the phrase

conveys an ominous ambiguity in the light of Iole's arrival. But irony here appears much more pointedly thrilling, if we accept the parallel rendering of the words «the house that is ready for marriage»¹, because the epithet μελλόνυμφος, in this sense, is in a striking contrast with Heracles' plight in his return.

vv. 233–235 Δη. . . δίδαξον, εἰ ζῶνθ' Ἡρακλῆ προσδέξομαι.

Λι. ἔγωγέ τοι σφ' ἔλειπον ἰσχύοντά τε
καὶ ζῶντα καὶ θάλλοντα κοῦ νόσφ βαρύν.

[233 Ἡρακλέα codd. There is no reason to read Ἡρακλῆ following Dindorf, Pearson and Masqueray, since a synzesis may be applied to the syllable -εα.]

The spectators hear with horror these words, which allude unconsciously to the frightful condition, in which Heracles is going to appear (974 ff.). Lichas of course cannot foresee the terrible reversal of Heracles' fortune; he is absolutely sure of his master's safe and glorious homecoming, which was foretold by the oracles. Similarly Deianeira cannot herself surmise such an unexpected outcome. Sophocles puts intentionally into Lichas' mouth the suggestive words ζῶντα «alive», θάλλοντα «strong» (cf. Joseph. Bell. Jud. VII. 348 ζῆ καὶ τέθηλεν; this participle is more than ἰσχύοντα² as implying «radiant health», cf. Jebb, ad loc.) and κοῦ νόσφ βαρύν, whereas the audience know that he will appear νόσφ . . . βαρύτατος! Thus the passage appears ironically suggestive, because it stresses the contrast between the hero's present state and that in which he is going to arrive at Trachis.

vv. 303–6. In a moment Deianeira expresses the desire to be informed about the identity of the beautiful girl Iole, for whom she felt pity (289), but meets with Lichas' feigned ignorance and Iole's silence. Deianeira prays to Zeus to protect her σπέρμα from such cruel fate:

ὦ Ζεῦ τροπαῖε, μή ποτ' εἰσίδοιμί σε
πρὸς τοῦμόν οὔτω σπέρμα χωρήσαντά μοι,
μηδ', εἴ τι δράσεις τῆσδέ γε ζώσης ἔτι.
οὔτως ἐγὼ δέδοικα τάσδ' ὄρωμένη.

Here we have another passage of dramatic irony residing rather in a contrast between what Deianeira wishes to happen to her and her family, and what the real situation is going to bring to her, than in the actual words of the speaker. However the word σπέρμα must be taken in a wider sense: «race», «family» (cf. Antig. 981). Deianeira prays to Zeus to protect her family from such misfortune (cf. the schol. ἵκετεύει δὲ μὴ παθεῖν παραπλήσια, ad loc.), without suspecting the much more terrible calamity, which is about to meet herself and her husband. She feels an intimate fear (δέδοικα 306) before the misery of others, but cannot perceive how dreadfully true her sentiments are. Moreover the spectators shudder at hearing Deianeira address Iole by the words δυστάλαινα (307) and τάλαινα (320), which after a little time will be shown appropriate to herself rather than to the captive princess.

1) T. B. L. Webster, «Trachiniae» in «Greek Poetry and Life», Oxford 1936, p. 167.

2) It is worth observing at what place the word ἰσχύοντα occurs; if Lichas had said at the outset that Heracles was alive, Deianeira might well care to hear further (cf. later from the messenger, 182 ff.), that he was not only alive but hearty; but after hearing that a man is ἰσχύων one scarcely craves to be told that he is ζῶν.

vv. 491—6. A messenger enters and reveals the bitter truth; it was for Iole's sake that Oechalia had been conquered by Heracles, who also intends to make her his concubine (351—74; esp. 360). Then Lichas himself is engaged to confirm the events (475—8). The veils of Deianeira's delusion are torn, but she manages to restrain her emotions; a very heavy shadow flits across her joy, as she brings to her mind the charming face of the captive princess. The spectators, who know the outcome can take this as a premonitory shadowing of what is to befall herself and her husband. At any rate when Deianeira, recovering from the first bewilderment, bids Lichas to follow her into the palace to give him a message, and some «gifts» for Heracles; in a moment she remarks:

κοῦτοι νόσον γ' ἐπακτὸν ἐξαρούμεθα,
θεοῖσι δυσμαχοῦντες. ἀλλ' εἴσω στέγης
χωρῶμεν, ὡς λόγων τ' ἐπιστολὰς φέρης,
ἂ τ' ἀντὶ δῶρων δῶρα χρὴ προσαρμόσαι,
καὶ ταῦτ' ἄγης. κενὸν γὰρ οὐ δίκαιά σε
χωρεῖν⁷ προσελθόνθ' ὧδε σὺν πολλῷ στόλῳ.

Here Deianeira's statement is one of stirring irony. The sinister meaning of the verbal epithet ἐπακτὸς has been already suggested by Mazon (RPh, 1951, p. 9): «attiré sur la tête d'un homme par une opération magique», which hints ominously at Heracles' doom, caused by the operation of the magic; besides, the phrase θεοῖσι δυσμαχοῦντες denotes «fighting an unholy fight with the gods» — here with the god of love; all this, in view of Deianeira's undertaking such an unholy strife against Eros is ironically suggestive. However, the focus of irony lies here in the pregnant word νόσον that is an ominously ironical suggestion of Heracles' fearful affliction owing to the poisoned robe. We must also pay attention to the poignant words ἀντὶ δῶρων δῶρα, and in particular to the infinitive προσαρμόσαι, the meaning of which is deeply sinister. Deianeira wants to send Heracles «gifts which may fittingly be awarded in return for gifts ἀντὶ δῶρων δῶρα (ch. the schol. ὅπως ἂν αὐτῷ παρ' ἡμῶν κομίσεως ἀντίποινα καὶ σύμφωνα οἷς ἤγαγες) and Heracles' gifts are the spoils of Oechalia including Iole! Again, the infin. προσαρμόσαι is ominously ambiguous: its surface sense is «to find fitting measure for Heracles' peplos», but its hidden meaning is «to apply the philtre to Heracles» (cf. Jebb, ad loc.). Thus, I agree with Kamerbeek (ad loc.) that Sophocles means us to perceive that «Deianeira has already conceived her fatal plan». In addition one could say that the word προσαρμόσαι makes the spectators reflect not only on the tunic but also on Heracles's impending spasm of agony and excruciating pain as it attaches closely to his flesh.

vv. 580—3. When Deianeira appears again on the stage (531), her face shows that a serious change has taken place in her mind. Yes; she reveals that she cannot bear the idea that she and the young Iole have to share the one embrace μῑς ὑπὸ χλαίνης ὑπαγκάλισμα (539—40). Because it is obvious that her previous tender blossom has now faded, so she fears that Heracles will be called her πόσις (550), but in reality he will be Iole's ἀνήρ (551). Accordingly Deianeira has taken a desperate decision to resort to magic (554); she hopes to regain her husband's affections by means of the blood she picked up from the wound of the centaur Nessus (558), who had been killed by Heracles for having ventured to assault her:

χιτώνα τόνδ' ἔβαψα, προσβαλοῦσ' ὄσα
ζῶν κείνος εἶπε· καὶ πεπεύρανται τάδε.
κακὰς δὲ τόλμας μήτ' ἐπισταίμην ἐγὼ
μήτ' ἐκμάθοιμι, τὰς τε τολμώσας στυγῶ.

[580 προσβαλοῦσ' : if we accept the reading προσβαλοῦσ' (cf. also Radermacher's conjecture προσβάλλουσ'), we can render the phrase as follows : «applying τὸ φίλτρον to the tunic with attention to all the given details by Nessus» ; thus the scholiast's κατ' ἐντολὴν Νέσσου ἄλλα τινὰ συμμίξασα must be rejected. Besides, another proposed interpretation here «attending to all that Nessus said» is, in my opinion, rightly rejected by Jebb and Kamerbeek, since the text does not give any evidence supporting this view.]

This is another piece of dramatic irony depending on a contrast between what Deianeira understands about her acts and what the play demonstrates about them. She is quite unaware of the cruel game which the abominable monster is playing upon her ; for, she is convinced that she is not doing anything wrong, without suspecting the grave risk that is involved in the doctored robe for her husband. The audience, foreseeing that the clotted blood of the monster used as a love charm by the distraught woman will become the cause of destruction of the very object of her affection, are thrilled with pity and fear. Indeed Deianeira, utterly trustful and unused to the treachery of men, in particular of the ἐπίβουλος monsters, applies ὄσα ζῶν . . . κείνος εἶπε «just what the centaur said to her» ! . . . It is superfluous to say that Deianeira's spectacle gives rise to a powerful effect of irony, especially at the moment when she, so innocently, opens her heart to her young confidantes, entirely unaware of the approaching disaster. For her, Nessus' blood was the infallible charm, the only remedy — but it will be proved a murderous poison ! She, in her naive guilelessness, could not understand the ominous purpose of Nessus' treacherous gift.

From the passage quoted above the two last lines must be underlined, because their stirring irony cuts deeper than one can feel ; we see here that Deianeira's decision to resort to magic is endowed with all the innocence of a loving heart. She could not perceive what kind of τόλμη κακὴ she was ready to perform ; her chief purpose is to make her husband love her as she loves him (cf. the schol., ad loc. : τοῦ μεταθεῖναι αὐτοῦ τὴν γνώμην) and she accepts the means unquestioningly on the whole ignorant of the deadly danger involved in it. So the focus of irony at this point rests on the contrast between her good intentions (1123 ; 1136) and their appalling results.

vv. 604—9. Irony here is again expressed in a contrast between what Deianeira tries to achieve and what «fatal result» all these intentions of her will have. In fact, she, when delivering Lichas her fatal gift carefully arranged in a casket, gives her express instructions about the conditions which her husband must observe in putting on the tunic :

διδούς δὲ τόνδε φράζ' ὅπως μηδεὶς βροτῶν
κείνον πάροισθεν ἀμφιδύσεται χροῖ,
μήδ' ὄψεται νῦν μήτε φέγγος ἡλίου
μήθ' ἔρμος ἰρὸν μήτ' ἐφέστιον σέλας,
πρὶν κείνος αὐτὸν φανερός ἐμφανῶς σταθεὶς
δείξῃ θεοῖσιν ἡμέρα ταυροσφάγῳ.

[604 this line - usually embarrassing the commentators - can be easily rendered, if we read it, as follows : «... φράζε σκοπεῖσθε ὅπως ἀμφιδύσεται...» ; some verbs «qui comportent un effort dirigé vers un but» may be constructed with future indic., instead of subjunct. J. Humbert, *Syntaxe grecque*, Paris 1954, § 385.]

No doubt all these precautions emerge from Nessus' *θεσμοὶ* (682) ; the tunic must be put on by Heracles on the day when the bulls are to be slain (609) in special thankoffering to his father Zeus, while on the same day this tunic will be proved Ἐρινύων ὑφαντὸν ἀμφιβληστρον (1051—2). Sophocles indulges irony in making Deianeira repeat the substance of Centaur's perceptions (cf. 685—7) in a most striking manner, without suspecting the cruel game which the frightful monster had in mind to play on her (cf. *μηδείας*... *μηδ'*... *μήτε*... *μήθ'*... *μήτ'*...); nobody should see or touch the tunic before it is put on by Heracles ! (cf. the schol. on line 608 *πρὶν αὐτός, ἐνδυσάμενος, ἐπὶ τῆς οἰκίας φανερός καὶ ὑπ' ὄψει πάντων προελθεῖν*) Besides, the pregnant words *φανερός*... *σταθεῖς*... and *ἐμφανῶς*... *δείξῃ* referring to Heracles', when he, on the day of bull-slaying (*ἡμέρα ταυροσφάγῳ* 609 : it again may acquire a more deeply ominous sense, if we call to mind the thrilling phrases *βοῦν ἐπὶ φάτῃ* *Odys. XI. 411* and *βουθύτοις ἐν ἡμασι* *Choeph. 261*), appears wearing *τανναύφης πέπλος* «the radiant tunic» (602), convey a bitter irony for the audience when they call to mind Heracles' plight on that fatal day.

vv. 610—3. The following unconscious reference to the deadly nature of Deianeira's gift gives rise to emotional moving effect of irony :

*οὕτω γὰρ ἡὔγμην, εἴ ποτ' αὐτὸν ἐς δόμους
ἴδοιμι σωθέντ' ἢ κλύοιμι πανδίκως,
στελεῖν χιτῶνι τῷδε, καὶ φανεῖν θεοῖς
θυτῆρα καινῷ καινὸν ἐν πεπλώματι.*

[Since it seems to me more reasonable to construct *πανδίκως* with *κλύοιμι* rather than with *στελεῖν*, I punctuate after this abverb (cf. *Dain-Mazon*).]

The word *πανδίκως* includes an ironically ambiguous significance : indeed while it means to Deianeira «in consequence of my *εὐχῆ*» (cf. 610 *οὕτω γὰρ αὐγμην*...), the spectators understand it, as meaning the ...unintended justice of her gift in return for Heracles' reproachable behaviour towards her. In addition the *tr a d u c t i o* (*ἐλξίς*) *καινῷ καινὸν* (cf. *Soph. El. 642 ὀρθοῦθ' ὁ τλήμων ὀρθὸς ἐξ ὀρθῶν διφρων*) gives rise to a telling irony : Deianeira is unaware of the double dealing of the words *θυτῆρα καινῷ καινόν*... (613) ; she means to say that her husband will appear as a *νέος* *θυτῆρ* due to the new tunic (cf. the schol. *περιβαλεῖν αὐτὸν τοῦτω τῷ χιτῶνι καὶ φανεῖν αὐτὸν καινοπρεπῆ σφαγέα τῶν θυμάτων*), but the audience understand that he will be seen as an «unusual sacrificer» in so far he himself will be the victim !

vv' 630—2. Then Deianeira commands Lichas *μὴ 'πιθυμῆν πομπὸς ὦν περισσὰ δρᾶν* (617), so that her gratefulness, as well as Heracles' thankfulness to him, will be *ἐξ ἀπλήρης διπλήρης* (619). In the light of Lichas' subsequent disaster (cf. 772—82) tragic irony is also here in evidence. Finally Deianeira commissions Lichas to tell Heracles *τὰ ἐν δόμοισιν* (625) as well as *τὰ τῆς ξένης*... *προσδέγματος*' (627—8), and her conversation with him ends with the following words, which have a deeply ironical connotation :

δέδοικα γὰρ
μὴ πρῶ¹ λέγοις ἄν² τὸν πόθον τὸν ἐξ ἐμοῦ,
πρὶν ἰδέναί τ' ἀκεῖθεν εἰ ποθοῦμεθα.

She likes to leave her message in abeyance: why not? She sends the love-philtre instead of it! Here dramatic irony lies in the contrast between Deianeira's innocent fears and intentions and the *μοχθηρία* of Nessus whose «innocent instrument» of his abominable plan, Deianeira herself is fated to become.

vv. 633—62. And now a short choral ode follows of the type which Sophocles likes to insert just before the catastrophe: a relaxed and cheerful song. Below we are going to trace some pregnant utterances of the chorus which, in view of the imminent destruction, give rise to a stirring effect of irony. The young girls of Trachis in a mood of joyful expectation address the inhabitants of the neighbour districts (633—9); they hope they will soon hear the festive music on their master's homecoming:

ὁ καλλιβόας τάχ' ὑμῖν
αὐλὸς οὐκ ἀναρσίαν
ἄχῶν καναχάν ἐπάνεισιν, ἀλλὰ θείας
ἀντίλυρον μούσας. (640—3)

The chorus refer unconsciously to *καλλιβόας αὐλὸς* which was used in laments (cf. Webster, *Trachiniae*, op. cit., p. 172) and not in cheerful celebrations; thus it can be taken as an ironical anticipation of the moving *κωκυτὸς* «wailing» (cf. 867) after the terrible news about Heracles. Besides the words οὐκ ἀναρσίαν ἄχῶν καναχάν . . . (cf. the schol. οὐκ ἐχθρὰν οὐδὲ θρήνων βόην), make the audience call to mind Heracles' horrible cries of pain, with which the ravines of Oeta will resound, as soon as he arrives at Trachis. The Trachinian girls expect to see their master approaching *πάσας ἀρετᾶς λάφυρ' ἔχων* (645—6), but he will return in a fearful condition threatening and cursing his wife for the suffering which she has caused to him. Some other utterances of this hyporchema echo no less ominously: the day of the sack of Oechalia is called *ἐπίπνοος* (654), because the chorus believe it has put an end to Deianeira's sorrowful plight, whereas that day was the beginning of her husband's disaster. The maidens pray Heracles may return without delay and full of love and desire for her wife, thanks to the charm of Nessus! (650 ff.). Then they conclude their song with the following words:

ἔθεν μόλοι πανίμερος
τᾶς πειθοῦς παγχρόστῳ
συντακεῖς θηρὸς ἔπο παρφάσει (660—2)

[660 *πανάμερος* codd. Σ: *πανίμερος* Mudge. 662 *συγκραθεῖς* codd.; *συντακεῖς* Paley. (The epithet *πανάμερος*, thought it can be regarded in my view as a hyperdoricism 'πᾶν + ἄμερα', and need not be athetized, does not make good sense. On the contrary Mudge's *πανίμερος* «all-love» or «burning with

1) This adverb must be rendered «too early» as in Thuc. IV. 6 πρῶ ἐσβαλόντες.

2) The syntax *δέδοικα μὴ . . . λέγοις ἄν* is natural, since after a verb expressing fear can follow potent. Optat. with ἄν. Cf. Schwyzer - Debruner, *Grammatik* II, p. 327.

