Instances of Death in Greek Tragedy

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By

Sorana-Cristina Man

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For my grandmother Ana,
in memoriam

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PREFACE

DE MORTIS FACIE

With *Instances of Death in Greek Tragedy*, first elaborated as a doctoral thesis by Sorana-Cristina Man, we find ourselves before a true exegetical volume, as the jury appointed to assess it has stated since its public defence. It is a volume in which the specialized bibliography is fully assumed, internalized, re-dimensioned, and offered in a markedly personal interpretation. The result appears as a piece of writing with all the scientific qualities of a thesis and, at the same time, as a book with great chances to turn into a bestseller, in the highest sense of the term – of excellence in the field and passionate materialization of the research.

As a witness of the way this work came into being and developed, I can assert that the initial, well-structured plan proved a sound knowledge of the classics and a profound philosophical and religious background, as well as the theory of literature elements which the author knew how to handle in the most judicious manner. This plan and especially the aspects in which she has been interested have not changed, and over time have benefitted from a careful and deep analysis, embodied in the book we are reading today.

The author is confronted not only with the numerous approaches to the topic of death in Greek tragedy which have been made so far, but also with the various possibilities of approaching it. According to the competent opinion of the jury, the subject accepts two solutions: an obedient and practical investigation as both death and Greek tragedy have always been addressed by studies concerned with decoding their origins and meaning; or, on the contrary, a genuine research which goes beyond offering verdicts and restlessly urges the scrutiny of one's inner horizon, forcing us to escape from our conformist thinking. Repeating one more time the centuries-old research of Greek tragedy by taking stock of different perspectives and allying with them from time to time is the comfortable solution, which might be correct but is also unambitious, like walking on a no through road. Great literature is not so "kind" to us – it sows in us the irrepressible need to go on our own way and it makes us fly alone, to no predictable destination. This is what Sorana-Cristina Man accomplishes here, above the research itself.

"The pre-eminence of the topic of death within the literary and philosophical discourse," the author writes in the very beginning of her work, as the supreme motivation, "is the first issue we ought to approach in a piece of writing that bears this title, as death is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the theme with the greatest existential purport, intrinsically tied to the human condition, which it rounds into form. No other topic can come close to it except,

perhaps, that of love, for we all love, just as we all die. Human life unfolds on the horizon of death, it flows towards death as a goal, as an inexorable finality that reflects back, analeptically, upon life itself."

With this, the author announces that the subject – which is, to an extent, easy to guess from the title – is tackled by narrowing the analysis to those instances of death in the tragedies which have led her to a new interpretation. The interpretation comes from the text itself, but also from referring to the "opinions and vision of other commentators."

Of all the hypostases of death and characters who end by dying, the author selects only those which have stirred up her interest and elicited her own analyses and interpretations. This is, in fact, the main requirement for a doctoral thesis, but also the attraction of a new volume approaching this subject in the twenty-first century. Studying the tragedies, she asks herself questions which, over time, have deepened, changed, and become more complex. She reflects upon events, looking at them from different points of view and often reconsidering both the approach and the conclusions. It is difficult to not be persuaded by the arguments offered.

On the other hand, as I have already mentioned, the author had to get through a huge amount of bibliographic material, mostly literary, from which she has been forced to make a careful selection. To these she has added philosophical works which give

her own a special character and an impressive profoundness. At the same time, we find here some better or less known theories which she uses persuasively though not in their original spirit, proving the value of the "instrument" of a theory as well as her ability to use such instruments to the utmost of their utility. She does not take the theories over as such, and nor does she change them, but adapts them to the subject, thus hallmarking them.

The high quality of the theoretical and analytical approach as well as the stylistic suppleness are among the strongest points of this book. The temerity which the author notes in some of the characters ought to be attributed to her as well, as not only does the topic itself require a lot of courage but so does the theoretical universe that sustains it. Creation, theory, and metatheory are to be found permanently interwoven in the structure of this piece of work, constituting a veritable "mixed discourse." Boldly, the author avoids what is easy, approaching at all times what is difficult, like an authentic classicist. As a consequence, the reading rouses a lively dialogue with the author. It would be impossible in a mere preface to linger on all the parts of this work. I will therefore quote just a few of the proposed chapter titles, which represent the many original problems stated by the author, and which she tries to answer. Anyone honest to themselves who goes through these titles cannot but be interested in what they propose: "Violence and Death," including madness and violence, and ritual violence as a restoration of order (a chapter which considers the elements of

ritual sacrifice, such as: "man and animal, crime and ritual, order and disorder." These components are discussed mostly from the perspective of stage representation in an attempt to pinpoint in each case the relationship with the audience; and individual or collective acts of violence in the tragedies catalogued according to their causes and consequences, and also the way in which they have been perpetrated); "Several Psychoanalytical and Philosophical Insights into Death in the Tragedies," including the obliteration of the differences between opposites, the ontological-existential "given," thrownness (*geworfenheit*), and state-of-mind (*befindlichkeit*). This chapter traces, among other concepts, the projective identification through one's offspring and its tragic end, as well as the dynamism of several couples which manifest the contraposition chaotic violence–restoration of order and ritual purification; "Symbols and Predictions of Death," including travesty and implication as modes of playing, and the red carpet as a symbol in *Agamemnon*, a chapter which contains reflections on "other predictions and omens" like dreams, funerary laments of heroes or the chorus, signs and prophesies; "The Female Character in Relation to Death," including temerity, courage, or foolishness?, and between dignity, cleverness, and monstrousness. As this chapter has been discreetly announced by numerous comments inserted in the previous pages, this last part of the book, consisting of the contraposition courage–temerity, appears implicitly as the climax of the author's personal approach. There is here an inherent positive, and respectively a negative

purport, the latter being the defiance of divinity. The abovementioned contraposition is multiplied through the pairs human vs. divine law, reason vs. intuition, and masculine vs. feminine.

As powerful proof of the author's passion for the subject, the continuous problematization constitutes the main method for ideational construction, as she is aware – in a dramatical way, I would say – of the fragility of a firm solution, except for the several major directions of the plays that have been long traced. Thus, we are not dealing with rhetorical questions that have a finite scope, but with veritable bridges towards, on the one hand, the depth of the text, permanently sustaining its ideational core, and on the other towards the reader, placed *on this side* of the universe of the book – just to resort to a paraphrase of a paraphrase, one of the subchapters is Nietzsche-ly entitled "On This Side of Good and Evil" (III.4). And, like any loving parent – in the terms of Paul Tillich when analysing the manifestation of God's love for humankind – instead of offering us solutions, Sorana-Cristina Man just guides us, letting us find them ourselves, if they are to be found. Another trait that must be mentioned is the artlessness of the analyses, devoid of that "grim determination" of the commentator stubbornly concerned with proving one thing or another, so that the reading becomes captivating and warm, showing the desire to comprehend. We find everywhere the classicist spirit of discovering and grasping, so that the auctorial vision is that of a restless researcher who runs

frenetically towards those realms from which she can obtain more understanding and insight, never limited to the text itself but transgressing it and targeting the very elucidation of the existential mechanisms. This is the reason why valuable ideas in the wake of such a complex topic, which would encumber the text, are banished to the subtext; moreover, the footnotes can become texts themselves, guided by their own logic, and with a distinct personality. The author radiographs percussively, with intellectual refinement and philologico-philosophical subtlety, not only the cultural context in which the tragic action takes place, but also the changes in mentality from antiquity until now. Her work is exemplarily documented both regarding the bibliography (a territory that is enormous and therefore never fully covered) and especially regarding her vigilance as a reader, always searching for latent nuances. The book denotes not so much the (undoubtedly meritorious) effort to work out the subject (since the researcher knows very well that such a desire has no chance of ever being accomplished), as, first and foremost, the longing to discover. Paraphrasing Lucius, Apuleius's hero, our author also tells herself: "non quidem curios[a] sed qu[ae] uelim scire uel cuncta uel certe plurima."

The study imposes by its very nature an approach with various instruments (literature, stylistics, psychology, philosophy, anthropology) and a perspective that is both descriptive and historic. Besides, the same matter is minutely analysed by a

researcher never content with quick verdicts. There is therefore a dynamics to the text, which comes from a different interpretative perspective, with another point of view or, at least, another remark, although sometimes connected, on the same aspect.

I shall give just one example – that of the abovementioned red carpet from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. To pinpoint a characteristic of this book we must underline the dichotomous, antithetical, antinomic, and paradoxical categories used by Sorana-Cristina Man to make her way to the meaning, for example: courage–cowardice, good–evil, the public good–personal interest, man–woman, freedom–constraint, physical–spiritual, life–death, humanity–divinity, history–mythology, violence–disaster, and madness–lucidity. In many cases, one of the two elements is caught, in turn, in multiple hypostases: violence is seen for example as individual or collective, ritual or non-ritual, and intended or unintended. Since they have the role of systematizing the whole endeavour, on the horizon of the Aristotelian categories, their dynamics are meant to build the main ideational directions of this work.

The volume has a well-balanced structure from the point of view of quantity and quality, and the teaching experience makes itself known in the repetitions which the author considers appropriate for a better understanding. There are also references to other classical texts, and even Latin literature, when the demonstration requires so (for example, a subchapter is entitled

"The Intimate-foreign Background; the Greek and Latin Sense of Predestination"). Each section ends with partial conclusions.

The manifest or subjacent dialogue – with the authors, with the reader, with herself – highlights the reflexive dimension of the book. At the same time, like any valuable text, it incites dialogue so that one is permanently involved in the journey along with the author. Stopping, naturally, at Heidegger's philosophy of death and finiteness, Sorana-Cristina Man critically follows the way this philosophy of the author of *Being and Time* reverberates on the meaningful canvas of Greek tragedy. Nevertheless, she engages in a friendly debate with countless interpreters of the tragedies or with those who conceptualize the death phenomenon, in a manner which reveals a researcher never stunned by the theatrical posture of the enemy, but one absorbed by her subject. We find here a balance, a settling of all these intellectual ardours and passions, conjugated with a certain sharpness in interpreting the texts and dipping into their darkness. In this ideational-stylistic articulation, veritable apothegms appear here and there. One of them emerges from the story of Euripides's *Phaedra*: "Life does not have a price in itself. Its price is that for which it would be worth giving."

The conclusions draw our attention first of all to the relativity of the verdicts which can be formulated in the irreducibly open universe of death, as is argued many times in the book: "It seems like we have arrived at the end of the way. But if it has been worth walking, although it seems to be ending, in fact it might just

be the beginning." Thus, the author aligns with the perspective unveiled by Euripides and re-formulated by Hölderlin, admirer of classical Greece: "Who knows, maybe life is death and death is life."

What takes hold of the reader is the poised line of thought, looking in all directions, always on guard and never ignoring a possible road, so that anybody can read it with the same passion as it has been written. Mastering the methods she has selected and the concepts she is handling, the author of the present volume does not get lost in the endless wildwood of the different modes of dying offered by Greek tragedy. She presents them in a clear form, having in view both the origin and evolution of their significance, and their relationships with one another – a complex network which she disentangles and presents simply and probatively.

The impression gained by this reading, at the end of it, is one of the utmost soundness with which the author masters the various aspects of the subject she approaches. The theoretical endeavour, clear and coherent, is applied to the texts in a judicious manner. You feel at every step of the way the scruples and prudence present in the display of every theoretical or practical aspect. Each subchapter adds new merits to the general undertaking.

The logic of the endeavour, the accuracy and subtlety of the analyses, and the soundness of the topic confirm a valuable research, exemplarily conducted. The theoretical scope and fertility of the proposed solutions, the analytical sagacity, and the subjacent

creative inclination to dialogue, nurtured by an evident creative intuition, as well as the temerity and lucidity of the hypotheses, briefly accounted for here, recommend Sorana-Cristina Man's *Instances of Death in Greek Tragedy* as a must – a work which doubtlessly enriches the mind and soul of any true classicist.

Bucharest, November 5, 2019

Florica Bechet,
Professor Emerita, PhD (classical philology)

I. INTRODUCTION

The pre-eminence of the topic of death within the literary and philosophical discourse is the first issue we ought to approach in a piece of writing that bears this title, as death is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the theme with the greatest existential purport, intrinsically tied to the human condition, which it rounds into form. No other topic can come close to it except, perhaps, that of love, for we all love, just as we all die. Human life unfolds on the horizon of death, it flows towards death as a goal, as an inexorable finality that reflects back, analeptically, upon life itself. It is not accidental that there are thinkers, amongst whom Martin Heidegger is the most well-known, who have built their philosophy around this idea. We live as finite beings – we have death in view in every moment of our life, and this is the reason, we might add, why we want to ensure our continuity and are endlessly worried about prolonging our life beyond its natural and individual limit. When we speak of Greek tragedy, death is obviously what gives meaning to life.

I have tried to narrow my endeavour to those instances of death in the tragedies for which I have been able to come up with a new interpretation, in the best-case scenario starting from the text, and other times referring to the opinions and vision of other commentators. Regarding the theories I had in view when I began

to build my own hypotheses and those on which I based my arguments, the following must be mentioned:

(1) that of René Girard (1995) referring to **violence**, according to which the sacrificial rite is a means of fencing in the violence, of limiting it within certain, well-defined borders in order to prevent it from flowing over, and thus controlling it. Instead of a victim that cannot be killed, usually a human being, the act of violence is unleashed, under control, upon another being, wholly innocent but easy to sacrifice, assuming the role of a substitute. This surrogate has no trait, no reason to attract violence, except that it is vulnerable and handy, like that species of fish whose males, having no enemies to fight with, kill their own family (Girard 1995, 8–9). Ritual sacrifice is also founded on such a replacement, but the other way around, as the victim is most often an animal, usually a mild, harmless one, close to the human, although not always domestic, like the deer that takes the place of Iphigenia. To prevent violence from bursting out on the very members of society, who must be protected at any cost, society hijacks it by cheating, turning it on a less important, inferior victim. In the abovementioned book, this situation is compared to the one of the dragon that is given a boulder to swallow in order to spare the child which the beast craves. Nevertheless, in this case, as opposed to the sacrifice, the dragon, which represents violence, is not satisfied but defeated. In the ritual context we are dealing with an actual substitution, the

victim being fully accepted, received as a fair replacement of that initial victim. In this way the violence is totally calmed.

Unlike the potential victim whose place it takes, by saving it, the final sacrificial victim is usually neutral or in any case less important, less susceptible of being avenged, attracting upon itself the aggressive tendencies which would otherwise have been directed towards the former.

> The sacrifice quenches an appetite for violence that the simple ascetic will cannot satisfy, by providing it with a partial derivative, temporary, of course, but which can be endlessly renewed and for whose efficiency there are too many testimonies to be ignored. The sacrifice prevents the germs of violence from developing. It helps humans to keep revenge in check. (Girard 1995, 24)

The participants in the ritual feel that the act of violence that they have committed or that they watched, or only imagined, is on the verge of destroying the entire community and everything they hold dear. When they restage this violent act in a very well-confined way, circumscribed to certain rules, in order to persuade themselves that it can be caught within firm limits they focus mainly on the bloodshed, controlling it in the first instance as a symbol of the limited which becomes unlimited. Then, letting the blood flow on the altars and even themselves, the participants prove that what is seemingly unlimited and unstructured is in fact directed through ritual, which strengthens the psychological means of

defence against the violence, rage, and hatred that threaten to overflow and contaminate the good.

(2) Helene P. Foley's theory about the female character as a substitute of the masculine element (2003). Here, the place of men is taken in tragedy by women, as men prefer not to find themselves involved in extreme circumstances, such as death, either as victims or as killers, but choose to be represented by women and to recognize themselves in them.

Some contemporary commentators (Foley 2003, 116) think that women often display irrational and immoral behaviour due to their lack of education and knowledge. They are confined to family life and therefore cannot become fully responsible moral agents. When tragedy presents feminine characters like Antigone, Phaedra, Medea, or Clytemnestra, endowed with moral autonomy, it also reminds the public how women should behave in everyday life, without confirming the fears and prejudices regarding their independent attitude and actions. Their well-known inability to control themselves, their ethical errors due to naivety, their weakness in love, their passionate reactions when they are aggrieved, their desire for autonomy and fame, and their lack of social skills might all be traits that men are afraid to discover in themselves and prefer to explore in the female nature, according to these theories. If we think of Deianira or Phaedra, we can say, according to Foley, that the poor ethical dowry of women is

presented as both inherent to the feminine nature and a social construct. The Greek playwrights create these female characters in order to challenge themselves and their entirely masculine public. They make the whole action of the play depend on the moral decision of a woman and bring forward heroines who assume a moral attitude in public to temporarily and partially detach from a cultural ideal, using them to explore ethical but also psychical borders which are ambiguous and often dangerous. (This is the case in what we might consider their *anima*. Women might be deemed, in the process of composing the tragedies, artistic guinea pigs, or substitutes. They are not downgraded to represent a stage previous to that of manhood in the experiment of tragedy, in the way that guinea pigs are used in testing certain remedies, but they are a projection of man, a mirror that he places before himself to study himself, a double through which it becomes possible to explore controversial themes and situations, which men prefer to approach indirectly.)

Froma Zeitlin (1996, 347–57) believes that women never, in tragedy, represent a purpose in itself. They only play the role of a catalyst, an agent, an instrument, a barrier, a destroyer, a help, or a saviour for the male characters. When they are at the forefront they could serve as anti-models or hidden models for the masculine self. Their sufferings and deeds that bring them disaster or death usually appear in the play before those of the men. Those who affirm that Greek tragedy is androcentric, reasserting the inferior status of

women, like that of the strangers and slaves who claim that their freedom to act in fact serves the opposite purpose, as it is just an appearance, forget that the ancient Greeks did not like this force nor this freedom that the tragic heroines were endowed with (Foley 2003, 13).

(3) The projective identification of R. J. Lifton, a theory exposed in *The Broken Connection*, which C. Fred Alford also speaks about (1992, 13–16). Man prolongs his existence by identifying himself with transcendence in its various forms: family continuity, which can be extended to that of the city or people; participation in a religious tradition; awareness of the place anyone has in the order of nature; communion with the universe, in which time and death disappear; and art or other creative activities which transcend the individual and accede to the universal. The ordinary Greek, as he appears in the tragedies, has access mainly to the first of these modes – the extremely vulnerable transcendence offered by the family, which consists in the symbolic identification with the offspring.

Freud thinks it is impossible to imagine one's own death, as every one of us is convinced, in the unconscious, of our immortality. Consequently, we are not afraid of death because the non-being has no equivalent in the unconscious. Yet we are afraid of dark and loneliness, which have become symbolic equivalents of death, which they resemble, and through which death becomes our main fear, the great anxiety, which comes to comprise all the fears

of a human life, as Lifton (1996) proves. Man always resorts to symbols – all of his relationships, including the one with death, is intermediated by symbols, i.e. symbols of transcendence, which are beings, ideas, and activities with a certain value that will continue after his death.

For a reader, reading books in a library is a way to participate in the life and spirit of the past, which will last even when the reader has passed away. *Projective identification* is the mechanism through which a part of the self identifies with other people or ideas, as well as the need to live through children and grandchildren, the feeling of affiliation to nature and its cycles, to religious traditions, and the sense of unity with the universe. In this process of projective identification, a part of the self "detaches" itself, we might say, and is projected and lives in another. This happens when we share certain emotions while communicating with others. The symbolic unity between life and death, their continuity, is fundamental. In primitive societies, death used to be not so much a rupture, despite the anxiety it involves, as a continuation. Nevertheless, for the Greeks man dies entirely, his soul dies along with his body, and it is difficult to establish symbolic connections between life and death and preserve the memory of the beloved. The family, the most important symbol of continuity for the Greeks in the classic era, is always put in danger in the tragedies, not so much from outside as from within. Meant to prolong the human being beyond the limit of its life, family is in

fact self-destructive, taking away from the hero the chance of his continuity, as the conflicts usually take place within the family and its members destroy each other mutually.

The famous chorus from *Antigone* 334 and 360 sings:

> πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κοὐδὲν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει.
> … Ἅιδα μόνον φεῦξιν οὐκ ἐπάξεται·.[1]

The word used here to describe man is δεινός, which means both "wonderful" and "frightening." Death alone can render his plans ineffective by annihilating him physically. It is also frightening, and still nothing is more wonderful than man, not even the power that crushes him as an earthly being.[2] I have in view this superiority of the tragic hero over the power that crushes him (which are often the gods), since the admiration for the human spirit that the tragic authors awake in us is greater than the fear of necessity. In his book *The Paradox of Tragedy*, D. D. Raphael (1961) sets down this idea philosophically, yet without supporting it with literary arguments, as he does not begin his study from the text of the tragedies. My endeavour starts from this view, not chronologically, but regarding its meaning. It revolves around this idea, implicit throughout this

[1] "There are many wonderful things in the world, but none is more wonderful than man.
… Hades is the only thing he cannot escape."
[2] The idea is taken from Aeschylus's *Choephoroi*, where the same word is used (δεινά). It also appears in Solon's elegy for the Muses in the extant fragments of *Anaxagoras*, as well as in Plato's dialogue *Protagoras.*