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### SOME CASES OF "OXYMORON" IN EURIPIDES\*

In this work an attempt will be made to examine some cases of "oxymoron"<sup>1</sup> in Euripides which present a special interest mainly because they are related to and supported by the action of the plays.

One of its most striking instances is the attribution of two contradictory words to describe a situation. In the *Alcestis* there is already the "life-in-death paradox"<sup>2</sup> in the answer of the maid to the Chorus who want to know whether the Queen is still alive, or dead :

Θερ. Καὶ ζῶσαν εἰπεῖν καὶ θανοῦσαν ἔστι σοι. (141)

Further in the play, Admetus himself resorts to a similar device in his attempt to deceive Heracles regarding the dead he was about to bury :

Αδ. Διπλοῦς ἐπ' αὐτῇ μῦθος ἔστι μοι λέγειν.

Ηρ. Πότερα θανούσης εἶπας ἢ ζώσης ἔτι ;

Αδ. Ἔστιν τε κοῦκέτ' ἔστιν, ἀλγύνει δ' ἐμέ. (519ff)

In addition to their surface meaning, the maid's as well as Admetus' answer convey the ambiguity of this play which Alcestis herself exemplifies. Dramatically the audience knows from the prologue (69) that Alcestis is not irrevocably dead. On a deeper level however, the paradoxes serve to illustrate the puzzling relationship of life and death, which permeates the whole tragedy defying the limits of strict logic.<sup>3</sup>

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1. See for example W. Breitenbach, *Untersuchungen zur Sprache der Euripideischen Lyrik* (Stuttgart, 1934), pp. 236-38.

2. See also Erich Segal, ed., *Euripides: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1968), p. 2.

3. See Anne Pippin Burnett, "The Virtues of Admetus", *Euripides: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed., Erich Segal (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), pp. 66-76, who discusses the passages from the *Alcestis* which refer to the heroine's two condi-

In the *Ion* the words of the young hierodoulos after the recognition by Creusa, contain an apparent contradiction :

Ἄλλ', ὃ φίλη μοι μήτηρ, ἐν χερσῶν σέθεν  
ὁ καθανῶν τε καὶ θανῶν φαντάζομαι. (1443f)

The poet strains the language to convey more than one meaning. As far as Creusa was concerned Ion has been long dead (18, 27, 348, 951). Up to the scene of recognition she had acted on this false premise to the point of almost bringing about the elimination of her own son. Ion, on his part, lived in an illusion regarding the circumstances of his life and parentage. The illusion continues for both of them and constitutes perhaps the most important prerequisite for the action until the disparity disappears in the recognition scene. The formula describes summarily the contradictory presuppositions of the action — Ion's death and not death — which correspond to the limited knowledge of the agents about reality with the corollary of being fragmented and relative. In this characteristic way Euripides poses the problem of reality and appearance and the resultant conflict between the two, personified in the agents of the dramatic action who possess only part of the truth. In the paradox then Euripides has concentrated the dialectics of the dramatic action which moreover point to the poet's questioning of the timely problem of reality and appearance.

In the *IT* Orestes answers Iphigeneia with a similar paradox when, under the effect of the dream, she seizes the opportunity to ask the captured Greeks about her country and family in general and her brother in particular :

tions of life and death, and to the effects of this peculiar situation both on her and on the people around her.

Striking evidence of Euripides' questioning on the relationship between life and death are also the following fragments :

Τίς δ' οἶδεν εἰ τὸ ζῆν μὲν ἐστὶ καθανεῖν,  
τὸ καθανεῖν δὲ ζῆν κάτω νομίζεται ; (*Frg.* 638)

Τίς δ' οἶδεν εἰ ζῆν τοῦθ' ὃ κέκληται θανεῖν,  
τὸ ζῆν δὲ θνήσκειν ἐστί ; (*Frg.* 833)

Not surprisingly "Aeschylus" in the *Frogs* (1082) accuses "Euripides" of presenting on stage among others, women "φασκούσας οὐ ζῆν τὸ ζῆν". In the same play, aptly "Dionysus" retorts to "Euripides'" complaints for being left in the underworld:

Τίς οἶδεν εἰ τὸ ζῆν μὲν ἐστὶ καθανεῖν  
τὸ πνεῖν δὲ δειπνεῖν, τὸ δὲ καθεύδειν κώδιον ; (1477f)

Ιφ. 'Ο τοῦ θανόντος δ' ἔστι παῖς Ἄργει πατρός ;  
 Ορ. Ἔστ', ἄθλιός γε, κούδαμοῦ καὶ πανταχοῦ. (567f)

Orestes is nowhere and everywhere. Logically this phrase, of course, means nothing. While Orestes avoids answering directly, the paradox catches precisely his torment for the murder of Clytemnestra. The reconciliation between Orestes and the Furies in the *Eumenides* does not occur in the Euripidean play. Not even the intervention of Apollo on behalf of his agent is sufficient to appease them (965). In defiance of the trial and the casting vote of Athena, the Furies who voted against him are unmitigated in their insistence to pursue their victim (970f). According to Apollo's new prophecy, Orestes must bring back the image of Artemis from the country of the Taurians before he could be released from the torment of their persecution. Repeatedly the poet refers to the frenetic wanderings of Orestes (930f, 939ff, 1455f) brought into life by the description of the crisis that seized Orestes at the seashore (281 - 300).

The paradox focuses both at the desperate position of Orestes and by extension, on the basis of the dramatic action, it points to Apollo's inadequacy in prevailing upon the hostile Furies. That is, the reconciliation of the two opposing forces represented by Apollo and the Furies is not easy to attain in Euripides. The conflict between them continues, exemplified on a human level, in the anguish of Orestes who, unable to bear its stress, is deprived of the capacity to adjust to his environment. This peculiar situation of Orestes<sup>1</sup> is the result of a disturbed order both on a divine and on a human level, as Orestes himself has the occasion to ascertain in the same play (572f).

In the *Helen* Teucer's answer to the heroine who asks about the fate of her brothers, the Dioscuroi, is again contradictory :

Τε. Τεθναῖσι καὶ οὐ τεθναῖσι· δύο δ' ἔστων λόγῳ.  
 Ελ. Πότερος ὁ κρείσσων ; ὦ τάλαιν' ἐγὼ κακῶν.  
 Τε. Ἄστροις σφ' ὁμοιωθέντε φάσ' εἶναι θεῶν.  
 Ελ. Καλῶς ἔλεξας τοῦτο· θάτερον δὲ τί ;  
 Τε. Σφαγαῖς ἀδελφῆς οὐνεκ' ἐκπνεῦσαι βίον. (138ff)

The close relationship between this σόφισμα and the δισσοὶ λόγοι is obvious and it has been pointed out by Richard Kannicht in his

1. Descriptive of Orestes' conflict is also his answer to Iphigeneia who wants to know the cause of his wanderings :

φεύγω τρόπον γε δὴ τιν' οὐκ ἐκὼν ἐκὼν. (512)

commentary on the above verses.<sup>1</sup> Indeed the claim of Protagoras to argue both sides of one case is well known.<sup>2</sup> In a tragedy the obvious thing is to see the function of "Euripides' favourite kind of riddle"<sup>3</sup> dramatically. No doubt, among other possible reasons, the suicide of the Dioscuroi was invented by Euripides to add to Helen's remorse for the evils she caused to her family and nation.<sup>4</sup> In addition the Twins' "death and not death" touches on the duality, which is the main characteristic of the play, as the tension between appearance and reality is exemplified also in their fate.<sup>5</sup> From this perspective the oxymoron conforms to the main paradox of the play illustrated by the enigmatic personality of Helen. "Everything Helen touches most intimately... has this divided quality".<sup>6</sup>

And not only that. In the course of the play the emphasis is on the mortal logos of the Twins' fate both in the words of Helen and of the Chorus (207, 220f, 285) with the exception of their invocation by the Chorus shortly before they appear as *dei ex machina*. Could it be that Euripides questions the tale of Dioscuroi who were honoured in Athens as Σωτῆρες or Ἀνακτε? A serious objection to this is raised by their appearance, which according to some critics confirms their immortality.<sup>7</sup> The action of the play, however, which brings out the "human agencies"

1. R. Kannicht, ed., *Euripides' Helena* (Heidelberg, 1969), vol. II, p. 55 ad 138.

2. The same idea is advocated in the *Antiope* :

Ἐκ παντός ἄν τις πράγματος δισσῶν λόγων  
ἀγῶνα θεῖτ' ἄν, εἰ λέγειν εἴη σοφός. (*Frg.* 189)

And there are of course the *Tetralogies* of Antiphon where there is a demonstration of how speeches should be composed both for accusation and defence.

3. See A. M. Dale, ed., *Euripides' Helen* (Oxford, 1967), p. 75 ad 138.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 75 ad 142. See also Kannicht, p. 55 ad 137 - 142 ; p. 78 ad 219 - 20, who maintains that the alternative story of the Twins' death mirrors also the uncertainty of Teucer and his contemporaries for their fate, although this is inconsistent with the prayer of the Chorus to Dioscuroi to appear as saviours of Helen (1495 - 511).

Prof. Th. Kakridis pointed out to me one more dimension to the new version of the suicide, namely Euripides' intention to "deceive" his audience who, in all probability, were expecting to hear the known story about the Twins.

5. See for example Charles Segal, "The two Worlds of Euripides' Helen" *TAPA*, 102 (1971), pp. 558 - 62 ; Kannicht, vol. I, pp. 57 - 62 ; Anne N. Pippin, "Euripides' Helen : A Comedy of Ideas", *CP*, 55 (1960), pp. 151 - 52, and passim.

6. See Segal, p. 562.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 607. See also Kannicht, vol. II, p. 79 ad 219 - 20.

for the escape, raises doubts in regard to the effectiveness of these gods.<sup>1</sup> If this is so, Euripides leaves also unresolved the problem of the Dioscuri in accordance with the main problem of the play, that is, the split world of Helen.

So far the paradoxes we have discussed are descriptive of ambiguous situations which admit more than one interpretation thus conforming to the well known relativism of the second half of the fifth century. And indeed, some of the most important cases of oxymoron in Euripides, which consist of the negation of a concept by tautology, point as well to a cultural crisis.

In the *Orestes* the Chorus comment on the matricide that was committed by the command of Apollo :

Τὸ καλὸν οὐ καλόν, τοκέων  
 πυριγενεῖ τεμεῖν παλάμη  
 χροῖα μελάνδετον δὲ φόνῳ  
 ξίφος ἐς αὐγάς ἀελίοιο δεῖξαι· (819ff)

The oxymoron τὸ καλὸν οὐ καλόν concentrates the criticism of the Chorus on the myth of matricide. Orestes is no longer the agent of the god but the tormented murderer of his mother in a place where there is already civil justice. That is to say the Orestes of the myth and the Orestes of Euripides' play belong to different cultures.<sup>2</sup> The transformation of values that has been affected strains the limits of the language. What once was good is not good any more. Euripides presents us again with the relativism of values. It is recognized that the καλόν is not immovable and eternal, rather subject to alteration and it depends on the accepted ideas and attitudes of a society. Consequently, the main conflict of the tragedy that comes from the disparity of a sanctioned act transplanted into an alien environment is caught in the paradox.

In the *Bacchae* the followers of Dionysus criticize Pentheus' attitude to the new religion and particularly to Teiresias, the official representa-

1. See D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama: Myth, Theme and Structure* (Toronto, London, 1967), pp. 301 - 302.

For the opposite point of view, see A. Spira, *Untersuchungen zum Deus ex Machina bei Sophokles und Euripides* (Kallmünz/Opf., 1960), p. 123 ; G. Zuntz, "On Euripides' Helena: Theology and Irony", *Euripide, Entretiens sur l'Antiquité Classique*, VI (Genève, 1960), pp. 209 - 40.

2. See also W. Arrowsmith, "Euripides' Theater of Ideas", *Euripides: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed., E. Segal (Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 1968), p. 21.

tive of the gods. Among the generalisations they draw from Pentheus' conduct is the following :

τὸ σοφὸν δ' οὐ σοφία (395)

It has been maintained that here a false wisdom of Pentheus is contrasted to a real wisdom of devotion to Dionysus, possessed by the Chorus.<sup>1</sup> The relationship, however, between these contradictory concepts seems to be more complex and subtle than the above theory indicates. In this play different systems of values struggle for predominance and acceptance personified mainly in Dionysus and Pentheus. Each system advocates its own wisdom which prevails as long as this system is balanced and functional. When the equilibrium is disturbed, for one reason or another, the rival system represented by a different wisdom struggles to establish itself. It is with this situation that we are faced in the *Bacchae* in general and in the paradox in particular. In other words there is not, it seems, one true and one false wisdom but the acceptance of one, as another is rejected by the Chorus.<sup>2</sup> That is, a transformation of values is in process which manifests itself in the conflict between Pentheus and Dionysus and finds its expression in the oxymoron.<sup>3</sup>

Such an intellectual climate might cause psychological conflicts to an individual, as they are reflected in some of the plays of Euripides. In the *Hecuba* for example Neoptolemus is charged to execute Polyxena on Achilles' tomb. In the preparatory stage for the sacrifice Neoptolemus does not show any signs of remorse for the blood that he was about to

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1. See for example E. R. Dodds, ed., *Euripides' Bacchae* (Oxford, 1960), p. 121 ad 395. See also R. P. Winnington - Ingram, "Euripides' Bacchae 877 - 881 = 897 - 901", *BICS*, 13 (1966), p. 34 ; Idem, *Euripides and Dionysus* (Cambridge, 1948), pp. 62 - 63, for a discussion of this passage.

2. See also Marylin Arthur, "The Choral Odes of the *Bacchae* of Euripides", *JCS*, 22 (1972), p. 152.

3. The following fragment from Euripides may suggest an interesting case of the reversal of convictions, the political context of the *Frogs* 1442 - 50 notwithstanding :

Ὅταν τὰ νῦν ἄπιστα πίσθ' ἠγάμεθα,  
τὰ δ' ὄντα πίστ' ἄπιστα. (*Frg.* 887)

See also Thucydides (III. 82 - 84) for an evidence for the reversal of attitudes as the result of στάσις : καὶ τὴν εἰλωθῆσαν ἀξίωσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐς τὰ ἔργα ἀντήλλαξαν τῇ δικαιώσει.

shed (534ff). But the brave attitude of Polyxena affects him and for the first time he hesitates, at the moment of execution :

“Ο δ’ οὐ θέλων τε καὶ θέλων οἴκτω κόρης,  
τέμνει σιδήρῳ πνεύματος διαρροᾶς” (566f)

The oxymoron expresses the change in Neoptolemus by Polyxena's attitude. The characters affected by the course of events interact upon one another. Neoptolemus is not the same as before. The previous confidence in what he was doing is gone and in its place there is hesitation and conflict. The ambivalence of Neoptolemus not only serves to qualify from one more perspective the monstrous decision of the Greeks, but more important, it reveals his human, unheroic response to the innocent victim.

More intensity is conveyed by the words of Electra in the tragedy of the same name after the murder of Clytemnestra :

Ἴδοῦ, φίλα τε καὶ φίλα  
φάρσα τάδ’ ἀμφιβάλλομεν. (1230f)

The poet catches here no less than the main conflict in Electra's character.<sup>1</sup> Her relationship with Clytemnestra was one of love-hate. The tragic thing about Electra is that she realizes the ambivalence of her feelings only when it was too late for her. Throughout the play she is obsessed by the idea of exacting revenge on the murderers of Agamemnon, who deprived her of all comforts to which her position entitled her. In fact she is the main force behind the indecisive Orestes in bringing about the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. But in a Euripidean drama with its human motivation the stress of the matricide is bound to affect its agents : both Orestes and Electra break down under its burden. Precisely at this moment Electra recognizes, to her terror, dimensions of her soul not suspected before. Contradictory feelings of hate and love tear her apart. At the same time, however, unsuspected human potentialities are revealed in her. The discovery in Electra of her ambiguous feelings towards Clytemnestra and her need for communication with Orestes amounts to no less, in my opinion, than the discovery of her humanity. In the paradox, then, is concentrated

1. In his commentary, J. D. Denniston, *Euripides' Electra* (Oxford, 1939), p. 101 ad 1230, refers to this type of expression as "rather a mannerism of Euripides; but here its pathos is most moving".

the essence of Electra's character, focusing at the conflicting powers that split her personality.

In the *Phoenician Women* we are met with a different case. There Polyneices, responding to his mother's effort to reconcile the two brothers, comes furtively into the city. He is suspicious of being trapped and he needs to rely on his armour to take courage (263ff). The climax is his mistrust of his own mother :

Πέποιθα μέντοι μητρί, κοῦ πέποιθ' ἄμα,  
ἦτις μ' ἔπεισε δεῦρ' ὑπόσπονδον μολεῖν. (272f)

Once Polyneices has entered into the struggle for power, all the other ties in his life were broken. In general the mistrust of his own mother is the measure of his alienation from country and family. Iocasta's emotional outburst at the moment of their meeting (304ff) does not liberate Polyneices from his caution and fear :

Μῆτερ, φρονῶν εἶ κοῦ φρονῶν ἀφικόμην  
ἐχθροῦς ἐς ἀνδρας· (357f)

Again Polyneices questions the wisdom of his entering a hostile territory which nonetheless is his native land.<sup>1</sup> The psychological situation that the above cases illustrate is characteristic especially of transitional periods when there are cultural changes in process and the individual, unable to bear their stress, experiences conflicts.

The paradoxes we have examined in Euripides show that the poet employs them to communicate to the audience some of his most characteristic ideas, which are supported by the whole action of the plays. They usually refer to ambiguous situations which admit more than one interpretation in accordance with the relativism of the fifth century, or to the transformation of values which points to a cultural crisis as well or to psychological conflicts which betray the fragmentation of the human soul. Thus these symptoms, characteristic of the second part of the fifth century, are reflected in Euripides' work and find their summary expression in a formula of oxymoron.

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1. Among the effects of στάσις, Thucydides (III. 82 - 86) includes also the alienation of family members.