

THE SOPHOCLEAN AXE

This brief note is tangential to Malcolm Davies' article Aeschylus' Clytemnestra: Sword or Axe?¹⁾ in which, flying in the face of recent orthodoxy, he argues a strong case for the *axe* as being the instrument which elicited the piteous cry *ὦμοι πέπληγμαι καιρίαν πληγὴν ἔσω* from the conqueror of Troy.

In the course of his article, Davies makes two references to the Sophoclean version of Agamemnon's death, firstly noting that Sophocles "takes over [i. e. from Homer] the motif of death at a feast (El. 194, 203) but has the axe as murder weapon (99)"²⁾, and secondly arguing that "the casual and allusive manner in which Sophocles and Euripides mention the axe . . . strongly suggests that that weapon . . . had already been popularised on the Attic stage"³⁾.

There seem to be grounds, however, for believing that at least *Sophocles'* choice of the axe was not primarily dependent on the Aeschylean or any other Fifth Century stage version of the story. As is well known, the picture of the murder presented by the Sophoclean *Electra* in her monody (Soph. El. 95–102) is strongly reminiscent of the accounts in Od. 4.534–7 and more particularly Od. 11.406–11. As is also well known, Sophocles drops the Homeric death simile *ὡς τις τε κατέκτανε βοῦν ἐπὶ φάτῃ* (Od. 4.535 and 11.411) in favour of another simile *ὅπως δρῶν ὑλοτόμοι* (El. 98) which is itself based on the Iliadic simile *ὡς δτε τις δρυς ἤριπεν ἢ ἀχερωῖς, / ἢε πίτυς βλωθρή, τὴν τ' οὔρεσι τέκτονες ἄνδρες / ἐξέταμον πελέκεσσι νεήκεσι νήϊον εἶναι* (Il. 13.389–91 and 16.482–4).

In the sequence *μήτηρ δ' ἡμὴ χά κοινολεχῆς / Αἰγισθος, ὅπως δρῶν ὑλοτόμοι, / σχίζουσι κάρα φονίῳ πελέκει* (Soph. El. 97–9), then, it seems quite possible that Sophocles has simply picked up the *πέλεκυς* from the Iliadic context and transferred it out of the simile⁴⁾. In other words, we could well be dealing with a case of purely 'poetic' or verbal borrowing and adaptation.

It could most reasonably be argued, of course, that the existence of a strongly entrenched axe tradition would make this transference an easy and natural step for Sophocles to take anyway. However, the extent of Sophocles' purely verbal borrowing from Homer in the *Electra* in general⁵⁾ suggests that his axe could just as easily have come from this same source even if there were no significant dramatic axe tradition at all.

It is therefore perhaps unwise to associate the Sophoclean axe with the Euripidean one as evidence, however slight, for the nature of the Aeschylean weapon. It should be added, in conclusion, that this criticism of a point of detail is not to be taken as implying that the strength of Davies' overall case is necessarily affected in any way.

Victoria University of Wellington

J. F. Davidson

1) CQ 37 (1987), pp. 65–78.

2) Ibid., p. 67 n. 19.

3) Ibid., p. 68.

4) Perhaps he is influenced in his choice of the word *ὑλοτόμοι* by *οἱ δ' ἴσαν ὑλοτόμους πελέκεας ἐν χερσὶν ἔχοντες* (Il. 23.114), another Homeric context (not a simile) which also features the *πέλεκυς*.

5) Note, for example, the relationship between Soph. El. 17–19, 30, 158, 167, 412, 698 ff. and Il. 8.485–6, 17.256, 9.145, 9.563, 24, 171, 23.287 ff. respectively.