SOPHOCLES AND PHILOSOPHY

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In Sophocles' *Electra*, the antagonistic relationship between Clytaemestra and her daughter, the play's protagonist, is explored with far greater depth and intensity than in Aeschylus' treatment of the same story, the *Libation Bearers*. A set-piece confrontation (*agon*) between the two in the middle of the play demonstrates many of the issues at stake. Clytaemestra first defends her murder of Agamemnon, on the grounds that it was just revenge for his own murder of their daughter, Iphigenia. Electra responds by defending her father (he was 'forced' to do it, βιασθενείς, 575), and accusing Clytaemestra of much less exalted motivations (her desire for her new lover, Aegisthus). She goes on to deny that Clytaemestra is even her mother, since she behaves in such an un-motherly way (597–598). The Chorus reacts to the exchange with moral confusion, and further bickering ensues:

Χο. ὅρω μένος πνεύουσαν· εἰ δὲ σὺν δίκη
ζύνεστι, τούθε φροντίζ᾽ οὕκετ᾽ εἰσορώ.
Κλ. ποίας δ᾽ ἐμοὶ δεῖ πρός γε τήνθε φροντίδος,
合击 τοιαῦτα τὴν τεκούσαν ὁμίρισεν,
καὶ ταῦτα τῇλικοῦτος; ἄρα σοι δοκεῖ
χωρεῖν ἢν ἐκ πᾶν ἔργον αἰσχύνης ἄτερ;
Ηλ. εὖ νυν ἐπίστω τῶνθε μ᾽ αἰσχύνην ἔχειν,
κεὶ μὴ δοκῶ σοι· μανθάνω δ᾽ ὁδούνεκα
ἐξωρα πράσσων κοῦ ἐμοὶ προσεικότα.
ἀλλ᾽ ἢ γὰρ ἐκ σοῦ δυσμένεια καὶ τὰ σὰ
ἔργ᾽ ἐξαναγκάζει με ταῦτα δρᾶν βία·
αἰσχροὶς γάρ αἰσχρὰ πράγματ᾽ ἑκδίδασκεται.
Κλ. ὁ δ᾽ ἑρμῆρ᾽ ἀναιδές, ἢ σ᾽ ἐγώ καὶ τάμ᾽ ἔπη
καὶ τάργα τἀμὰ πόλλ᾽ ἄγαν λέγειν ποιεῖ.
Ηλ. σὺ τοί τέλεις νιν, οὐκ ἐγώ. σὺ γὰρ ποεῖς
tαῦργον· τὰ δ᾽ ἔργα τοὺς λόγους εὔρισκεται.

CHORUS: I see how upset she is, but whether rightly—
I no longer know what to think about that.
CLYTAEMESTRA: Do I even need to think about that girl?
She has so insulted the woman who gave birth to her,
and at her age, too! Don't you think
there is no limit to her shamelessness?
ELECTRA: Let me tell you now, I am ashamed of this,
even if you don't believe it. But I know the reason
why I act out of season and unlike myself.
Truly, your own hatred and your actions
compel me forcibly to act this way.
Shameful deeds are taught by shameful deeds.
CLYTAEMESTRA: What an outrage! No! I, and my words,
and actions, always make you talk much, much too much.
ELECTRA: You said it, not me. Because you were the one
who did it. Actions invent words.

This passage is not obviously ‘philosophical’ in most modern senses of the
word, and does not look much like the kind of work we might identify
today as ‘philosophical drama’. Sophocles does not write plays that are
primarily witty meditations on the history of philosophy, in the manner of
Tom Stoppard. His plays are not, like Jean-Paul Sartre’s, encapsulations of
a single philosophical position. And compared to his own contemporary,
Euripides, Sophocles’ response to the philosophy of his time is less obvious
and less explicit.

But the linguistic terms and concepts which were most important to the
philosophers of his day—the Sophists—are everywhere in Sophocles. In the
Electra passage just cited, what is at stake is not just any old conflict between
mother and daughter, presented in timeless or mythical terms. Rather, the
problems at issue are closely related to fifth-century philosophical debates.
Four key issues, which were all hot philosophical topics at the time, stand
out here. First, is justice separable from power or force? And how can one
know what is just? Second, how do words relate to actions? Do words
respond to actions, reflect reality, or constitute their own alternative sphere
of action? Third, how is nature related to culture or law (φύσις/νόμος).
Are human beings, and human societies, the result of natural bonds and
natural hierarchies, or did culture—as several Sophists argued—develop
gradually and create the relationships that we now perceive as natural?
Are social divisions and relationships formed from nature, or convention?
And lastly, a point related to all the others: is it possible to change people
through education? Is education a tool for good, or might teachers like
the Sophists—as in the negative portrayal of Socrates in Aristophanes’
Clouds—actually corrupt the young, teaching them to pervert language and
use it against their (natural) superiors?

All these issues are, I will suggest, at stake in Sophocles’ Electra, in com-
plex ways that suggest a deep engagement with contemporary philosoph-
ical discourse. I choose to focus on this play because it is relatively little
studied in the context of Sophocles’ philosophical interests. This in itself
makes it a good test case for investigating whether Sophocles might show