

When the Gods Speak: Oracular Communication and Concepts of Language in Sophocles

by

Amy Nicole Pistone

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(Classical Studies)  
in the University of Michigan  
2017

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Ruth Scodel, Chair  
Professor Sara Ahbel-Rappe  
Professor Richard Janko  
Associate Professor Ezra Keshet

Amy Nicole Pistone  
apistone@umich.edu  
ORCID iD: 0000-0003-2822-7154

© Amy Nicole Pistone 2017

*For my mom, who taught me to love literature before I could read it on my own,  
and my dad, who taught me that a challenge builds character.*

## Acknowledgments

I am sure that I will not adequately thank everyone who contributed to my completing this project, and I apologize in advance for that. The list is long indeed.

First, I owe my committee a great deal, and my chair above all. Ruth Scodel gave me the room to explore my own ideas and the support to help make something of them. I needed to spin my wheels a bit before I started making any progress on my dissertation, and she allowed me space to spin and then also helped set me on a productive path. For that I am deeply grateful, and for the wealth of knowledge she has shared with me while still allowing my research to be my own. She has taught me a great deal about how to be a scholar and an instructor, as well as a colleague, and I will take those lessons with me.

I also owe a great debt to my committee members—Richard Janko, Sara Ahbel-Rappe, and Ezra Keshet—all of whom have helped refine my ideas and pointed me toward useful scholarship to develop my research. Their support and encouragement has also been extremely valuable to me. Celia Schultz and Donald Sells and Benjamin Fortson have also helped me along the way, and their willingness to answer all my *ad hoc* questions and requests (often for letters for things, with less lead time than I should have given them) is something I appreciate very much. Michelle Biggs and Molly Cravens have also made everything around this process run as smoothly as possible, and this would not have been completed or submitted without their support, both practical and moral. Naturally, I am also extremely thankful to the Department of Classical Studies and Rackham Graduate School for the funding they have provided me.

I have been fortunate to have wonderful peers and colleagues as well: in particular, my cohort (the Third Triumvirate) of Nick Geller and Jacqui Stimson, as well as Tiggy McLaughlin, and Tim Hart. They have made me a better scholar and have kept me grounded during this graduate school process. I hope that I have given them a portion of what they have given me. Clara Bosak-Schroeder, Matt Newman, and Evan and Ellen Lee have also helped me a great deal, as well as Rebecca Kennedy, who has been both a friend and mentor to me.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends outside my department for keeping me grounded and giving me perspective. In particular, my running group, PR Fitness, has given me an outlet and support and a great deal of my productivity has been due to regular long runs with them. I appreciate all that you have given me.

Of course, I owe so much to my family. My parents have encouraged me to pursue my academic dreams, even if they don't always understand the details of what I work on or why I work on it. Their love and encouragement means everything, as does my brother's. Finally, I cannot thank my partner, Mike, enough for loving me and putting up with me through all the highs and lows of graduate school and for asking if I needed anything when I was cursing at my laptop or a pile of books who weren't cooperating.

To everyone I mentioned and those I forgot, know that I appreciate all of your help along the way. Thank you for your help in making my scholarship and my academic life better and, it goes without saying, any faults that remain are entirely my own.

# Table of Contents

<b>Dedication</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>List of Appendices</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>I</b>
Sophocles and Linguistics .....	2
Gricean Maxims and Implicature .....	4
Scalar Implicature .....	10
Implicature conclusions .....	14
Ambiguity .....	15
Linguistic Case Study: Orestes and Electra's Recognition Scene (El. 1098-1230).....	20
Linguistic Conclusions .....	26
Other Aspects of Oracles in the Ancient World .....	28
Historical Oracles .....	28
Oracles in Herodotus.....	35
Other Literary Oracles .....	44
<b>Chapter 1: The <i>Trachiniae</i> and Tragic Misunderstandings</b> .....	<b>46</b>
Introduction .....	46
Pragmatic Theory .....	48
The Multifform Prophecy from Zeus.....	50
43-8: Deianeira's ominous δέλτος .....	50
76-85: Deianeira's first account.....	51
164-174: Deianeira's second account .....	54
821-830: The Chorus' account .....	59
568-577: Nessus' dying words .....	62
1159-1173: Heracles' prophecies and interpretations .....	69
Pragmatic Analysis .....	71
Conclusions .....	77

<b>Chapter 2: Oedipus, Tiresias, and Apollo Loxias .....</b>	<b>81</b>
Introduction .....	81
The Riddle of the Sphinx .....	82
Mechanics of Greek Riddles .....	89
Oracles and Prophecy in the Oedipus Tyrannus.....	97
1. Oracular Instructions and the Plague .....	98
2. Prophecies about Laius and Jocasta .....	108
3. Tiresias: Most like the Lord Apollo.....	130
Conclusions .....	146
<b>Chapter 3: The Other Plays and What Is Found There.....</b>	<b>152</b>
Introduction .....	152
The Transmission of Fate: Calchas' Words in the Ajax.....	154
The Use and Misuse of Oracles in the Electra .....	162
A Prophecy or a Curse? Tiresias' Words in the Antigone .....	167
Odysseus the Sophist: Rhetoric and a Prophecy in the Philoctetes.....	173
Building a Prophecy in the Oedipus at Colonus .....	188
Lines 84-110: A New Oedipus and a New Oracle .....	189
Lines 335-420: Ismene and the New Oracles.....	193
Oedipus, Prophecy, and Curses.....	198
602ff.: Oedipus Triumphant.....	201
Conclusions at Colonus.....	204
Overall Conclusions.....	205
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>207</b>
Next Steps .....	211
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>240</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>241</b>

## List of Appendices

<b>Appendix A: Uses of ħ . . . ħ</b> .....	<b>212</b>
Inclusive (or Predominantly Inclusive) Uses of Or.....	213
Prayer Language.....	213
Quasi-Hendiadys, Plausible Coexistence, and “Ideally Both” Uses.....	217
Neither Inclusive nor Exclusive .....	223
“Or at Least” Uses .....	223
Ambiguous Uses .....	225
Exclusive Ors.....	227
<b>Appendix B: Linguistic Terms and Concepts</b> .....	<b>231</b>
Conventional Implicatures.....	231
Deeper Analysis of Implicature.....	231
Grice’s Cooperative Principle and Maxims of Conversation.....	232
Q- and R-based Implicature .....	234
Downward Entailment.....	235
Hurford’s Constraint .....	237
Glossary of Linguistic Terms .....	239



## Abstract

Oracles in Sophoclean tragedies are consistently misunderstood, not because the gods speak in out-and-out lies, but because they communicate in a decidedly non-human mode that appears to violate the unwritten rules of effective human conversation. I use pragmatic linguistic theory to examine how oracles are misunderstood, since pragmatics is concerned precisely with these unwritten rules—how context, inferences, and implications complement the basic semantic content of language. These non-semantic elements are conspicuously absent from oracular communication, which leads to misinterpretation. I examine how the liminality and strangeness of oracular speech afford Sophocles the flexibility to explore the different components of language. Oracular speech—precisely because it is not bound by the rules of “normal” speech—offers a context in which pragmatic principles can fail and artificially constructed miscommunications can “break” pragmatic rules. By exploring the limits of communication and miscommunication, Sophocles illustrates exactly those guiding principles that underlie effective communication.

## Introduction

In this project, I examine all seven of Sophocles' surviving tragedies with a focus on the oracles and prophetic speech—features found in all seven plays. Although scholars have pointed out that these oracles fundamentally defy understanding, my work explains exactly how mortals fail to understand and argues that this failure is central to Sophocles' conception of language. This theory of language, I argue, is a sophisticated one that engages with and resists many of the sophistic rhetorical trends in Athens in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE in a way that has not been fully appreciated by previous studies. By focusing on the specific linguistic mechanisms that generate this oracular ambiguity, I show that oracles in Sophocles communicate in a way that seems to violate unwritten rules that govern effective human conversation. To do this, I draw on pragmatic linguistic theories, which study the ways language gives rise to meaning and understanding, to examine how and why these prophecies are misunderstood.

Because pragmatic theory deals with the role that things like context, inferences, and implications play in generating meaning and augmenting the basic semantic content of language, it offers a very useful and promising approach to oracles—though, thus far, a sadly underutilized one. The deceptive nature of these oracles has often been understood as either a sign of malicious intent by the gods or some sort of failure by the mortal listeners: scholarship on these oracles has either treated the problems with oracular language as a dramatic convenience or as a theological issue, or they have used deconstructionist approaches to conclude that language is fundamentally unintelligible. I instead focus on the ways these oracles show things about language—things that are entirely separate from the gods' intentions. I argue that these intentions are in fact inaccessible within the context of the play, and that the language itself is much more the object of Sophocles' interest.

Oracles present a unique opportunity for Sophocles to explore language because they are, by their very nature, liminal and strange. This, I argue, allows Sophocles to play with language to create artificial exceptions to pragmatic principles, where deceptive language need not be intentional or malicious, but can arise simply from a fundamental divide between mortals and the

divine. Precisely because it is not bound by the rules of “normal” speech, oracular speech offers a context for Sophocles to explore the ambiguity of language, as he can present artificially constructed miscommunications that seem to “break” these pragmatic rules. By exploring the limits of communication and miscommunication, Sophocles illustrates exactly those guiding principles that underlie effective communication. Put another way, by creating situations in which integral parts of human communication are stripped away, Sophocles can highlight these aspects of communication through their conspicuous absence.

Only after closely reading all of these plays can I widen my examination to explore Sophocles’ broader purpose for including ambiguous oracles and other prophetic utterances in all of his extant plays. By highlighting the failures of communication between mortals and gods, Sophocles comments on the relationship of language to meaning—a particularly salient topic in 5th-century Athens, when Sophists were introducing more relativistic and deconstructionist ideas about language into the intellectual discourse. Rather than simply accepting or rejecting these concepts, as has often been suggested, Sophocles makes a much more subtle point about how language functions. After examining the competing theories of language in Athens at the time, I suggest that Sophocles uses the opportunities provided by oracles in his plays to argue that there is some intrinsic meaning in language and communication. Language’s slippery nature does not prove that there is no stable meaning to language, but simply that the rules that govern meaning are more complex than people often realize.

## **Sophocles and Linguistics**

In the analysis which follows, I seek to focus on the consistent presence of oracular misunderstanding in all of Sophocles’ extant plays and to use these moments of miscommunication to formulate a theory of language that emerges from these plays. Oracles are unique in that they seem to present a moment of linguistic communication between gods and mortals. Contrary to other sorts of divination, such as augury or reading entrails, once oracles are derived and placed into a verbal form by some sort of priest or priestess, they appear to be intelligible. The words of the gods are in the Greek language and can presumably be understood by anyone who speaks (or, in some contexts, reads) Greek.

The often fatal misunderstanding of these oracles is surprisingly constant throughout the extant Sophoclean corpus, however, and points to a persistent interest in this idea. The question of how and why these oracles are misunderstood is not a new question—scholars have wrestled with this at great length and often concluded that Sophocles’ works convey a constant message of “late learning” and the inability of mortals to fully understand themselves and their own natures or circumstances until it is too late to avert disaster.

This motif is certainly present in Sophocles’ tragedies, but my analysis will focus on a different aspect of this oracular misunderstanding. In Sophocles, the oracles are misunderstood in a peculiarly linguistic way that does not, I argue, leave us with the inescapable conclusion that the gods are malicious or knowledge is unattainable. These readings are certainly available within these plays, but the linguistic mechanics of these oracles point to another, subtler point. Oracles are misunderstood for the same reasons human communication is properly understood—the tragic outcome of these plays hinges upon the fact that humans approach oracular language with the same linguistic and pragmatic tools that they use to approach human language. These tools fail spectacularly when applied to communication from the gods, but, in their failure, these plays also highlight what these tools are. To put it another way, these plays offer a sophisticated set of linguistic theories and the ambiguity of oracles specifically flouts these linguistic principles. By creating artificial language and situations that “break” these linguistic principles, Sophocles’ plays in fact construct and promote a theory of language that is conspicuously delineated by the unusual situations in which it fails.

These theories are implicitly embedded within the language of these plays and require a certain amount of excavation before we can look at them clearly. The best tools to do this are those furnished by pragmatic linguistic theory—particularly, recent work on implicature. I provide here an overview of the linguistic concepts that will be most relevant to my analysis in subsequent chapters. Many of the more precise and technical aspects of pragmatics are not directly applicable to my project and I will often turn to a less precise definition or theory when the more precise version will not fundamentally alter my reading of Sophocles. Many of the precise details of these theories, it is worth noting, are still controversial and hotly contested among the linguistics community<sup>1</sup> and the precise boundaries between pragmatics and semantics are not well delineated. For my purposes, however, I am less concerned with the precise boundaries between the two and

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, Bach 1999 has claimed that conventional implicature is a myth.

more concerned with the theoretical implications of these ideas, as a lens through which to examine the linguistic theories put forth in the extant Sophoclean corpus. For a more detailed presentation of these ideas or a concise summary of terms and examples presented here, please see Appendix B.

### Gricean Maxims and Implicature

Implicature—an aspect of what is meant by a speaker that is not a part of what is explicitly said by that speaker—will pervade my analysis of Sophocles’ works. The term originates with Grice but has since been picked up by many neo-Gricean linguists, in addition to other linguists as well. It is worth noting, however, that the concept of a contrast between what is said and what is meant (the roots of the idea of implication) dates back a great deal further than Horn or Grice, and in fact finds its roots in antiquity. Horn<sup>2</sup> cites the 4th century CE grammarians Servius and Donatus, in their discussion of litotes, on this point: *minus dicimus et plus significamus*. Since a great deal of work has been done on this topic since Grice’s seminal work in 1961, I will begin with an overview that Horn provides,<sup>3</sup> which summarizes and draws upon Grice heavily, but also makes use of more recent advances.

The underlying premises that inform pragmatic theory (and concepts of implicature in particular) stem from Grice’s seminal Cooperative Principle and his Maxims of Conversation:

<b>Grice’s Cooperative Principle and Maxims of Conversation</b> (Grice 1989: 26-7)
Cooperative Principle: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange.”
Maxims of Conversations:
<b>QUALITY:</b> Try to make your contribution one that is true. 1. Do not say what you believe to be false [i.e., Do not lie]. 2. Do not say that for which you lack evidence.
<b>QUANTITY:</b> 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange). 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
<b>RELATION:</b> Be relevant.
<b>MANNER:</b> Be perspicuous. 1. Avoid obscurity of expression. 2. Avoid ambiguity.

<sup>2</sup> Horn 2006 cites Hoffmann 1987 and Horn 1991

<sup>3</sup> Horn 2006 working closely with Grice 1961. This work of his is an introductory chapter in a handbook to pragmatics and is intended as an uncontroversial overview of implicature for a non-specialist audience. While many of his claims (here and elsewhere) are not accepted by all contemporary linguists, this particular work is not very controversial and I feel comfortable adopting his presentations and analysis of implicature: unless specifically noted, nearly all of the terminology and linguistic theory provided here is drawn from his analysis.

3. Be brief. (Avoid unnecessary prolixity.)
4. Be orderly.

Critically, these maxims are not prescriptive or meant to guide ethical action. They are instead a collection of default assumptions that are shared by speakers and which give rise to the implicatures upon which pragmatic analysis rests. These conventions are a guide which can be observed, violated, or apparently violated (when a speaker counts on the hearer to recognize the violation and incorporate that knowledge into their context-based interpretation). In all these circumstances, the underlying principles still function, just in different ways.

Out of these, Grice himself and many other linguists<sup>4</sup> have given the most importance to the maxim of Quality. To emphasize this, I would like to include a critical passage from Grice's original formulation of these ideas that will be relevant throughout my analysis of Sophocles' texts (though I do not claim that it maps onto Sophocles' own ideas, but merely that it is a critical element of this pragmatic framework that I bring to bear on Sophocles' plays):

The maxim of Quality, enjoining the provision of contributions which are genuine rather than spurious (truthful rather than mendacious), does not seem to be just one among a number of recipes for producing contributions; it seems rather to spell out the difference between something's being, and (strictly speaking) failing to be, any kind of contribution at all. *False information is not an inferior kind of information; it just is not information.*<sup>5</sup>

There is something critically different about statements that are known to be false, and this distinction will prove extremely important throughout the rest of this analysis. It is a persistent misunderstanding of Grice's ideas<sup>6</sup> to think that consciously delivered lies "disprove" this basic set of maxims. In fact, these maxims are most useful as an analytical tool precisely when they are *not* observed.

Building on the foundation of these maxims, Grice developed the idea of implicatures and separated them out into specific subtypes. Horn's illustrative examples (closely following Grice 1961: § 3) will be extremely useful for exploring how exactly implicature functions. The second member (b, and in italics) below is deducible (at least in certain contexts) from the first version (a):

---

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Levinson 1983, Horn 1984a

<sup>5</sup> Grice 1989: 371, emphasis my own.

<sup>6</sup> For a small selection of these misunderstandings, see Keenan 1976 and Campbell 2001,

Subtypes of Implicatures (after Grice 1961: §3) <sup>7</sup>	
1a	Even KEN knows it's unethical
1b	<i>Ken is the least likely [of a contextually invoked set] to know it's unethical</i>
2a	[in a recommendation letter for a position as a philosophy professor] Jones dresses well and writes grammatical English
2b	<i>Jones is no good at philosophy</i>
3a	The cat is in the hamper or under the bed
3b	<i>I don't know for a fact that the cat is under the bed</i> <sup>8</sup>

Looking at sentences 1a and 1b, we can see that the word *even* plays a critical role in generating 1b from 1a. Even without emphasizing the word *KEN*, we still understand from the use of *even* that Ken is the least likely (of the contextually-invoked set) to know that it is unethical. We could express the same **truth-conditional content**<sup>9</sup> in a way that does not generate 1b (“Ken knows it’s unethical too,” for example). This depends on a particular word (which is complemented by stress placed on the word *KEN*).

In 2a and 2b, something very different is occurring. Here, it is entirely context-dependent. In a different context, *Jones dresses well and writes grammatical English* would be a compliment. This implicature has nothing to do with the conventional lexical meaning of the words (as was the case in 1b), but rather from the utterance of those words in a particular context and the implicature rests entirely on the context and what *could* have been said but was left unsaid. Convention dictates that a recommendation letter will say positive and polite things about the applicant (see the Principle of Politeness, addressed later). Returning to Grice’s maxims, the Principle of Relation would dictate that the speaker should be relevant and comment on the applicant’s qualifications for a job—a hearer will infer that the speaker has flouted this maxim for a reason (here, in the interest of politeness) and by extension, will infer that the speaker has nothing positive to say about the applicant’s qualifications.

Looking now at 3a and 3b, we see a similar situation. These inferences (as noted, an equally valid option here would be *I don't know for a fact that the cat is in the hamper*) are also context-dependent. 2a requires a very specific context to generate 2b, whereas 3b is always generated,

---

7 For a more technical analysis of these implicatures, please see Appendix B. 1b is a detachable, non-cancelable inference and illustrates a conventional implicature. 2b and 3b are non-conventional non-detachable, cancelable inferences. All of these concepts are defined and explained in more detail in the appendix.

8 An equally valid implicature here would be “I don’t know for a fact that the cat is in the hamper.”

9 By “truth-conditional content,” I refer to the conditions (of the world) under which the utterance is true. If the truth conditions obtain, the utterance is true. For my purposes in this example, this simply refers to Ken’s knowledge that it is unethical (at which point the utterance and also the inference become valid).

without a specific context to block this implicature.<sup>10</sup> This is a much more generalized version of the same context-based implicature<sup>11</sup> we saw in 2b. 3a and 3b also illustrate an application of Grice's maxims, since the speaker implicates—by their use of *or*—that they do not have definite knowledge either way. If the speaker knew that the cat was in one of those two discrete locations, the Maxim of Quantity would dictate that (assuming the precise location of the cat is relevant to the given conversation) they should provide as much information as they can. A hearer will infer that the speaker does not know more relevant information because they did not disclose more relevant information. The use of *or* implicates that the speaker does not have enough information to make a stronger, less ambiguous claim.

In all these types of implicatures, however, it is crucial to note that the proposition or sentence does not produce the implicature—implicatures are produced by the speaker or the utterance. Implicatures are critically *not* a feature of sentences. Before going any farther, I would like to distinguish between a few critical (and unfortunately similar) terms: *implication*, *implicature*,<sup>12</sup> *inference*, *presupposition*, and *entailment*. For my purposes, I will be using fairly standard and traditional definitions for all these terms.<sup>13</sup> Grice was deliberate in his choice of *implicate* rather than *imply* to describe what speakers do. If a sentence is true, then what it implies is necessarily true. Implication (what is *implied*) depends on semantic content (what actually is said) whereas implicature (what is *implicated*) involves what is not said and depends on pragmatic

---

<sup>10</sup> “Block” is the term of art generally used for this process. An implicature is blocked when some sort of contextual clue overrides the default pragmatic process that we would expect to occur. *The cat is in the hamper or under the bed* always generates (as a default) the implicature *I don't know for a fact that the cat is under the bed* unless context prevents the implicature from occurring. We could, for example, imagine the following scenario:

A: I've looked everywhere for the cat, except in the hamper and under the bed

B (looking in the hamper while giving no indication that the cat is there): *So, the cat is in the hamper or under the bed...*

In this scenario, the implicature generated would in fact be *I know for a fact that the cat is under the bed*, since Speaker B's actions have just conveyed that the cat is not in the hamper, and must therefore be under the bed. In this very specific situation, the implicature *I don't know for a fact that the cat is under the bed* is said to have been blocked, since the default implicature is not generated, because context precludes it.

<sup>11</sup> This is in fact a contrast between a particularized conversational implicature and a generalized conversational implicature, which are described in more detail in Appendix B.

<sup>12</sup> I will not be using the term implicature (playing off of implicIT, as opposed to implicATE) at all. There are some (e.g., Bach 2006) who prefer this term, particularly in the context of scalar implicatures, on the grounds that there is a fine distinction between the two and that nuance is lost by using the term implicature for all of these situations. This argument would see implicatures as situations in which the meaning is supplied implicitly through completion and expansion, rather than explicitly. See Bach 2006: 28-9 for an argument in favor of this distinction. Although his arguments have merit, the subtle distinction he draws is irrelevant for my purposes and only complicates the already-complicated terminology.

<sup>13</sup> These, and all other technical linguistic terms that I introduce, can be found in Appendix B, which is a glossary with examples of these different terms which will hopefully be useful for readers as a handy reference.



elements instead. To return to the examples above, *Jones dresses well and writes grammatical English* implies simply that Jones dresses well and writes grammatical English. The context is irrelevant. However, in the context of a letter of recommendation for a philosophy position, what the speaker (or writer) is understood to mean—that Jones is no good at philosophy—is the unstated implicature. These terms will need additional refinement, and there is certainly debate about the extent to which implicature can be extricated from grammar<sup>14</sup> and this is a simplistic overview, but it will suffice for the moment.

Inferences are also distinct from implicature, though they are often conflated with one another.<sup>15</sup> The critical distinction here is that an inference is something that a hearer makes and an implicature is something that a speaker intends. A speaker can implicate something without a hearer making the intended inference and a hearer can infer something that the speaker did not implicate. In a world of perfect and complete communication, these ought to line up with one another, but the two terms describe opposite sides of unspoken communication.

**Entailments** can occasionally have the same truth-conditional content as implicatures,<sup>16</sup> but they are generally distinct. A *sentence* can entail something, whereas a *speaker* implicates something. Entailment is the relationship between two sentences when one demands the truth of the other. For example:

- A) That urn contains the ashes of Orestes
- B) Orestes is dead

Sentence A **entails** sentence B. If sentence A is true, sentence B *must* be true. This relationship has nothing to do with the utterance of the sentences or the speaker's intentions or the context.

Sentence A simply requires the truth of sentence B.

**Presuppositions** are also a feature of a sentence, but they work slightly differently from entailments. A presupposition (as one might imagine) involves a presupposed truth that is taken for granted. For example, *That urn contains the ashes of Electra's brother* **presupposes** that Electra

---

<sup>14</sup> Chierchia 2004 argues compellingly that implicatures are far more grammatical than has often been acknowledged and that—particularly with indirect and embedded implicatures—it is inadequate to think about implicatures as a distinct aspect of an utterance.

<sup>15</sup> See Bach 2006 ("The Top 10 Misconceptions about Implicature") on this misunderstanding of Gricean and neo-Gricean theories (among many others, as the title of his article would indicate). My discussion of this distinction, as well as many of my definitions, draws heavily on his explanations (esp. 23-25).

<sup>16</sup> See Bach 2006: 24 on this situations in which the two can correspond exactly.

has a brother. The simplest way to distinguish entailments from presuppositions is through negation. Presuppositions still hold true under negation, but entailments do not:

**Presupposition:** *That urn does not contain the ashes of Electra's brother* still presupposes that Electra has a brother.

**Entailment:** *That urn does not contain the ashes of Orestes* does not entail that Orestes is dead (though he certainly could be, with his remains in an undetermined state and location).

Building upon these, *scalar implicature* is another important term to introduce here. I include Horn's well-chosen illustrative example from the film *When Harry Met Sally*, partly due to its great clarity and partly due to its entertainment value (in the midst of a rather dry discussion of linguistic theory). In this scene, Harry is setting up a blind date between his friend Jess and his friend (but not yet girlfriend), Sally:

Jess: If she's so great why aren't YOU taking her out?

Harry: How many times do I have to tell you, we're just friends.

Jess: So you're saying she's not that attractive.

Harry: No, I told you she IS attractive.

Jess: But you also said she has a good personality.

Harry: She HAS a good personality.

Jess [Stops walking, turns around, throws up hands, as if to say "Aha!"]

Harry: What?

→Jess: When someone's not that attractive, they're ALWAYS described as having a good personality.

Harry: Look, if you had asked me what does she look like and I said, she has a good personality, that means she's not attractive. But just because I happen to mention that she has a good personality, she could be either. She could be attractive with a good personality, or not attractive with a good personality.

Jess: So which one is she?

Harry: Attractive.

⇒Jess: But not beautiful, right?

Horn marks (with the single arrow) the moment where Jess incorrectly reanalyzes a particularized implicature as generalized, at which point Harry stresses the content-dependent nature of that inference. More than a gratuitous movie reference, however, this also provides an

example of another critical term for my linguistic analysis of Sophocles. At the end of this scene, in the line marked with the double arrow, Jess draws a separate inference. Here, the inference is generalized, but it demonstrates provides an example of *scalar implicature*.<sup>17</sup> Jess here assumes that the weak claim that the speaker makes indicates that the speaker is not in a position to make a stronger claim. In short, scalar implicature works from a scale of strength of predication and assumes (based on Grice's maxims, which I shall explore below) that a speaker will make the strongest claim they are in a position to make. "Attractive" is here the upper-bound of an assertion, and Jess then infers that the woman in question is not anything beyond attractive (i.e. beautiful, gorgeous, etc.). Scalar implicature works on the assumption that terms can generally be ranked in terms of their strength and a speaker will make the strongest claim that they are in a position to make. As another example, a speaker would not say that their food is warm when they really mean that it is very hot. It would not necessarily be wrong to say that it is warm (it is, after all, *at least* at the minimum threshold to be considered warm), but it would be misleading. Perhaps more clear is an example with numbers, where a scale of strength is essentially just a number line. If a speaker says that she has four children, and it turns out that she in fact has five children, her claim to have four children is not false, but a listener would be justified in thinking that her answer was not *entirely* accurate either. This is, of course, context-dependent as well. If a large group were asked to split into two smaller groups, based on the number of siblings they have, and people with fewer than three siblings were asked to form one group and people with three or more siblings were asked to form another group, then it would no longer be misleading for a woman with four siblings to say that she has three siblings, since three siblings is the most relevant piece of information and is—in this specific context—functionally equivalent to "three or more siblings."

## Scalar Implicature

Scalar Implicature, to delve in a little more deeply, stems largely out of Grice's Quantity maxim and, more precisely, out of the first submaxim he lists under Quantity: Do not say what you believe to be false. This submaxim is used to derive "upper-bounding generalized conversational implicatures associated with scalar values."<sup>18</sup> This idea can be seen much more clearly with an

---

<sup>17</sup> Though Horn modestly does not refer to it this way in his summary which I am drawing heavily upon here, this phenomenon is often described in terms of Horn Scales and refers to the idea that he developed in his thesis and later work, though Horn himself protested vigorously against that term for them (Birner and Ward, 2006: ix-xi).

<sup>18</sup> Horn 1972, 1989; Gazdar 1979; Hirschberg 1985

examination of the uses of *some* in English, which can conceivably mean *at least some* (the indefinite use) or *some but not all* (the semi-definite use).<sup>19</sup> If a speaker were to say “I like some of the people at this party,” a hearer would be justified in thinking that the speaker does not like all of the people at the party. Without additional context to suggest otherwise, the hearer will reasonably assume that if the speaker liked *all* of the people at the party, they would say *all*. One can reasonably suggest, however, that perhaps the speaker does not know everyone at the party and does not feel as though they can pass judgment on people they have not met. To reduce ambiguity, a speaker in that situation might say something like “I like *at least* some of the people at the party.” In fact, this is precisely what Grice addresses with his Modified Occam’s Razor: “Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.”<sup>20</sup> This effectively negates the “lower bound” of the semantic possibilities that would otherwise be in play; put more simply, it means that the speaker will give as much relevant information in the most comprehensible way, and the hearer is authorized to eliminate the less obvious understanding.

This lower bound is often called a one-sided reading, as opposed to the two-sided reading, which combines what it actually said with what is implicated. If we schematize this, it looks like the following:

One-Sided and Two-Sided Understanding (Horn 2006: 10)		
	“One-sided”	“Two-sided”
I like some of the people at the party.	“...some if not all...”	“...some but not all...”
The water is warm.	“...at least warm...”	“...warm but not hot...”

So, combining Grice’s different theories, we come to a conclusion that the best understanding of an utterance, without other context, will be this two-sided meaning. If the speaker has all the relevant information at their disposal (i.e. they do in fact know how they feel about everyone at the party or what the temperature of the water is), then they would say “all” or “hot” if that were the better choice. By not using the stronger word, they effectively implicate the weaker reading and cancel the stronger reading.

---

<sup>19</sup> Horn 2006: 9 lays out the scholarly history of debating this point, including De Morgan 1847 and Mill 1867. Mill’s formulation draws on the principles that underlie the idea of scalar implicature.

<sup>20</sup> Grice 1989: 47.

This, then, is where the “scalar” aspect comes into play.<sup>21</sup> Working from the two examples above, we can see a pattern that gets generalized more broadly into the idea of scalar implications. We can order descriptive words into a ranking of relative informativity. The scales (often called Horn Scales, from Horn’s seminal 1972 work on the topic) are not entirely accepted in any given form, but Levinson provides a useful sampling of scales as follows:

Sample Horn Scales (Levinson 1983: 134)
< all, most, many, some, few >
< and, or >
< n, . . . , 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 >
< excellent, good >
< hot, warm >
< always, often, sometimes >
< succeed in Ving, try to V, want to V >
< necessarily p, p, possibly p >
< certain that p, probable that p, possible that p >
< must, should, may >
< cold, cool >
< love, like >
< none, not all >

The direction of the scales will vary based on context (temperature, for example, will depend largely on the desired temperature and the stronger version will be very different when talking about iced tea as opposed to hot coffee). The critical element here is that they are arranged in ascending/descending order of informativity. So when a speaker chooses a word (to return to my previous example, *some* of the people at the party), the hearer can assume that the speaker has a reason for not using a word higher up that particular *scale*. There can be a range of reasons that the speaker made this choice, but the underlying assumption is that the speaker did not intend for

---

<sup>21</sup> For a much more elaborate exploration of this, see Horn 2006: 11, where he provides a square of opposition that visually constructs the possibilities and lays them out in a hierarchy from universals to particulars and affirmations to negations.

that “some” to be understood as “more than some” (i.e. all, most, or many). This, in effect, *cancels* those semantically viable meanings and the speaker *implicates* “some not all.”

To introduce a final bit of relevant terminology here, items higher up (more informative) on a scale *entail* things below them. This is, to some extent, the flip side of how scalar implicature works. So, to take the following example:

⟨ necessarily p, p, possibly p ⟩

“Necessarily p” *entails* “possibly p” and not the other way around. This is why saying “possibly p” implicates the negation of anything higher on that list. The utterance of “possibly p” means, once the implicature is taken into account, “possibly p, but **not** necessarily p,” or the speaker would have used the stronger term. Hirschberg 1991 has also shown that this pragmatic approach to meaning applies not only to scales or the sort that are listed above, but in fact any partially ordered set. So in a chronologically-arranged history book, if someone were to say that Sarah has made it to the Middle Ages, knowing as we do that this is a chronologically ordered set of topics, that utterance would implicate that she has not yet made it to the Industrial Revolution, though this implicature could be canceled by its modification to something like “not only has Sarah made it to the Middle Ages, but also to the Industrial Revolution” (which might, depending on the context, be preferred).

A few other constraints apply to this framework as well. For example, in the context of negation, this process is complicated.<sup>22</sup> In addition, there are many reasons why someone might not provide as much information as he or she potentially *could*, including a concern with style or politeness. Things like irony and sarcasm or understatement or hyperbole seem to flout these principles in a way that undermines their usefulness. Davis is quite succinct on this point:

We use irony and other figures, of course, in part because we have conversational goals other than the efficient communication of information. We observe not only the Cooperative Principle, but also the Principle of Style.

**Principle of Style:** Be stylish, so be beautiful, distinctive, entertaining, and interesting. Clear and simple prose—“just the facts, please”—can be boring, tedious and dull. We liven up our writing with figures of speech and other devices. In the process, we sacrifice perspicuity (violating Manner). We sometimes “embellish” a narration to make it more

---

<sup>22</sup> Chierchia 2001 addresses the way that this works in more detail, in the context of what are known as “downward-entailing operators,” such as negation. Horn 1989:234 also addresses how scalar implicature can be blocked and “scale reversal” occurs. Levinson 2000 challenges some of Chierchia’s conclusions about scale reversal, and the issue is certainly a complicated and unresolved one, but it does not directly pertain to my arguments and is perhaps best left to qualified linguists to resolve.

interesting (violating Quality) and delete boring or ugly details even when they are important (violating Quantity).<sup>23</sup>

Further, as Davis notes, drawing on Leech, Grice's maxims often come into conflict with the Principle of Politeness:

**Principle of Politeness:** Be polite, so be tactful, respectful, generous, praising, modest, deferential, and sympathetic.

Speakers frequently withhold information that would be offensive or disappointing to the hearer, violating Quantity. Speakers often exaggerate in order to please or flatter, and utter "white lies" in order to spare the hearer's feelings, violating Quality. People pick "safe topics" (e.g., the weather) to stress agreement and communicate an interest in maintaining good relations—but violating Relation. Euphemisms avoid mentioning the unmentionable, but in the process violate Manner and Quantity.<sup>24</sup>

As we can see, then, there are a great variety of principles that can come into conflict with one another and complicate the emergence of meaning.

### **Implicature conclusions**

In closing this section on linguistic theory, I would like to raise some objections that are perhaps obvious to any application of these theories to literary texts—particularly texts written in a different time and language. The emphasis in pragmatic theory is placed squarely on the speaker and the hearer and implicatures are only properties that can properly be spoken of in relation to a speaker or an utterance. A *sentence*, as I have noted, does not implicate anything. It would seem, then, that this is a purely spoken phenomenon that is entirely contingent on the assumptions that the speaker and hearer bring to bear on the conversation. It is not obvious how one might apply these theories to an ancient literary text.

Although these theories can be applied to a wide range of literary texts, drama is a particularly apt place to apply them, since drama recreates spoken communication, albeit in an artificial form. Further, the aspects of these plays which I am focusing my analysis upon are instances of communication that is intrinsically connected to spoken language. Oracles are a fundamentally language-oriented form of communication. As opposed to augury and other similar

---

<sup>23</sup> Davis 2014

<sup>24</sup> Davis 2014, drawing on Leech 1983 as well as directing readers toward Lakoff 1977; Brown and Levinson 1978; 1987; Horn 1989: 360; Matsumoto 1995: §2.4. Contrast Huang 2007: 37, fn. 12; Pinker 2007. Grice 1975: 28, he notes, "acknowledges the Principle of Politeness, and suggests that it generates implicatures that are both nonsemantic and nonconversational."

means of divination (reading entrails of an animal, for example), oracles are a linguistic means of communication and they seem, at least, to be intelligible in the same way that normal Greek linguistic communication is. While we do not always learn where a prophecy originated in the plays I will examine, they are all vocalized and we see characters within the plays interact with these oracles as utterances of the god(s). In this way, pragmatics are a viable means of interpretation and analysis.

The other obvious objection is that pragmatics is fundamentally concerned with the context of an utterance and the sorts of psychological mechanisms that allow the speaker and hearer to minimize the effort involved in effective communication. Can we, as moderns, effectively approximate the sorts of assumptions that shaped ancient communication? If we are to pragmatically analyze communication between characters within plays (and the ways the playwright's own ideas might shape those depictions), then a certain understanding of ancient psychology is a requisite. As I will show, however, we do have a great deal of information both within and without the plays and we have literary characters as well as ancient philosophers and other authors who provide an extensive frame of reference. Characters voice their own expectations and analyze the ways in which their expectations were incorrect and the ways their assumptions of meaning proved not to be accurate. In this way, we have the tools that we need to effectively and reasonably bring pragmatic linguistic theory to bear on these ancient texts.

## **Ambiguity**

Because this project deals so much with ambiguity, it is worth laying out precisely what I mean by ambiguity. Linguists recognize several discrete types of ambiguity: lexical ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity, and pragmatic ambiguity.

**Lexical Ambiguity:** this sort of ambiguity involves words that are homophonous (such as read and reed) and/or homographous (βίος meaning life and βίος meaning bow). Lexical ambiguity will vary between written and oral communication, since written lexical ambiguity only arises from homography, whereas oral lexical ambiguity arises from homophony.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> This can also vary by dialect, in oral communication—for instance, the word *been* is pronounced differently throughout the United States, and *been/bin* are homophonous in some regions, whereas *been/Ben* are homophonous in others, and *been/bean* are homophonous in yet other regions. See Katz 2016 for an extremely accessible visual representation of regional linguistic variants in the United States. See Hickey 2014 for a more scholarly approach.



**Syntactic ambiguity**<sup>26</sup>: this type of ambiguity refers to ambiguity that occurs on the sentence level, when the relationship between words and phrases is unclear (often involving modifiers whose referent is not clearly identified).

**Phrasal ambiguity**, a major subset of syntactic ambiguity, refers to a something like *superfluous hair remover*, which could either mean something that removes superfluous hair or a hair remover that is not necessary (that is, *superfluous* could modify either *hair* or *remover*).<sup>27</sup>

A relevant and extremely problematic sort of syntactic ambiguity occurs with **multiple connectives**, as in the sentence *Tonight, he will get drunk and rowdy or sad*, in which there is a lack of clarity about which connective has the broadest scope. Does this mean that *either* he will get drunk and rowdy *or* he got sad? Or does it mean that he got drunk and then he either got rowdy or sad? While math and propositional logic use brackets to make these distinctions, in written and spoken communication, the distinctions are not so clear.

**Modals** are also likely to introduce ambiguity, as in *John should be at home by now* (depending on context, this could mean something like *I don't know for a fact where John is, but I strongly suspect that he is at home at this time of night* or it could mean *John is not home, and I have no idea where he is, but he is under an obligation to be home* or *You must eat a piece of cake* (the range is less extreme here, but this could suggest a moral imperative, as in *you are obliged to eat this cake, or else you risk offending someone, or worse or you really should eat this cake because you will certainly like it*).

**Scopal ambiguities**: A second sort of syntactic ambiguity is a question of what are called “**scopal ambiguities**”—these involve operators and quantifiers. *All that glitters is not gold* is syntactically ambiguous, in that it is unclear whether this means that *not everything that*

---

<sup>26</sup> Examples here are taken from Sennet 2016, with minor modifications, since his examples are concise and effective and there is no reason to reinvent the wheel, so to speak.

<sup>27</sup> This can also occur when a phrase is not clearly connected to another part of the sentence, as in *Mary took the boat between the rocks*, which could refer either to Mary piloting a boat in such a way that it passes through two rocks (*between the rocks* modifies the verb *took*, in this case) or it could refer to Mary seizing a boat that was located between two rocks (*between the rocks* modifies the object *the boat*, in this case).

*glitters is gold (but some of it is)* or that *everything that glitters is not gold (i.e., nothing that glitters is gold)*. Another sort of syntactic ambiguity occurs with pronouns whose referent is unclear, as in *His mother loves John*, where we might assume that this is John's mother, but that is not necessarily true.<sup>28</sup> This is the type of ambiguity we will see surrounding a passage in the *Oedipus Colonus* in which it is unclear who the referent of κείνων is. The ability of Ancient Greek to omit the subject of the verb (as with φασι) can cause similar ambiguities, as will occur at *OC* 392.

### Pragmatic ambiguity:

One of the largest categories of pragmatic ambiguity has to do with **speech acts** and ambiguity as to what *type* of speech something is. Anyone with a particularly pedantic friend who has been asked *Can you pass the salt?* and responded smugly with *I don't know, can I?* is familiar with this sort of ambiguity. *Can you pass the salt?* can be intended either as an actual question (imagine, say, that someone's hands are full, and there's an actual question about their ability to pass the salt, under those conditions) or a request that is synonymous with *Please pass the salt*. This ambiguity, then, is one about the nature of the speech in question.

The broadest and most interesting type of pragmatic ambiguity (for my purposes) is **presuppositional ambiguity**. As an example, consider the ambiguity introduced by *too* in the intriguing case of *I love you too*.<sup>29</sup> This can mean one or more of the following:

- I love you (just like you love me)
- I love you (just like someone else does)
- I love you (and I love someone else)
- I love you (as well as bearing some other relationship (i.e. liking) to you)

These ambiguities are not a syntactic sort of ambiguity, but arise rather in relation to presuppositions.<sup>30</sup> This is the sort of ambiguity that occurs in τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ' ἔόντος

---

<sup>28</sup> In a sentence like *Every woman loved a man*, this could mean that *for every woman, there is at least one man that she loved*, or  $[\forall x:Wx][\exists y:My](x \text{ loved } y)$  in logical notation. It could also mean that *there is at least one man whom every woman loved*, or  $[\exists y:My][\forall x:Wx](x \text{ loved } y)$  in logical notation. Similarly, the scope of negation can cause problems of this sort.

<sup>29</sup> This example and an exploration and analysis of the ambiguity here can be found in Bach 1982.

<sup>30</sup> A second example can be found in the statement *Maria solved the problem too*. This could either mean *Maria solved the problem, in addition to Sarah, who also solved it* or it could mean *Maria solved the problem in addition to other things she's done*. Tone of voice might help distinguish these two in a spoken communication, as could contextual

ἀεὶ ἀξύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι, in which it is unclear with what ἀεὶ should be understood (an ambiguity Aristotle complains about at *Rhet.* 1407b).

**Two final types of ambiguity**<sup>31</sup>: are the sorts known as **collective-distributive ambiguity** and **ellipsis and complement ambiguity**.

**Collective-distributive ambiguity** arises when talking about a group of individuals, such as in *Natalie and Sara brokered deals*, in which it is unclear whether Natalie and Sara worked together to broker several deals or they each brokered one or more deals individually (or, as a third option, they may have brokered deals with one another, as in they were the two parties to a negotiation).

**Ellipsis and complement ambiguity** describes something like *Sam loves Jess more than Jason*, in which it is unclear whether this means *Sam loves Jess more than Sam loves Jason* or if it means *Sam loves Jess more than Jason loves Jess*. The ambiguity here arises from the words which are not written, and ambiguity occurs within that ellipsis (and the words that the reader/listener supplies to fill that ellipsis). The listener must decide whether Jason is another subject or object of the understood *loves*. Similarly, in a sentence like *John loves his mother and Bill does too*, this could mean *John loves his mother and Bill also loves John's mother* or *John loves John's mother and Bill loves Bill's mother*. This type of ambiguity has been given the name “strict-sloppy identity” and there is an extensive linguistic debate about precisely what sort of ambiguity this is,<sup>32</sup> for which reason I have not included this in a particular category, though I tend to agree with those who classify this as a sort of syntactic ambiguity.

---

clues provided by what was said immediately before this, but taken in a vacuum, the meaning of the initial utterance is unclear.

<sup>31</sup> I have omitted discussion of “truth conditional pragmatic ambiguity” because linguists are not convinced that this necessarily exists. For those who think that such ambiguity is impossible, see Kripke 1977 and Searle 1979: 150 fn. 3. For an opposing view, see Donnellan 1966 (esp. p. 297) and Recanati 2010.

<sup>32</sup> See Fiengo and May 1994, Sag 1980, Williams 1977, and Hardt and Stone 1997 for three different interpretations about precisely where the ambiguity is generated, in a psycholinguistic sense. For my purposes, this discussion is not terribly relevant, though it is fascinating.

All these types of ambiguity<sup>33</sup> fall under the larger linguistic umbrella of **polysemy**. Polysemy has been a popular topic in linguistics recently, primarily in computational and cognitive linguistics<sup>34</sup> and psycholinguistics has also treated the topic extensively, in terms of things like word recognition, semantic priming, and lexical decision tasks.<sup>35</sup> Intentional polysemy has long been overlooked in linguistics, though this has changed more recently. The earlier approaches to polysemy relied on the assumption that in normal speech, we resist multiplicity of meanings and avoid ambiguity. To examine instances when conversational maxims are flouted, Lehrer 1990 introduces the **principle of conventionality** (see also Clark 1993 on this), which Lehrer separates into two different closely related principles (Lehrer, 1990: 210):

1. If a word already exists to express a meaning, use it; don't use or construct another one
2. If a word lexicalizes a meaning (concept), don't use it to mean something else, even if that meaning would fit the patterns of the language

Critically (and this is where she departs from linguistic approaches like Grice 1975 and Sperber and Wilson 1986), she notes that these principles "can, of course, be overridden when there is a good reason for doing so, for example, to be entertaining, literary, shocking, or simply to be unconventional" and that "[w]henver a principle of conventionality is violated, the hearer, in addition to computing the meaning of the words, must figure out what, if anything, is being implicated by the unconventional choice as well" (1990: 210). As with the more fundamental Gricean maxims, the principle of conventionality is most useful when it is not followed. Because these guidelines do provide general descriptions of how communication functions, they are *generally* followed. When they are not followed, effective pragmatic analysis demands that we

---

33 There are some additional cases which do not fit neatly into one category and others which are niche enough (and which do not pertain to my analysis in this project) that I did not treat them here. For a fuller list, see Sennet 2016. One sort which I would like to mention in brief is often called *pros hen* ambiguity and is detailed in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (Γ.2, 1003a-b), where he discusses ambiguity inherent in words like being (τὸ ὄν), healthy (τὸ ὑγιεινόν), and medical (τὸ ἰατρικόν). These are all used in relation to something—in the case of health, for instance, “healthy” can mean related to health or producing health or in good health, etc.—but it is not always clear which meaning is intended, which can generate ambiguity (Τὸ δὲ ὄν λέγεται μὲν πολλαχῶς, ἀλλὰ πρὸς ἓν καὶ μίαν τινὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐχ ὁμωνύμως ἀλλ’ ὥσπερ καὶ τὸ ὑγιεινὸν ἅπαν πρὸς ὑγίειαν, τὸ μὲν τῷ φυλάττειν τὸ δὲ τῷ ποιεῖν τὸ δὲ τῷ σημείον εἶναι τῆς ὑγείας τὸ δ’ ὅτι δεκτικὸν αὐτῆς, καὶ τὸ ἰατρικὸν πρὸς ἰατρικὴν (τὸ μὲν γὰρ τῷ ἔχειν ἰατρικὴν λέγεται ἰατρικὸν τὸ δὲ τῷ εὐφυῆς εἶναι πρὸς αὐτὴν τὸ δὲ τῷ ἔργον εἶναι τῆς ἰατρικῆς), ὁμοιοτρόπως δὲ καὶ ἄλλα ληφόμεθα λεγόμενα τούτοις, — οὕτω δὲ καὶ τὸ ὄν λέγεται πολλαχῶς μὲν ἀλλ’ ἅπαν πρὸς μίαν ἀρχήν· τὰ μὲν γὰρ ὅτι οὐσίαι, ὄντα λέγεται, τὰ δ’ ὅτι πάθη οὐσίας, τὰ δ’ ὅτι ὁδὸς εἰς οὐσίαν ἢ φθοραὶ ἢ στερήσεις ἢ ποιότητες ἢ ποιητικὰ ἢ γεννητικὰ οὐσίας ἢ τῶν πρὸς τὴν οὐσίαν λεγομένων, ἢ τούτων τινὸς ἀποφάσεις ἢ οὐσίας· διὸ καὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν εἶναι μὴ ὄν φαμεν).

34 See Pustejovsky 1995, Brugman 1997, Cuyckens and Zawada 2001, Nerlich 2003.

35 See Nerlich and Clark 2001: 3.

examine precisely how and why these principles are disregarded. In actual conversations, this can be due to a variety of factors, ranging from complex theory of mind and psycholinguistic considerations to far simpler explanations such as accidental mishearing (perhaps by a listener who is distracted) or language barriers. In literature, however, choices are far more conscious and random accidents do not occur in scripted, literary conversations. This makes a pragmatic analysis of literary ambiguity that much more valuable.

This dissertation proposes a pragmatic linguistic reading of the oracles in Sophocles and takes precisely the approach that Lehrer suggests. Sophocles crafts oracular language which is intentionally ambiguous, and we must ask why he does this. Why are the oracles formulated in that way, and why specifically do humans chose the interpretation that they choose? The linguistic analysis required to answer these questions provides useful insight into Sophocles' own ideas about how language works, as I will show in the following chapters.

### **Linguistic Case Study: Orestes and Electra's Recognition Scene (*El.* 1098-1230)**

To illustrate what these tools can offer us, I turn now to the extended recognition scene between Orestes and Electra at *El.* 1098-1230, since this scene offers ample opportunity to examine how human characters miscommunicate and are forced to revise their language in a shared endeavor to arrive at meaning. Scholars have generally been quite unconcerned at the unusual length, slow development, and abundant miscommunications that we find in this scene. For the few who think there is anything worth commenting on, theatrical effect or suspense has been enough to explain the prolonged scene.<sup>36</sup>

As the scene opens, Orestes and Pylades have arrived at Argos in disguise and are bringing false proof of the fabricated story of Orestes' death. The moment when the scene becomes much more interesting, for my purposes, is at 1174, when Orestes realizes that he is speaking to Electra—he exclaims “Oh gods, what should I say? What words can I—who am at such a loss—turn to? I am no longer able to control my tongue!” (φεῦ φεῦ. τί λέξω; ποῖ λόγων ἀμηχανῶν / ἔλω;

---

<sup>36</sup> Jebb describes the scene as a “delicately gradual process” (ad 1176-1226) and Wright 2005 notes that this is elaborate and the recognition is postponed (from the prologue, where it conceivably could have occurred) in order to build suspense or excitement. Kells (ad 1176-1231) describes this scene as one of “great art and mounting excitement . . . due to its naturalness.”

κρατεῖν γὰρ οὐκέτι γλώσσης σθένω, 1174-5). For the rest of the scene, in a prolonged exchange, Orestes slowly reveals his identity to Electra.

As Orestes confirms his realization that he is speaking to Electra, the two begin communicating at cross purposes. Orestes is reacting to Electra's life and the sad conditions she has faced, and he laments the wretched misfortune that he has just fully come to understand (οἴμοι ταλαίνης ἄρα τῆσδε συμφορᾶς, 1179). At this point, we understand that he is upset at learning how terrible his sister's life has been, and her misfortune becomes his own. We can also see her own confusion in her response, since she is not aware of any reason why her pain would directly affect a stranger with whom she presumably has no particular connection and she responds with "surely you are not upset about *me*, stranger?" (οὐ δὴ ποτ', ὦ ξέν', ἀμφ' ἐμοὶ στένεις τάδε; 1180). Kells suggests that this is because "Electra is not accustomed to having strangers feeling concern over her. So she finds it hard to believe that it is herself that is the object of Orestes' pity" (*ad* 1180). Kells is not wrong on this point, but the source of the confusion is somewhat more nuanced. It is not the sadness of her plight in the abstract that strikes Orestes, but rather the personal connection that he has to this misfortune—he has just learned that *his sister* has suffered terribly.

Even just in these first few lines, however, we can see clearly how understanding takes so long to emerge. Orestes asks if he is looking at the "famous form of Electra" (σὸν τὸ κλεινὸν εἶδος Ἥλέκτρας τόδε; 1177). Here, we see some important pragmatic nuances. His formulation of the question is highly wrought and reflects the "dignity and solemnity" (Kells *ad* 1177) that is appropriate to the moment and to the genre. However, Orestes flagrantly breaks the Gricean Maxim of Manner, which suggests that speakers ought to be perspicuous and avoid ambiguity or obscurity or prolixity. Rather than explain who he is or why he feels Electra's own pain so deeply, which would be the most relevant pieces of information at this point, Orestes instead obliquely laments for the wretched misfortune (ταλαίνης . . . συμφορᾶς, 1179), her body, which has been treated dishonorably and impiously (ὦ σῶμ' ἀτίμως κάθ' ἑὸς ἐφθαρμένον, 1181) and her unmarried and ill-fated life (φεῦ τῆς ἀνύμφου δυσμόρου τε σῆς τροφῆς, 1183). Throughout, we can see Electra struggling to determine the missing information, though her persistent questions go largely unanswered—after her initial confusion at 1180, she explicitly asks Orestes why he is so upset about her plight (τί δὴ ποτ', ὦ ξέν', ὧδ' ἐπισκοπῶν στένεις; 1184). Interestingly, she addresses him as ξένος here, as she has at 1180 and 1182 already, clearly identifying him as something without a particular stake in her own plight and someone with whom she does not have

a pre-existing connection.<sup>37</sup> We can see the ways Electra moves forward in her attempts to understand what is going on, starting from her reasonable (though ultimately inaccurate) assumption that a speaker has not concealed his identity and that he would identify himself, if he were a friend or kin of some sort. When Orestes finally answers her question about why he is lamenting, Orestes' identity (known only to him) separates his interpretation of this conversation from Electra's and we can see how the same words are interpreted in two very different directions by the two participants in the conversation.

If we were to paraphrase Electra's reasoning, it would rest on these underlying presuppositions and logical progression:

***Presupposition:** (extreme) pity for suffering is something that only reasonably affects friends or family of the sufferer*

Electra's assertion that her interlocutor is a stranger (ξένος) with no personal connection to her then produces the following:

***Entailment:** My pain should not affect you [so much]*

As such, we can now improve upon Kells' reading of this scene and understand that Electra's reaction is not primarily a response to *anyone* expressing concern or pity for her, though we understand that she has not received a great deal of sympathy lately. Instead, we can understand her statement at line 1184—literally, “Why then, stranger, do you lament so much when you look at me?”—as actually meaning something more like “Why did *my* sad story make *you* so upset? You are a stranger and my suffering presumably has no connection to you.” The difference in the amount of information that Electra and Orestes possess leads to radically different interpretations of the same exchange.

<p>Ἥλ: τί δὴ ποτ', ὦ ξέν', ὧδ' ἐπισκοπῶν στένεις;          Ὀρ: ὡς οὐκ ἄρ' ἤδη τῶν ἐμῶν οὐδὲν κακῶν.          Ἥλ: ἐν τῷ διέγνως τοῦτο τῶν εἰρημένων;          Ὀρ: ὁρῶν σε πολλοῖς ἐμπρέπουσαν ἄλγεσιν.          1184-7</p>	<p>El: Why then, stranger, do you lament so much when you look at me?          Or: How, in fact, I knew nothing of my own woes!          El: In which of the things that have been said did you come to realize this?          Or: Because I am seeing you, conspicuous in your myriad woes.</p>
---	--

<sup>37</sup> The context makes quite clear that this is a use of ξένος that equates to “stranger” as a term of address (LSJ II and, in particular, III.b) and not “guest-friend” (LSJ I). Electra has expressed suspicions that this stranger might in fact be related to her, but she has phrased those suspicions in language related to συγγενής, as at 1202, and ξένος here refers to his unknown, stranger status. For more on this, see Dickey 1996.



Orestes' perspective	Electra's perspective
El: Why are you so sad? Or: I understand now how much you, my sister, suffered and by extension, I was/should have been suffering all these years! El: How so? Or: Seeing you and your suffering made me understand that.	El: Why are <i>you</i> so sad, stranger? You don't even know me! Or: How ignorant I was of my own woes! El: What that either of us has said in this conversation possibly made you think that any of these woes should affect you personally? Or: Seeing you and your suffering made me understand that.

At the end of this scene, just before Orestes finally reveals his identity, we see another illustrative moment that corroborates this interpretation. Electra is still clearly operating under the assumption I highlighted earlier, that only a relative of some sort would reasonably be this pained on her behalf.<sup>38</sup>

Ὀρ: ὦ δύσποτμ', ὡς ὀρῶν σ' ἐποικτίρω πάλαι. Ἡλ: μόνος βροτῶν νυν ἴσθ' ἐποικτίρας ποτέ. Ὀρ: μόνος γὰρ ἦκω τοῖσι σοῖς ἀλγῶν κακοῖς. Ἡλ: οὐ δὴ ποθ' ἡμῖν ξυγγενῆς ἦκεις ποθέν; 1199-1202	Or: Poor wretch! How I pity you, as I look at you! El: Know, then, that you alone among mortals has ever pitied me. Or: For I alone have come here, feeling grief at your woes. El: Surely you have not come as a relative of ours from somewhere?
---	---

Again, Electra's inferences are readily apparent in this scene. In the face of Orestes' own cryptic and oblique statements, Electra's attempts to make sense of his words foreground her own interpretive process. She is still unable to ascertain why this stranger takes such pity on her and,

<sup>38</sup> Electra is not being entirely realistic here, and her claim that Orestes *alone* has ever pitied her is hyperbolic, since the Chorus certainly pities her (as Kells notes, *ad loc.*, "But what of the Chorus?"). Her hyperbole does serve at least two purposes, however. Most obviously, this emphasizes the extent of her grief and despair, even if she overstates the reality facing her. Simultaneously, her claim that Orestes alone has ever pitied her draws rhetorical attention to how unusual his care is. As Electra describes things, Orestes is more concerned for her than her entire household, and even though her statement is not entirely accurate, her claim nonetheless has the same rhetorical effect, in the heat of this highly emotionally charged moment. The audience is unlikely to carefully weigh the merits of a claim like this and will instead feel the effect of Electra's claim, which highlights Orestes' concern and kinship (known only to the audience in this exchange).



adopting Jebb's preferred reading of τοῖσι σοῖς rather than τοῖς ἴσοις at I201,<sup>39</sup> we can see Electra apply the same basic assumption—that only kin would truly share in pity and suffering—to try to solve her confusion in this scene.

Just looking at this isolated facet of this scene, we can already see how pragmatics—combined with other interpretive tools—can help us to make sense of a complicated scene that hinges on failed attempts to convey meaning effectively. As we can see, Grice's maxims and the other underlying principles I have detailed need not be *followed* for them to be useful tools. In fact, they are most useful when they are not followed, since they can serve as a diagnostic tool to determine how failures of communication occur. By looking at the statements and responses of the two interlocutors, and knowing as we do that Orestes is more informed than Electra, we can identify what realistic human impulses are at play. It does a disservice to this scene to simply attribute its length and convolutions to dramatic suspense or some other theatrical effect. Similarly, to look at Orestes' wording and Electra's confusion and conclude that this is a generic, tragic convention of elevated language and tense stichomythia misses the point in many ways. To be sure, all these analyses are accurate, but they are also insufficient. As I will also argue in the context of oracular misunderstandings, Sophocles presents a complex and nuanced picture of how people communicate with one another and the ways meaning and understanding can be compromised.

In the end, Electra's assumption proves valid and Orestes reveals his identity as the kinsman that she suspected he must be all along. The assumptions and her grounds for making them are validated, and the lengthy process of recognition serves to highlight both the logical inferences that Electra is making as well as the complicating factors that can further obscure meaning. Orestes is not sure whom he can trust and his plan for revenge hinges on the element of secrecy. When combined with dramatic conventions of lofty, tragic language, there are multiple psychological and generic reasons for Orestes to be cautious about revealing his identity. In this scene, Sophocles combines these motivations in a way that requires readers to employ multiple heuristic approaches in order to make sense of it fully.

---

<sup>39</sup> I adopt Jebb's reading here of τοῖσι σοῖς rather than τοῖς ἴσοις. Either variant produces coherent meaning, but I am persuaded by his argument that ξυγγενῆς in the following line suggests that something must have prompted Electra's assumption and τοῖσι σοῖς does that far more effectively than τοῖς ἴσοις.

Although I focused mostly on this particular assumption of Electra's to explore the value of pragmatic analysis, the final lines of this scene offer a bizarre series of circumlocutions on Orestes' part, while Electra struggles to make sense of his cryptic and riddling language. I provide it here because Orestes' ambiguous language shares a great deal with the ambiguous and cryptic language of oracles, which will be my primary focus throughout the following chapters. However, because of two critical differences between Orestes' speech and oracular speech, Orestes can (eventually) be understood effectively: (1) Orestes and Electra can continue to ask questions and clarify meaning in a way that is impossible with oracles and (2) even though Orestes is proceeding in a strange and confusing way, he is nonetheless aiming at comprehension. Because of this, despite the comically circuitous path they take,<sup>40</sup> Electra and Orestes do eventually reach a shared understanding. The conclusion of this scene represents a particularly flawed attempt at communication, but one which nonetheless resolves into meaning, which is an interesting *comparandum* for oracular speech.

<p>         Ὅρ: μέθες τόδ' ἄγγος νῦν, ὅπως τὸ πᾶν μάθης.          Ἥλ: μὴ δῆτα πρὸς θεῶν τοῦτό μ' ἐργάσῃ, ξένε.          Ὅρ: πείθου λέγοντι κούχ ἀμαρτήσῃ ποτέ.          Ἥλ: μή, πρὸς γενείου, μὴ 'ξέλη τὰ φίλτατα.          Ὅρ: οὐ φημ' ἑάσειν.          Ἥλ: ὦ τάλαιν' ἐγὼ σέθεν,          Ὅρέστα, τῆς σῆς εἰ στερήσομαι ταφῆς.          Ὅρ: εὐφημα φώνει· πρὸς δίκης γὰρ οὐ στένεις.          Ἥλ: πῶς τὸν θανόντ' ἀδελφὸν οὐ δίκη στένω;          Ὅρ: οὐ σοι προσήκει τήνδε προσφωνεῖν φάτιν.          Ἥλ: οὕτως ἄτιμός εἰμι τοῦ τεθνηκότος;          Ὅρ: ἄτιμος οὐδενὸς σύ· τοῦτο δ' οὐχὶ σόν.          Ἥλ: εἴπερ γ' Ὅρέστου σῶμα βαστάζω τόδε;          Ὅρ: ἀλλ' οὐκ Ὅρέστου, πλὴν λόγῳ γ' ἠσκημένον.          Ἥλ: ποῦ δ' ἔστ' ἐκείνου τοῦ ταλαιπώρου τάφος;          Ὅρ: οὐκ ἔστι· τοῦ γὰρ ζῶντος οὐκ ἔστιν τάφος.          Ἥλ: πῶς εἶπας, ὦ παῖ;          Ὅρ: ψεῦδος οὐδὲν ὦν λέγω.          Ἥλ: ἦ ζῆ γὰρ ἀνὴρ;          Ὅρ: εἴπερ ἔμψυχός γ' ἐγώ.          Ἥλ: ἦ γὰρ σὺ κείνος;       </p> <p style="text-align: right;">1205-1222</p>	<p>         Or: Hand over this urn now, so that you can learn everything.          El: No, by the gods, do not do this to me, stranger!          Or: Listen to what I tell you to do and you will never err.          El: No, I beseech you at your knees, do not take this thing which is most dear!          Or: I say that I will not allow that.          El: Alas for me and for you, Orestes, if I am to be deprived of your burial!          Or: Say well-omened things! You are not justified in lamenting.          El: How am I not justified in lamenting my dead brother?          Or: It is not appropriate for you to say these things.          El: Am I so dishonored of the dead?          Or: You are dishonored of no one. This is not yours.          El: It certainly is, if this is Orestes' body I am holding.          Or: It is not Orestes', except insofar as it has been decorated with that story.          El: Then where is the tomb of that wretched man?          Or: There is none; there is no tomb for the living.          El: What are you saying, boy?          Or: I say nothing that is a lie.          El: Then the man is alive?          Or: If, in fact, I am breathing.          El: Are you he?       </p>
--	---

<sup>40</sup> I am thinking specifically of comic routines such as Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First?" in which similar gaps in knowledge and linguistic ambiguity are exploited to great comedic effect.

In the face of seemingly nonsensical demands from Orestes, Electra responds in precisely the way that we would imagine, from both a psychological perspective and from a pragmatic perspective.<sup>41</sup> She has trusted all of Orestes' previous words and believes that the urn contains the ashes of Orestes—a claim which she has had no reason yet to doubt.

I would like to replicate the example I provided of entailment from above: *That urn contains the ashes of Orestes entails* that Orestes is dead. As I mentioned above, a *sentence* can entail something, whereas only a *speaker* can implicate. We are now in a better position to see the clear application of these to an actual passage. When Orestes (in disguise) says that he and Pylades come carefully bearing the meager remains of dead Orestes, in a small urn (φέροντες αὐτοῦ σμικρὰ λείψαν' ἐν βραχεῖ / τεύχει θανόντος, ὡς ὄρας, κομίζομεν, 1113-4) and that this urn is the container for Orestes' body (τόδ' ἄγγος ἴσθι σῶμα τοῦκείνου στέγον, 1118), he has implicated that Orestes is dead. The actual circumstances—that Orestes is alive—are not a secret, clever potential meaning hidden in the language, as we will see is the case with oracular speech. Electra's interpretation is exactly as it should be here and she has correctly understood the words that were spoken to her. The issue here is that the speaker was aiming at deception. Nonetheless, pragmatics provides a useful mechanism for determining how and where this misunderstanding occurred.

## Linguistic Conclusions

In the example above, both speakers are humans who can question one another and ascertain more details and eventually reach a shared understanding. This provides a useful example to demonstrate the ways these theories can illuminate Sophoclean tragedy which is, as I will show in the subsequent chapters, deeply concerned with the process of communication and language. Characters in Sophocles' plays are fundamentally rational actors. Their actions are motivated by events in the play (or events external to the play which we have access to in some capacity) and,

---

<sup>41</sup> There is a great deal more going on in these lines than I have detailed here. One particularly interesting feature is the subtle linguistic shift that occurs throughout this passage, as Orestes' identity comes to light. At the start, Electra addresses Orestes as ξένη and describes Orestes (in the third person) as ἀδελφόν. When Electra addresses Orestes as ὦ παῖ at line 1218, she is addressing someone who is ξένος to her and, with παῖς, she is using a term reserved for either children or servants/slaves. While she may be commenting on his age or his status in her eyes (as a reflection of her frustration), this is nonetheless not a term that suggests respect. As it becomes clear that she is speaking to Orestes (that ξένος and ἀδελφός are one and the same), his identity is also elevated from παῖς to ἀνὴρ, linguistically marking his recognition and his newly-elevated status. More than simply a recognition scene, this is also the moment where Electra realizes that her brother, who was a παῖς the last time she saw him, is now an ἀνὴρ. The shift from παῖς to ἀνὴρ gives a linguistic form to both these changes in Orestes' identity.

while we may not agree with their actions, we understand why they choose those actions. We can analyze the characters using things like theory of mind, because these characters have minds that can be read, to use Zunshine's terminology (Zunshine 2006), and things like cognitive science and psychology can yield useful insights when applied to literary characters.

Though tragedy is a heavily stylized genre and tragedians are not aiming for perfect verisimilitude, the interactions between characters in these plays nonetheless conform broadly with what we would expect from interactions between real people. Characters in these plays communicate in ways that *do* accord with the pragmatic principles that I have laid out in this introduction, as we saw in the exchange between Orestes and Electra. When characters talk to one another, unless they have reason to be suspicious of their interlocutor, they both assume that they are part of a cooperative conversation which aims at comprehension. As such, if the person they are speaking to says something that initially seems not to comply with these maxims, the listener tries to reinterpret the speaker's words in a way that does fulfill the Gricean maxims, and seeks to confirm their interpretation. If that proves impossible, then the listener asks clarifying questions or expresses their confusion, and the two parties work to eliminate misunderstandings and arrive at comprehension.

However, in the context of oracular speech, there is not the opportunity to work cooperatively to negotiate meaning. Instead, the god speaks—ungoverned by human linguistic conventions—and the hearer(s) must interpret the oracle without any additional context. Unlike Orestes, whose motivations are at least somewhat clear (desire for revenge, fear of discovery, etc.), gods who are issuing oracles are often inscrutable. Even when Zeus communicates with his own son, Heracles, we will see that the communication is not straightforward or easily intelligible. In stark contrast to communication between mortals, when communicating with a god, the hearer cannot apply the contextual and linguistic tools that are at their disposal when communicating with other humans. Gods, it seems, abide only by semantic rules and not pragmatic ones.

As I will show, the characters in these tragedies are unaware of this and persist in interpreting divine, oracular speech as though it were human speech. This is not because Sophocles wants to show that the gods are necessarily malicious or cruel (though that may well be the case). Rather, by depicting gods who only speak the same language as mortals in strictly semantic terms, Sophocles highlights all the non-semantic elements that contribute to meaning.

Because the gods almost never physically appear in Sophoclean tragedy, they exist purely in a linguistically-mediated form. Put more simply, the only concrete presence that the gods have in these plays is through their words. In this sense, we can know very little about the gods *qua* gods and I will generally avoid the question of how the gods are characterized. Instead, I will approach their oracular pronouncements as an instance of non-human language which can be usefully juxtaposed with human language. By seeing the ways (which can be most effectively analyzed through a pragmatic framework) that humans fail to accurately interpret divine (non-human) language, we can learn a great deal about the basic underlying assumptions and structures that *do* effectively govern human communication.

### **Other Aspects of Oracles in the Ancient World**

My focus in the subsequent chapters will be on literary oracles in Sophocles. This excludes two major categories of oracles: non-Sophoclean literary oracles and actual oracles (i.e., non-literary oracles). A striking feature of literary oracles is, as will be clear, how fundamentally different they are from historical oracles. For this reason, it will be worthwhile to look at what we know of actual oracular and divinatory practices in Ancient Greece. Further, we should question why such a discrepancy exists between historical and literary oracles and what this discrepancy tells us about conventions for oracular speech

### **Historical Oracles**

The definitive studies of historical Delphic oracles are Parke 1939 (rev. 1956 with Wormell) and Fontenrose 1978. For more recent work, see Johnston 2005 and 2008. Because Delphic oracles are the most famous, I will focus primarily on them, but see also Parke 1967 for oracles of Zeus at Dodona, Olympia, and Ammon. Parke and Wormell provide a broad, historical overview of the Delphic oracle from its mythohistorical origins (detailed in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, the Pythia's speech in the prologue of the *Eumenides*, and Euripides' account, in the mouth of the Chorus in *Iphigenia in Tauris*). These accounts do not corroborate one another, though there are points of similarity, and since material culture suggests that the region of Delphi was inhabited as early as 1500 BCE, our literary sources do not give a clear picture of Delphi's actual foundation.

What seems likely is pre-Apolline cult activity which was associated with some sort of chthonic deity, likely an earth goddess. This is corroborated by the archaeological record, and we see hints of this in the mythical foundation stories of Apollo killing a snaky monster and supplanting

a female deity at Delphi—Minoan religion also suggests a connection between a female deity and snakes (cf. the so-called “Minoan Snake Goddess”). Rituals and local myths at Delphi may commemorate Apollo needing to atone for killing the snake (by exile in Thessaly, in some accounts).

Actual divinatory practices at Delphi seem to have mirrored the overall trends in Greek divination. Our first alleged oracular consultations at Delphi date to the 8<sup>th</sup> century<sup>42</sup>, but legends are preserved which reflect augury<sup>43</sup> as well as divination via entrails (extispicy or haruspicy) and interpretation of dreams (oneiromancy).<sup>44</sup> Divination by fire is attested as well (pyromancy),<sup>45</sup> as is divination by lots (cleromancy).<sup>46</sup> Parke and Wormell suggest that the term commonly used to describe the Pythia giving oracles, ἀναρπεῖν, relates to picking up (and then casting) lots or a divinely inspired selection of lots (Parke and Wormell 1956: 9-10).<sup>47</sup> By the archaic period, however, cleromancy was the only other form of divination that survived at all, and the overwhelming majority of oracles were given by direct utterances from the Pythia (with a male priest who presided over the ceremonies).<sup>48</sup>

---

42 These are all responses Fontenrose classifies as Quasi-Historical, however, and include accounts like Pausanias’ story of King Iphitos being told to renew the Olympic Games (Q1 in Fontenrose, 485 in Parke and Wormell, Paus. 5.4.6), which would have to date to sometime before 776 BCE. Similarly, we have an account of Lycurgus of Sparta, King Iphitos of Elis, and Cleosthenes of Pisa consulting the Delphic oracle about the Olympic festival (Q2, 486 in Parke and Wormell, Phlegon *Ol.* 1.3 and schol. vet. On Plato *Rep.* 465d) which would date to sometime before 776 as well (Fontenrose dates it 884-776 BCE, but also declares it not to be genuine). The earliest extant responses Fontenrose considers genuine are from c. 440-430 BCE (H1, 123 in Parke and Wormell, IG 12.77 = Oliver 1950: 13, lines 7-11) and relates to people receiving public maintenance in the prytaneion, though the text is not preserved well enough to tell the specifics of the response. For what we can know about the early history at Delphi, see Sourvinou-Inwood 1979.

43 Paus. 10.6.1 attributes the invention of augury to Parnassus, namesake of the mountain (see also Str. Byz. s.v. Παρνασσός). Pliny also attributes knowledge of augury, though not its invention, to Phemonoe the Pythia (*HN* 10.21). Flacelière 1938 argues (based on *h.Merc.* 543) that augury was once used to tell if the oracle could be consulted with good results.

44 Pliny *HN* 7.203 attributes the invention of haruspicy to Delphus, namesake of Delphi, and attributes the interpretation of portents and dreams (*interpretationem ostentorum et somniorum*) to Amphictyon, namesake of the Amphictyony.

45 Paus. 10.5.6 and Hsch. s.v. πυρκόοι. This is likely connected in some way to the fire in the temple at Delphi.

46 The ancient evidence is more oblique on this point. For an overview, see Parke and Wormell 1956: 15 as well as Bouché-Leclercq 1879, Halliday 1913, Robbins 1916, Amandry 1950. For cleromancy as the original form of divination at Delphi, see Nilsson 1906: 155-159.

47 This interpretation is shared by others and uses as evidence the many mentions of lot oracles and mantic ψῆφοι in late sources. The lateness of these sources (Nonnus, Hesychius, Stephen of Byzantium) does make their testimony less reliable, however. For a thorough list of sources on the possibility of lots, see Fontenrose 1978: 219, fn. 33.

48 There has been debate about the role that the priests played and some have posited that the priests were actually bards in practice, and they would translate the Pythia’s words into verse. However, it is now the consensus opinion that the Pythia herself delivered the oracles. On this point, see Maurizio 1995.

As I noted above, this move from augury and pyromancy and other such methods of divination toward verbal oracles is not unique to Delphi. In general, literary evidence suggests that Greek divinatory practices shifted in this direction.<sup>49</sup> In Homer, for instance, the future is told either through dreams<sup>50</sup> or through natural omens. Though gods do appear to mortals and speak with them directly, this is treatment reserved for exceptional heroes. Heroes of the more common sort (the supporting characters of the Homeric epics, as it were, who inhabit the heroic era but are not as kingly or famous as men like Achilles, Hector, and Odysseus) rely primarily on things like bird signs to discern the will of the gods.<sup>51</sup> To take the example of signs from birds, we know that a bird is not always an omen, but that it takes on specific meaning in certain contexts.<sup>52</sup> Once the bird is recognized as a form of communication, then an interpreter can divine the meaning it intends to convey (as Calchas does at *Il.* 2.308-20). Ornithomancy, at least in Homer, is not available to everyone<sup>53</sup> and it seems as though the ability to interpret birds and other omens is one of the defining characteristic of a Homeric prophet.<sup>54</sup> The prophet then “reads” the sign which has likely occurred in the context of a sacrifice or some other moment when mortals are attempting to

---

49 For a general overview of this process, see Bushnell 1988. It might be more accurate to say that literature points to this sort of development over time. It seems reasonable to infer that literature is reflecting something about the development of actual divination practices, but there is a great deal that is artificial about literary divination, as I will examine throughout this dissertation. Because of this, I do not think that we can comfortably assume that the move from sign- or omen-based divination that we see in our literary texts is necessarily a reflection of actual practices.

50 These can be either accurate or misleading and can also be straightforward or involve interpretation. For an example of a misleading dream, see Agamemnon’s dream at *Il.* 2.1-34. For a dream requiring interpretation, see Penelope’s dream at *Od.* 19.535-50. In effect, this is a bird sign within a dream.

51 For discussions of bird signs, see Bouché-Leclercq 2003, or Thompson 1936 (for specific birds and their connection to particular divinities). See also Bloch 1963 on the types of omens found at *Od.* 2.146-55 or *Il.* 2.308-20, which feature natural signs (animals) behaving in unnatural, portentous ways.

52 As Eurymachus states at *Od.* 2.181-2, many birds make their way beneath the rays of the sun, but they are not all portentous (ὄρνιθες δέ τε πολλοὶ ὑπ’ αὐγὰς ἡλίου / φοιτῶσ’, οὐδέ τε πάντες ἐναΐσιμοι). The weight of this line should be colored by the fact that Eurymachus is wrong about these birds, which the narrator has just told us were sent from Zeus, and Eurymachus uses his flawed reading of the birds (despite insisting that he is a better reader of bird signs than Halitherses, who has in fact just read the omens correctly) to argue that Odysseus is dead, which is also false. This is all to say that we cannot take this line entirely at face value, but the gnomic sentiment expressed in these two lines seems accurate, even if Eurymachus does not apply this principle correctly to these particular birds.

53 Though, it should be noted, this is not exclusive to prophets. Helen, for instance, is able to read omens, even though she is not a prophet. For the process of interpreting omens and the transmission of omens as a type of messenger scene, see Ready 2014.

54 It is unclear what the cause-effect relationship is between these two attributes, though it does not matter in any substantive way, for my purposes. We do not know if there is something else about Calchas that makes him a prophet, and by virtue of that, he can read bird signs, or if the ability to read bird signs is what grants him his status as a prophet. That is to say, ἡ μαντική is not explicitly defined. See Bouché-Leclercq 1879 and Halliday 1913 (in response) on the development of a more rigorous system of orthinomancy by the Hellenistic period. At that point, there are clearly defined codes for interpreting the direction, species, and action of birds. Homer paints a very different picture, however, or at least chooses not to include the technical details involved in interpreting bird signs.

communicate with the divine,<sup>55</sup> and the prophet can even be seen as a participant in a conversation of sorts, in which the bird is a divine answer to the (explicit or implicit) request that the mortals have just made.

Significantly, however, these conversations are only available to priests and prophets (those conducting sacrifices and reading omens) and all the other Greeks must rely on them to communicate effectively and reliably. As Bushnell has detailed nicely, however,<sup>56</sup> Greeks shift away from the sort of divinations that rely on the interpretation of signs (such as birds, entrails, or dice) in the 5th century BCE. These sorts of divination are relegated to a secondary position and Greeks move toward what Vernant (following Crahay) calls the “oracular dialogue.”<sup>57</sup> The effect of this shift is seemingly to make communication from the divine accessible to everyone—once placed into the Greek language, prophecies would seem to be equally accessible to any speaker of the Greek language.<sup>58</sup> As I will explore in subsequent chapters, this accessibility is only *apparent* in the context of Sophocles’ plays, and the language of oracles is subtly different from the normal Greek language (so subtle as to be indiscernible to the characters within the play, though not to an external viewer or reader), and this subtle difference is one that can only be effectively understood by the application of pragmatic linguistic analysis. However, in actual oracles, this is not the case, and we have no reason to think that oracles were transmitted in anything other than the standard Greek language. For Greek people who consulted oracles, the responses they received were in a form that they (or anyone else) could readily interpret effectively. A shift from other sorts of divination to oracular divination marks a democratization of the divination process. The natural signs were replaced by linguistic signs (signs in a Saussurean, semiotic sense) which needed no special expertise to interpret.

To return to the form and content of the oracles dispensed at Delphi, Fontenrose collects a total of 535 Delphic responses, divided into Historical Responses (75 examples), Quasi-Historical Responses (268 examples), Legendary Responses (176 examples) and Fictional Responses (16

---

55 Stockinger 1959 suggests that omens appear at times when mortals are in some sort of contact with the gods (during a prayer or a sacrifice).

56 See Bushnell 1988: 1-42.

57 Vernant 1974: 18-19, following Crahay 1956.

58 With Bushnell 1988: 14, I am somewhat skeptical of the claim made by Fontenrose 1978 that the Pythia “was not seized by a frenzy” or that she “spoke coherently, and it was she, not the prophets, who gave the response in final form to the inquirer” (224).



examples).<sup>59</sup> Though some of his classification choices have been questioned,<sup>60</sup> this remains the most thorough and complete catalogue of oracular responses (95 entries from Parke and Wormell's catalogue have been removed and 15 additional entries added—Fontenrose includes only 535 entries, as opposed to 615 in Parke and Wormell, due in large part to reclassification and rearrangement of the responses. I am generally persuaded by Fontenrose's classifications and conclusions, which were controversial at the time of publication but have become increasingly well-accepted since then.

Fontenrose's Historical category includes responses which are recorded in contemporary records. Among this category, he distinguishes between the most genuine, which are recorded by the person who received the oracle or someone close to them. Less genuine are the oracles reported by hearsay, such as the oracle Chairephon received about Socrates (item H3 in his catalogue). Fontenrose is careful to note that historical does not mean genuine. His Quasi-Historical category includes oracles which are alleged to have been delivered in historical times (i.e., non-mythological/legendary) but which were not recorded until after the lifetime of the person who received the oracle. Legendary responses are responses which are transmitted as part of a "legendary narrative," which he defines as stories about events which took place before the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Finally, Fictional responses are responses invented by poets and playwrights for works of fiction. His final words on this subject is useful: "The inventors did not intend that anyone think them authentic; their audience or readers were not likely to believe them genuine. These responses are important only in so far as they reveal ancient conceptions of Delphic oracles" (Fontenrose 1976: 9).

His conclusion is that these Historical questions are commonplace and are generally posed as a simple yes/no or Choice A/Choice B questions (we might think of these as questions in a multiple-choice format), generally on matters of public interest, such as political or religious affairs. Significantly for my purposes in this study, he concludes that

A) Ambiguous and riddling phrasing is not an authentic feature of genuine oracles

---

<sup>59</sup> At times, Fontenrose combines two responses into one two-part response; elsewhere, Fontenrose omits responses he thinks come from Didyma or another non-Delphic oracle

<sup>60</sup> See for instance Maurizio 1997.

B) Many of the famous oracular responses (found in Herodotus and later authors) are inauthentic or at least dubious

and he further suggests that the characteristics of fictional oracles (ambiguous wording, misleading or incomplete predictions, etc.) become dominant characteristics of literary oracles, such that traditional riddles and proverbs are later attributed to the Delphic oracle, reiterating this image of the Delphic oracle as a source of unclear prophecy. Once the trope of riddling, unclear oracular communication was established, any sort of riddle or wordplay could then be attributed to an oracle, reinforcing the reputation of oracles.<sup>61</sup>

For additional reading on historical oracles, see also Rosenberger 2003, Friese 2010, and Eidinow 2013, and for divinatory practices in the Roman time period, Busine 2006 is a useful starting point, though she focuses on Roman Asia Minor. For a general epigraphical study (i.e., not one confined to a particular site), see Guarducci 1978. Among smaller sites not covered here, Klaros is perhaps the most significant. For information on oracles at Klaros, see Parke 1985:112-170, Merkelbach and Stauber 1996 and Oesterheld 2008. Additionally, Oracle consultations were an involved process and there was often extensive travel required to get to the oracle.<sup>62</sup> Once at the oracle, there was often required sacrifice of a costly *πελανός* cake, the proceeds from which went to the temple itself, and there could be additional fees.<sup>63</sup> The process was also often conducted or mediated by priests or temple attendants.<sup>64</sup>

---

61 As a few final notes on historical oracles, Delphi was not the only site of an oracle, and prominent oracles were also located in Didyma (another oracle of Apollo) and Dodona (an oracle of Zeus). For details about Didyma, see Parke 1985: 1-111, Fontenrose 1988, Morgan 1989, Oesterheld 2008. Turning to Dodona, Parke's pronouncement that "The material found at Dodona...is not of a kind which would greatly reward the effort of collecting it into a corpus" (Parke 1967: 259) was thankfully not the last word on the subject and there have been several recent studies which have advanced our understanding of consultations at Dodona significantly. For details about Dodona and a collection of inscriptions, see Lhôte 2006 and Eidinow 2007. For the latest edition of these inscriptions, see the 2013 edition by Dakaris, Vokotopoulou, and Christidis (DVC). Each of these three works contains a slightly different selection of inscriptions as well as different interpretations of the fragmentary findings and are worth consulting in tandem. See also Parker 2016 on oracular consultation at Dodona.

62 For pilgrimages to Delphi, see Arnush 2005 (in Elsner and Rutherford 2005) and for pilgrimage in antiquity more broadly, see the rest of Elsner and Rutherford 2005.

63 For financial considerations and demands at Delphi, see Rosenberg 1999

64 On temple personnel in general, see Georgoudi 1994. There is extensive debate about the role of priests or attendants at both Delphi and Dodona. At Delphi, the debate centers on whether the Pythia gave oracles directly to questioners or if she pronounced oracles in a secluded portion of the temple and then the oracles were transmitted via a third party. On the Hosioi at Delphi, see Jay-Robert 1997. There is also debate about what form the oracles were in. The main alternatives are that the Pythia delivered oracles directly in hexameters; she raved while in a trance, and the priests translated her ravings into hexameters; or the oracles never took actual hexameter form and that is an exclusively literary convention. For more on the Pythia's role, see Fontenrose 1978: 126-228, Versnel 1992, Price 1985, and Suarez de la Torre 1998. This question connects to the controversial debate about the Pythia's mental state while

It is worth considering not only what the oracles said, but also what the oracle was asked. Literary oracles are not always given in response to a question, but actual oracular consultations were always in a question/answer format. We do not always have corresponding questions and answers, but of those that survive, none presents an oracle who does not answer the question that is posed to it. Unlike unprovoked oracles which often occur in literary contexts, actual oracles do not provide answers to anything but what they are asked. As to the sorts of questions posed to oracles, Beerden 2013 concludes (working from the 75 oracular responses in Fontenrose’s Historical category) that Delphic oracles are expected to function predominantly in an advisory capacity,<sup>65</sup> as opposed to an instructive, indicative or predictive capacity.<sup>66</sup> An analysis of Dodona provides similar results: working from Lhôte’s 152 questions from Dodona, nearly half of the responses are advisory.<sup>67</sup>

As an example of what constitutes an advisory question, I include an example from Dodona:

Τύχα ἀγαθὰ. Ἴη τυγχάνοιμί κα ἔμπορευόμενος | ὅπως κα δοκῆι σύμφορον ἔμειν, καὶ ἄγων, τῆι κα δοκῆι | ἅμα τᾶι τεχναι χρεύμενος.

Good fortune. Whether I would do better travelling to where it seems good to me, and doing business there, if it seems good, and at the same time practicing my craft.<sup>68</sup>

---

delivering oracles and the possibility of some sort of hallucinatory agent (gas fumes or drugs). For a small portion of the extant scholarship on this question, see Holland 1933, Chirassi Colombo 1991, Maurizio 1995, Strauss-Clay 1996, and Lehoux 2007. At Dodona, there is debate about the precise role of the attendants (the Selloi). On the Selloi, Georgoudi 1994: 335–340 provides a useful treatment. Beerden 2013 omits them from her examination because she does not think they are *manteis*.

<sup>65</sup> Beerden’s classification is useful for analyzing these responses. Advisory questions are ones here the questioner asks whether he ought to perform a particular task or make a particular decision. These usually take the form of “Will it be better if I do X or Y?” Instructive questions ask for specific instructions, such as “To which god should I sacrifice?” Her indicative category refers to general questions about the future, such as “Will I be happy?” Though these are similar to predictive, Beerden makes these into a separate category, though I find her rationale for this to be flawed: “They contain a predictive element but the supernatural is not specifically asked to look into the future: the question is general and the timeframe vague” (Beerden 2013: 212). I think that these do form a useful classification, not for the reasons Beerden lists, since any question about the future necessarily asks the god to look into the future—to determine whether the questioner will be happy, the god must look into the future and see what their lot in life is. However, I do think that this is useful as a distinct category from predictive, since these questions are not connected to any sort of action and are not about a specific time. The vagueness of these questions does seem to distinguish them from what Beerden classifies as predictive oracles. The final category is predictive, which includes requests for specific information about the future as well as the past. Though I think it would be useful to separate questions about the past from those about the future, Beerden combines these two. Here, she includes questions like “Who are my parents?” or “What will happen if I do X?” These ask for specific knowledge that is currently unknown by the questioner.

<sup>66</sup> She finds that 33 of 75 (44%) are advisory, 31 are instructive (41.3%), 4 are indicative (5.3%), and 2 are predictive (2.7%). She finds that 5 (6.7%) cannot be placed into one of these classifications (Beerden 2013: 213).

<sup>67</sup> There are in fact 187 responses from Dodona, but 35 are illegible. Of those 152, Beerden finds that 73 are advisory (48%), 35 are indicative (23%), 31 are instructive (20.4%), and 11 are predictive (7.2%), and 2 combine prediction and instruction (1.3%) (Beerden 2013: 2013-4)

<sup>68</sup> Text and translation taken from Eidinow 2007: 97, number 9.

At its heart, this is a yes/no question: Should I take this action? This is the sort of question which forms the overwhelming majority of the questions posed to oracles.

To conclude, our extant material evidence suggests that historical oracle consultations involved a structurally simple, yes/no (or, rarely, a multiple choice) question posed either to a temple functionary or to the priest or priestess directly. The questions generally involved advice about the best course of action and responses were straightforward and direct,<sup>69</sup> and rarely gave precise, detailed predictions about the future. Further, there are no examples from Delphi, Dodona, or Didyma which are widely held to be authentic which are written in meter.<sup>70</sup> How, then, do literary oracles take such a vastly different form? And what should we make of all the oracles in verse which are preserved in the literary record,<sup>71</sup> if not the archaeological record?

It will be useful to look at Herodotus as an intermediary between actual oracular practice, as detailed here, and the literary oracles in Sophocles. Herodotus purports to be providing an accurate history and ethnography, and yet his *History* features oracles which bear little resemblance to the sort of oracles I have detailed here.

### Oracles in Herodotus

Crahay 1956 remains the most thorough and exhaustive study of Herodotean oracles. He concludes (as does Fontenrose 1978) that very few of the oracles in Herodotus provide a verbatim account of an actual oracle given at Delphi (or elsewhere). Of the few oracles that he deems authentic, the majority are related to cult, and they are almost entirely instances in which Delphi confirms an extant cult, rather than prescribing the formation or introduction of a new cult. Crahay concludes that the false oracles were political inventions, whereas others (e.g., Defradas 1954) have suggested that these stories were generated by the priests at Delphi (whom he characterizes harshly

---

69 Naerebout and Beerden perform their own analysis, using (with some reservations) the oracle collections compiled in Eidinow 2007 (for Dodona) and Fontenrose 1978 (for Delphi). Based on these, they calculate that at least 96% of the historical Delphic oracles are unambiguous, and they find no evidence of truly ambiguous oracles at Dodona (Naerebout and Beerden 2012).

70 On Dodona, Eidinow concludes that “Although none of the texts seems to offer traces of poetry, and the literary evidence suggests a prose format, the possibility still remains that the answers were given in verse” (Eidinow 2007: 138). For methodological problems with these studies, see the following section.

71 In addition to Herodotus and Sophocles, Plutarch’s *On the Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse* (Plut. *Mor.* 394d-409d) presents a very detailed description of the shift away from overwrought oracles and Plutarch in fact suggests that Apollo caused this shift in oracular style because people were unable to understand the oracles in their earlier, poetic form (406f: ἀφελῶν δὲ τῶν χρησμῶν ἔπη καὶ γλώσσας καὶ περιφράσεις καὶ ἀσάφειαν οὕτω διαλέγεσθαι παρεσκεύασε τοῖς χρωμένοις ὡς νόμοι τε πόλεσι διαλέγονται καὶ βασιλεῖς ἐντυγχάνουσι δήμοις καὶ μαθηταὶ διδασκάλων ἀκροῶνται, πρὸς τὸ συνετὸν καὶ πιθανὸν ἀρμοζόμενος.). See also Parke 1945 for a collection of metrical oracles which are in non-hexameter verses.

as *ambitieux et avisé* and *impérialiste et usurpateur*), in order to elevate the Delphic oracle's status. Yet others, such as Amandry 1956, have suggested that they were exaggerations of an underlying oracle which was actually delivered. The broad issues with all these studies,<sup>72</sup> however, is encapsulated in a review of Crahay's work, which asks "How many oracles are genuine? How, and by whom, were the false invented?" before reluctantly concluding that we cannot answer those questions conclusively (Forrest 1958). Forrest is quite right that Crahay's work does not effectively answer these questions (as I will discuss below, I do not think that these are the most useful questions to be asking in the first place), nor does it provide an answer to the question of how to balance the clearly fictionalized, literary oracles with all the evidence to suggest that Delphi did play a very real role in Greek political discourses.

To address these issues, I turn to work done by Oswyn Murray and Lisa Maurizio,<sup>73</sup> both of whom treat Herodotus as more of an oral history than a purely literate history. When looking at oracles in particular, this approach is very illuminating. Murray moves away from the authentic/fake dichotomy and concludes that there is a great deal of space between real and fictional, in terms of Herodotus' narrative structures (Murray 2001 [1987]). The fact that stories in Herodotus resemble one another or folktales or other traditional stories does not mean that the story is entirely made up, Murray argues, and we need not discount an entire story based on elements like a suspicious resemblance between contemporary events and events in the distant past. Instead, Ionian storytelling conventions rely on certain tropes and conventional forms, and that Herodotus' work demonstrates many of the techniques of the professional storytellers in what he refers to as the "moralizing Eastern Greek tradition." Murray argues that the very features of Herodotean history which have caused many scholars to question their veracity—things like common folktale tropes, such as the wise advisor who is not heeded (Demaratus, Artabanus)—are hallmarks of a storytelling style that Herodotus adopted from the Ionian tradition. Murray concludes that "to one brought up in the traditions of storytelling in Ionia it was the obvious way to present the Great Event. It is in fact this moralizing East Greek tradition which created Herodotus as a historian, and which moulded his attitudes towards the patterns in history, the narrative techniques of his art, and the roles of creativity, accuracy, and invention. For we must recognize

---

<sup>72</sup> And here, I would include several other works (primarily but not exclusively by French scholars) that were roughly contemporaneous, such as Amandry 1950, Defradas 1954, Delcourt 1981 (first edition published in 1955), Parke 1956

<sup>73</sup> Maurizio 1997 and Murray 2001 [1987] and 2001.

that ultimately truth in Herodotus is a question of aesthetics and morality, as much as of fact” (Murray 2001 [1987]: 34). Conformance to a story type does not mean that these stories are fabricated, he argues, but simply that Herodotus took events as he learned about them and shaped them into the narrative forms he knew (which were largely oral performances by professional storytellers). He took the facts, as we might think of them, and formed them into a story.<sup>74</sup>

Maurizio too takes an approach that focuses on the role that oral histories and oral transmission play in Herodotus’ work.<sup>75</sup> To begin, she provides a useful overview of the approach to Delphic oracles which was long taken by literary scholars. This process, as exemplified in the previous section, generally involves establishing an oracle’s authenticity, “where authenticity implies that it is a fact that there was a consultation of the Delphic oracle, that a response was given and that the account of these events reports the occasion of the consultation and the response verbatim” (Maurizio 1997: 309). She (rightly, I think) attributes the longevity of this type of scholarship both to positivism as well as to the legacy of the major works on Delphic oracular responses: Parke and Wormell 1956 and Fontenrose 1978. Both these works aimed at systematizing approaches to the question of authenticity and developing some objective criteria on which to base these classifications. Crahay 1955 uses a fundamentally similar approach and reaches a similar conclusion to Fontenrose,<sup>76</sup> which is that an overwhelming majority of the oracles which have survived are inauthentic. These approaches have been criticized,<sup>77</sup> but Fontenrose remains the authoritative collection of Delphic responses, and it seems likely that the structure of his collection, organized by authenticity, cannot help but predispose scholars to think of oracles in those terms (if only subconsciously).

---

<sup>74</sup> I should note that Luraghi 2001 raises objections to this interpretation (namely, that this posits an Ionian storytelling tradition for which there is no actual evidence), though Murray remains committed to the central premise of his 1987 article, which he revisited in a 2001 postscript.

<sup>75</sup> It corroborates her approach that the only two instances in Herodotus when writing is clearly attested at Delphi are the “wooden wall” oracle (Hdt. 7.142, ...συγγραψάμενοι ἀπαλλάσσοντο ἐς τὰς Ἀθήνας) and when Croesus tests the oracles (Hdt. 1.48 explicitly describes the messengers writing their oracles down for Croesus to read: ταῦτα οἱ Λυδοὶ θεοπισίας τῆς Πυθίης συγγραψάμενοι...ἐνθαῦτα ὁ Κροῖσος ἕκαστα ἀναπτύσσων ἐπώρα τῶν συγγραμμάτων).

<sup>76</sup> Crahay distinguishes the oracles which are found in prose summaries in Herodotus from the oracles in hexameters. He concludes that the former, which relate to religious matters, were told to Herodotus by priests at Delphi, and are therefore authentic, whereas the latter category come from romanticized biographies of eastern rulers and are fictionalized.

<sup>77</sup> While Mikalson praises Fontenrose’s “precise historical and philological methodology” with its “cold hard realism” (Mikalson 1980/1981: 179-80) and Dietrich 1980: 238-39 follows suit, many others have objected to the methodology as well as the conclusions Fontenrose draws, including Robertson 1982, Brenk 1980, and Maurizio 1997.

As noted above, the stories in Herodotus conform largely to traditional story patterns, and nowhere is this more true than in oracular stories. Many have been tempted by the similarities in narrative structures to disregard all the oracles as fictionalized, and Homeric echoes and other stylistic elements have caused suspicion as well (on the grounds that these are evidence of conscious manipulation by the author to include allusions and other stylistic embellishments).<sup>78</sup> Maurizio goes further than Murray in suggesting that authenticity (in the sense of the Pythia's *ipsissima verba*) is simply not the correct focus for studies of Herodotean oracles,<sup>79</sup> and she points out that even inscriptional evidence is not a reliable source of authenticity, since inscriptions reflect inscriptional practice and are not necessarily even intended to be verbatim copies of what the Pythia said. She instead uses oral historian Jan Vansina's concept of "structuration" to make sense of these plot similarities.<sup>80</sup> Structuration describes this process, common in oral traditions, to fit events into a familiar pattern to make a memorable and coherent narrative structure:

Sequential order is imposed and the ordering made easier to remember by patterning successive accounts in one of the basic ways in which the mind patterns-by oppositions, or by strong sequential association.... Finally there is the known tendency of the mind in memory to construct a coherent discourse. This leads to structuring the same topics over and over again so that they become more meaningful in terms of world view of the culture in question (Vansina 1985: 171).

Maurizio notes that the sheer number of what Fontenrose terms the Quasi-Historical Delphic oracles (oracles which were recorded after the lifetime of the recipient of the original oracle) suggests that the oracles are "oral derived," meaning that the written form is the product of a long process of oral transmission.<sup>81</sup> She also suggests that our ideas about truth may not correspond to those of Herodotus and his audience and that all of the oracles attributed to Delphi were all

---

78 Crahay, for instance, makes this argument about many oracles. Though I think Crahay (and Parke and Wormell and Fontenrose) are taking a fundamentally flawed approach to these oracles, I would also comment that even using their approach, Homeric echoes are not necessarily a disqualifying element. If the priests at Delphi (or, less likely, the Pythia herself) were trained as oral poets, then we could expect oracles to share many similarities with other popular oral poetry.

79 Her parallel to Homer is useful here: "In the same way that it is not possible to recover the "original" songs of Homer (or "Homer"), it is not possible to recover the Pythias' original words, their *ipsissima verba*. No oracle in the Delphic tradition can be proven to be such. Nor can oracles which originated from the Pythias in Delphi be easily distinguished from those which did not" (Maurizio 1997: 312). She draws upon Homeric scholarship on oral performance throughout her article, and the general principles which shape studies on Homer and oral composition are illuminating when applied to Herodotus.

80 On the process of structuration in oral traditions, see Vansina 1985: 71-79, 165-73. See Peradotto 1974: 822-25 for an analysis of the narrative patterns of oracular tales.

81 On the term "oral-derived," see Foley 1990.

considered to be “true,” in the sense that the audience deemed them all to be authentic and fulfilled.<sup>82</sup>

The picture that emerges from Maurizio’s approach is one in which an oral oracle genre emerges, and oracle stories are expected to include certain features.<sup>83</sup> When we view Herodotus as recounting oral-derived stories which have been transmitted through several intermediaries who considered these to be authentic oracles, we must resign ourselves to the idea that whatever original form the Pythia’s words took, they have been altered at least somewhat in the transmission process (as each subsequent storyteller recomposes the oracle to fit their own narrative). The repetition and interchangeability of elements of oracles or even the entirety of those oracles<sup>84</sup> is not a sign of forgery so much as a sign of the Delphic genre, which begins to look very similar to

---

82 Maurizio’s argument includes a fluid concept of author and audience in the transmission process. E.g., “Since oracles were accepted (or rejected), interpreted (and during this process re-worded), remembered and recited by a community of believers, their author, properly speaking, was the community itself, not the Pythia, nor the author who recorded them in writing. Thus, a recognition of the oral transmission of oracles requires us to revise our notions of authenticity and authorship, two interrelated concepts” (Maurizio 1997: 313). Her argument is compelling, but the details of it are not necessary for this overview, so I have omitted much of this from my summary of her work. The basic premise is that at each stage of transmission (Pythia to the *theoros/theoroi*, *theoroi* to the community who sent him, and community members among themselves, and eventually—often with additional intermediate steps—someone telling Herodotus, who then wrote down a form) there is a separate author and a separate audience and the audience needs to confer authority and legitimacy to the oracle at each stage of the process. She cites instances in which the audience does not grant that legitimacy or cautions an ambassador not to exercise any authority in changing the oracle’s form to support this interpretation, which is quite compelling. For instance, Theognis 805-810 explicitly state that a *theoros* should not meddle with the oracle he receives, suggesting that this was something that some *theoroi* did:

<p>Τόρνου καὶ στάθμης καὶ γνώμονος ἄνδρα θεωρόν  εὐθύτερον χρῆ &lt;ἐ&gt;μεν, Κύρνε, φυλασσόμενον,  ᾧτινὶ κεν Πυθῶνι θεοῦ χρήσασ’ ἰέρεια  ὄμφην σημήνηι πίονος ἐξ ἀδύτου·  οὔτε τι γὰρ προσθεις οὐδέν κ’ ἔτι φάρμακον εὔροις,  οὐδ’ ἀφελῶν πρὸς θεῶν ἀμπλακίην προφύγοις.  Theog. 805-10</p>	<p>Cyrnus, a man who is a <i>theoros</i> needs to be careful that he is more straight and upright than a carpenter’s compass, his rule, and his square, the man to whom the priestess at Delphi gives an oracle and reveals the voice of the god, from out of the rich adyton. For you would not be able to find any remedy, if you make any addition, nor would you be able to avoid offense before the gods if you remove anything.</p>
---	---

Further, Croesus’ demand that his ambassadors write down what the oracles tell them, when he is testing the oracles (Hdt. 1.48) reflects a concern that *theoroi* might not faithfully transmit the oracles they receive. She also cites an account of Oenomaus, a Cynic philosopher, in which an oracle is not confirmed and thereby has no conferred legitimacy (Eusebius *Praep. Evang.* 5.22.214Aff.).

83 For elements of Herodotus which reflect oral composition, see Immerwahr 1966 and Lang 1984 in addition to Murray 2001 [1987].

84 See Maurizio 1997: 323-4 on an oracle (PW1) which is preserved in several sources and which is said to have been given to several different people and by several different oracles. Ion of Chios says that it was delivered at Delphi to Aegium (*FGrHII* 51) on the topic of the First Sacred War, but it is also said to have been given to the Megarians (Mnaseas recounts that Callimachus says this at *FGrHIII* 157). The version in Dinias substantively changes the content of the oracle, as does a version attributed to Oenomaus (in Eus. P.E. 5.29.4). Plato alludes to yet a different version (*Hp. Ma.* 288b) (see Parke and Wormell 1956: I 82-4 and their full apparatus criticus on PW1 for all the attested variants).



Homeric poems: accounts of oracles are expected to be in meter (usually hexameters)<sup>85</sup> and often feature recycled phrases and motifs which are flexibly and easily repurposed for a particular setting.<sup>86</sup> If we understand these folk motifs and recycled elements as markers of oracles rather than purely literary fictions, then we are forced to reconsider what it means to talk about an oracle being “authentic” at all.

As an extended case study of both Herodotean oracles and the history of scholarship on them, I will look at the “wooden walls” oracle from Herodotus, since it has been the focus of many recent studies: Georges 1986; Holladay 1987; Robertson 1987, Vernant 1991, Manetti 1993, and Maurizio 1997.

Herodotus recounts how the Athenians went to Delphi for advice, and the Pythia, Aristonice, gave them the following oracle:

<p>Ἵω μέλει, τί κάθησθε; Λιπῶν φύγ' ἐς ἔσχατα γαίης  δῶματα καὶ πόλιος τροχοειδέος ἄκρα κάρηνα.  Οὔτε γὰρ ἡ κεφαλὴ μένει ἔμπεδον οὔτε τὸ σῶμα,  οὔτε πόδες νέατοι οὔτ' ὦν χέρες, οὔτε τι μέσσης  λείπεται, ἀλλ' ἄζηλα πέλει· κατὰ γὰρ μιν ἐρείπει  πῦρ τε καὶ ὄξυς Ἄρης, συριηγενὲς ἄρμα διώκων.  Πολλὰ δὲ κάλλ' ἀπολεῖ πυργώματα, κού τὸ σὸν οἶον·  πολλοὺς δ' ἀθανάτων νηοὺς μαλερῶ πυρὶ δώσει,  οἳ που νῦν ἰδρῶτι ρεούμενοι ἐστήκασι,  δείματι παλλόμενοι, κατὰ δ' ἀκροτάτοις ὀρόφοισιν  αἷμα μέλαν κέχυται, προῖδὸν κακότητος ἀνάγκας.  Ἄλλ' ἴτον ἐξ ἀδύτοιο, κακοῖς δ' ἐπικίδνατε θυμόν.  Hdt. 7.140</p>	<p>Wretched ones, why are you still seated here? Leave, flee to the ends of the earth, flee your homes and the heights of the circle of Athens  For the head will not remain secure, nor will the body, not the lowest feet, nor its hands, nor will anything in the middle remain, but all is in ruins. Fire and Ares, driving swiftly a Syrian chariot, rushes down upon it. He will demolish many other citadels, not only yours, and he will give many temples of the immortal gods to the fierce fire. They now stand, dripping with sweat, pallid with fear, and black blood is poured upon the peaks of their roofs, A harbinger of the inevitable evil. Leave, then, from the adyton, and cover over your woes with a courageous spirit.</p>
---	--

Unsurprisingly, the Athenians did not like this oracle, which painted a very bleak picture, so they returned to Delphi to ask for another oracle, and refused to leave Delphi until they were given one. At this point, they receive a second oracle:

85 There is no evidence to suggest that this is the case at Dodona, though this is very likely a result of having very few literary accounts of oracles from Dodona (although the material evidence from Dodona does not reveal any metrical oracles, the same can be said about the material evidence at Delphi.). Any argument about the oracular conventions at Dodona is largely an *argumentum ex silentio*.

86 See Maurizio 1997: 324-6 for a series of oracles and oracle stories which are about ravens (many are about white ravens being a sign, though what they signify varies) and many of which are explicitly connected to the phrase ἐς κόρακας (go to the ravens). White ravens are also a proverbial descriptor of an unlikely event (AP 11.417; Luc. Epigr. 43; Arist. HA 519a6, though Aristotle presents them as a real phenomenon and not merely a proverb). Idiom, folk tale, aetiology, and oracle overlap here, blending the genres somewhat.

<p>Οὐ δύναται Παλλὰς Δί' Ὀλύμπιον ἐξιλάσασθαι,      λισσομένη πολλοῖσι λόγοις καὶ μήτιδι πυκνῇ·      σοὶ δὲ τόδ' αὖτις ἔπος ἐρέω, ἀδάμαντι πελάσσας.      Τῶν ἄλλων γὰρ ἀλισκομένων ὅσα Κέκροπος οὖρος      ἐντὸς ἔχει κευθμῶν τε Κιθαιρῶνος ζαθέιο,      τεῖχος Τριτογενεῖ ξύλινον διδοῖ εὐρύοπα Ζεὺς      μούνον ἀπόρθητον τελέθειν, τὸ σὲ τέκνα τ' ὀνήσει.      Μηδὲ σύ γ' ἵπποσύνην τε μένειν καὶ πεζὸν ἰόντα      πολλὸν ἀπ' ἠπείρου στρατὸν ἤσυχος, ἀλλ' ὑποχωρεῖν      νῶτον ἐπιστρέφας· ἔτι τοί ποτε κἀντίος ἔσση.      Ἔω θείῃ Σαλαμῖς, ἀπολεῖς δὲ σὺ τέκνα γυναικῶν      ἢ που σκιδναμένης Δημήτερος ἢ συνιούσης.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Hdt. 7.141</p>	<p>Pallas is unable to propitiate Olympian Zeus      Praying with many words and shrewd counsel.      But I will tell you this word, made strong like adamant,      For after everything is taken, which the Cecropian border      holds within it, and the valley of holy Cithaeron,      May wide-seeing Zeus grant to the Trito-born a wooden wall,      which alone shall be unassailable, which will profit you and      your children.      Do not wait quietly for the cavalry or the great infantry on      their way from Asia, but turn your back and withdraw.      There will yet be a day when you meet face to face.      Divine Salamis, you will destroy the women's children, either      when the grain is scattered or when it is gathered.</p>
--	--

This second oracle, Herodotus tells us, “seemed to be and actually was more favorable than the previous one” (ταῦτα σφί ἠπιώτερα γὰρ τῶν προτέρων καὶ ἦν καὶ ἐδόκεε εἶναι, Hdt. 7.142).

Crahay notes several Homeric echoes<sup>87</sup> and comments upon how many of these details are too vague to be meaningful predictions and that the only precise detail, the mention of Salamis, has often been excised on the grounds that it is an *ex eventu* addition, though Crahay does not feel the need to remove the last two lines. He does characterize this double oracle as propagandistic though (301) and is skeptical of its verisimilitude. Parke and Wormell take a similarly “historical” approach and note that the Pythia’s behavior (seeming to respond before a question is asked) is more typical of legend than history, but they conclude that “there can be no doubt that we have here the original utterances of Delphi before the event” because “[n]o forger would have perpetrated such a mistake as to show Apollo induced to change his mind about one of the most decisive events of Greek history” (Parke and Wormell 1956: 170). They allow that the Athenians may have tampered with the oracular process by privately requesting a specific prophecy from the Delphic authorities. They reiterate Crahay’s point that the oracles are vague and full of ambiguities that would allow the oracle to seem to be confirmed by a wide range of outcomes.<sup>88</sup> Fontenrose categorizes both these oracles as Quasi-Historical, though with some qualms, since he concludes that too little time

87 Crahay 1956: 296 fn. 1 and 297 fn. 1-2, though he includes several Hesiodic, Pindaric, and Aeschylean echoes as well

88 Crahay : “elles sont trop vagues...Les prodiges décrits dans le premier oracle sont purement conventionnels ; c’est le type de présages qui, dans l’Antiquité, constituent l’accompagnement classique de toutes grandes catastrophes “ (298). Parke and Wormell: “Delphi gave qualified support to Themistocles’ plan, but guarded itself by the insertion of ambiguities. The ‘wooden wall’ pointed fairly clearly to the navy; but even it could be interpreted otherwise. The reference to Salamis is almost absurdly equivocal” (171).

has passed (c. 40 years) for anyone to viably circulate false oracles. However, he points to several factors which incline him to think that this oracle is not truly a Historical oracle.<sup>89</sup>

Georges 1986 examines 7.132 through 7.145 and concludes that there is not any reason to assume that there is a “clear sequential link” (19) between the oath the Greeks take against Medizers, the oracular responses from Delphi, and the military deliberations which take place at 7.145.1. Though this is the order that events are presented in Herodotus, Georges finds this an implausible chain of events and suggests instead that “the more economical hypothesis is that the same meeting is referred to at both 132.2 and 145.1, at which the oath was deliberated upon and sworn as one of the pledges exchanged. On this hypothesis, chapters 133-44 are enclosed by a narrative loop within a factual context to which they bear no readily apparent connection” (19). On his reading, the Delphic consultation could have taken place either earlier or later than people generally assume, since it has no causal or temporal connection to the events surrounding it in Herodotus’ account, and he concludes that the consultation may well have taken place after Thermopylae and Artemisium.<sup>90</sup> His primary objective, however, is to square Herodotus’ account with military history (a great deal of his approach can be seen in the title alone: “Saving Herodotus’ Phenomena: The Oracles and the Events of 480 B.C.”) in order to defend Herodotus’ honor as an historian.

Robertson 1987 meanwhile takes Herodotus’ account at face value and takes great issue with those<sup>91</sup> who (as Georges does) suggest that the oracle consultation took place at any other time than in 481, as the most natural reading of Herodotus would suggest. He argues vehemently that these oracles are not a *vaticinium ex eventu* (11) and suggests that the problems historians have had with this passage stem from their inability to think that the oracle might mean something else by the “wooden wall,” beyond the two options that the Athenians generate (a wooden wall on the Acropolis or the Athenian fleet). The “wooden wall,” he suggests, is the Spartan Isthmus wall and

---

<sup>89</sup> He points to the length (12 lines, long for what he considers an authentic Delphic response, and longer than most inauthentic responses), the mode (what he calls mode E2, or a clear historical prediction, which is uncommon in most of his Historical responses), and the strange nature of the requests (for the first oracle, the Pythia speaks without being asked a question and for the second, the Athenians simply ask for another oracle, but still without any actual question). These, combined with the unusual combined form of the requests, parallels between this account and Croesus’ oracles (Hdt 1.55 and 1.91 in particular), and stylistic features more common in Bacid oracles.

<sup>90</sup> Among other rationales, he draws on Plutarch’s *Life of Themistocles* and gives particular credence to Plutarch’s opinion that this was all a ruse of Themistocles’ because Plutarch was himself a priest at Delphi, though in a much later period.

<sup>91</sup> Georges 1986, but also Evans 1982.

the oracle's advice to "flee to the ends of the earth" meant that they should flee to the Peloponnese. Though he vehemently opposes Georges' interpretation, he too attempts to defend Herodotus and he is right to conclude that "[t]his reconstruction vindicates both Herodotus and the Delphic oracle" (20)—his interpretation does in fact allow that the words Herodotus provides are the Pythia's word verbatim.

Finally, Holladay 1987 offers a third interpretation. Like Georges, his title makes his interpretation quite clear: "The Forethought of Themistocles." Also like Georges, he is extremely skeptical of Herodotus' implied timeline and attributes the oracles to Themistocles' own scheming, in order to persuade the Athenians to follow his proposed course of action: "it is tempting to think that he must have put pressure through the envoys at Delphi to secure what he needed" (186). Holladay attributes a great deal of this oracular story to "patriotic mythmaking" (186) while simultaneously defending Herodotus again, since Herodotus accurately reported the story he received, though that story was colored by Themistoclean propaganda.

It is against these interpretations (and others like them) that Maurizio argues. All these approaches are still rooted in the approaches that Fontenrose takes, or attempting to measure the historical accuracy of the oracular tales. Did the Pythia say those exact words? Did she say them when Herodotus suggests that she did? If not, how close to the actual oracle is the version he provides? Her approach usefully switches the focus away from these questions and instead presents an oral-derived model. On these oracles, she identifies a secular and a sacred thread to the story, as Herodotus recounts it, and focuses on the body motif in the first oracle to conclude that the oracles taken together force the Athenians to debate what actually makes up Athens, "its population or its physical territory, filled as it is with the living temples of the gods" (331). The oracles, she concludes, "reflect a crisis in the very definition of Athens as a city. Whether they reflect particular historical details and can be mined for them, as many scholars have tried to do, is unlikely" (331).

My own approach to Herodotean oracles is very much based on Maurizio's, and I concur with her that while these oracles reflect something important about the events that were happening in Greece at the time, they are certainly not verbatim. This fictionalized aspect does not undermine the overall impression that Herodotus provides about the oracle—the Delphic oracle's role in politics is well-attested, both in material and literary evidence. The precise form that these oracles take, however, is shaped by Herodotus' own narrative demands and, as Murray observed,

aesthetics and morality shape these stories as much as historical fact. Things like the hexameter (or other metrical) form are not so much a representation of the way that the Pythia or her priests delivered the oracles, but rather a stylistic marker to show that these words are different and are set off from ordinary, secular language. Similarly, Herodotus' oracles are not always readily intelligible, and his most famous oracles are those which are ambiguous and misinterpreted. Though I will depart somewhat from her interpretations in the subsequent chapter, Maurizio's conclusion about is useful here:

Tellers of oracular tales were interested in how oracles were divine utterances which eluded human comprehension because of their tropic nature. That is, they were interested in the interstices of language, its capacity to hold multiple meanings that can make manifest the presence of the divine breaking in on the human world. These authoritative tale tellers created oracular narratives that emblemized their *Sitz im Leben*, which always involved human and divine interaction, the gap between human and divine intelligence, and the tragedy of the human condition that resulted, as it inevitably did, in the space where human strivings to hear and comprehend the divine on earth often failed (331-2).

The primary purpose of an oracular tale is not to transmit an oracle verbatim but to convey the importance and effect of that oracle, which is to emphasize the awesome power of the gods and the insurmountable divide between mortals and humans. Oracles in Herodotus are often misunderstood, I would argue, to reinforce the power of Apollo and the gap between gods and mortals. Maurizio's linguistic and theological conclusions will be useful to keep in mind when turning to Herodotus' contemporary, Sophocles, whose work shows the influence of Herodotean oracles at times and whose oracles share some important features of Herodotean oracles.

### Other Literary Oracles

Herodotus is not the only other source of literary oracles, and there are many relevant examples in Thucydides, such as Thuc. 2.54, which recounts an ancient oracle (described as *πάλαι*) ostensibly phrased as ἤξει Δωριακὸς πόλεμος καὶ λοιμὸς ἅμ' αὐτῶ, though the Athenians debate whether the oracle mentioned *λοιμὸς* (plague) or *λιμὸς* (famine). This occurs in the midst of the plague at Athens, and Thucydides explains that they eventually chose to recount the oracle as saying *λοιμὸς* because "people make their memory accord with what they are experiencing" (οἱ γὰρ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς ἃ ἔπασχον τὴν μνήμην ἐποιοῦντο), but that if another Dorian war took place in the future, and it was accompanied by famine, the Athenians would very likely re-remember this oracle with *λιμὸς* instead (ἦν δέ γε οἴμαί ποτε ἄλλος πόλεμος

καταλάβη Δωρικός τοῦδε ὕστερος καὶ ξυμβῆ γενέσθαι λιμόν, κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς οὕτως ἄσσονται).

Euripides also offers another example in his *Ion*, in which Ion and Xuthus misinterpret Apollo's oracle to (at times) comic effect, as Xuthus bursts out of the temple of Apollo and addresses Ion abruptly as his son (ὦ τέκνον, χαῖρ'· ἡ γὰρ ἀρχὴ τοῦ λόγου πρέπουσά μοι, 517) while Ion is concerned that Xuthus has perhaps gone mad (εὔ φρονεῖς μὲν; ἢ σ' ἔμηνε θεοῦ τις, ὦ ξένε, βλάβη; 520). The play as a whole offers an extended study of the process of misinterpretation and reinterpretation (and re-misinterpretation) of oracles, before Athena eventually resolves things.

These literary oracles are sporadic moments in a much larger body of work by both Thucydides and Euripides. These reflect the sort of oracular conventions that Maurizio discusses, but oracles are not a central part of these authors' works. With Sophocles, as we shall now see, oracles play a central role in the *Trachiniae* (Chapter 1) and the *Oedipus Tyrannus* (Chapter 2) and at least one prophetic or oracular utterance occurs in the other five extant Sophoclean tragedies (Chapter 3). As I will show, these oracles are carefully constructed linguistic phenomena and are designed to elucidate subtle aspects of how language works. Reading these oracles from a pragmatic linguistic perspective helps highlight how and why these oracles are misunderstood and we can use our findings to construct a loose theory of language for Sophocles, which accounts for the nonsemantic aspects of language and presents a sophisticated linguistic perspective operating beneath the dramatic form.

## Chapter 1: The *Trachiniae* and Tragic Misunderstandings

### Introduction

Ezra Pound famously identified line 1174 of the *Trachiniae*, which he translates as “SPLENDOUR / IT ALL COHERES,” as “the key phrase, for which the play exists.” I hesitate to endorse many of his interpretations of the play, but on this point he is quite correct. The play revolves around disparate oracles and prophetic utterances given to different characters and understood in different ways. It is only at this late moment in the play that Heracles finally connects all the oracles. Though he has only two prophecies to draw upon directly—both given to him by Zeus in the distant past—the audience has had a much broader range of oracles and prophecies at their disposal. In this final moment, it is clear that the constantly-shifting oracle from Dodona, which has appeared throughout the play, is accurate in all its incarnations. Additionally, Nessus’ riddling words to Deianeira at the moment of his death prove to be accurate as well, and to coincide with a prophecy from Zeus. At this moment, all the prophecies do in fact cohere into the only possible outcome that could fulfill them all—the death of Heracles.

The plot of the *Trachiniae* is a particularly salient place to explore how oracles function in Sophocles, which is why I have chosen to begin here. This central oracle appears five times in different forms throughout the play—lines 43-8, 76-85, 164-74, 821-6, and 1159-73—in addition to the second prophecy from Zeus that appears at the end of the play (1159ff.) and the dying prophecy from Nessus (568ff.).<sup>92</sup> This play has been studied less than some of Sophocles’ other plays, though that has begun to change.<sup>93</sup> There has been some very useful recent scholarship on the subject, but the ways in which the different prophetic utterances shift and interact has still not been adequately explored. The utter failure of communication and understanding that lies at the

---

<sup>92</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I am using Davies’ 1991 text throughout this chapter.

<sup>93</sup> Davies provides a useful discussion of this shift from the 19th century’s general consensus that it was an inferior work in which Sophocles did not rise to his usual level of mastery. Davies opens his introduction to the text with: “The rehabilitation of the *Trachiniae*’s reputation is one of the more impressive achievements of twentieth-century classical scholarship” (Davies 1991: xvii). Writing approximately a decade earlier, Easterling notes that the play must have been admired in antiquity to have survived, but it was largely neglected in the middle ages and 19th century, though more recent studies (Segal 1977, Albin 1972, Winnington-Ingram 1980, Fuqua 1980, and Easterling 1981) have been more sympathetic to the play (Easterling 1982: 1).

center of the *Trachiniae* prompted some scholars to understand this as a play about late-learning<sup>94</sup> and epistemological uncertainty, even imputing a radical skepticism to Sophocles.<sup>95</sup> Further, this play has been cited as the “greatest stumbling block” to “the humanist view of Sophocles as a dramatist of emotion and character.”<sup>96</sup>

Most recently, this play has prompted a thorough, deconstructionist reading by Heiden, who suggests<sup>97</sup> that “there is no knowledge, only interpretation.”<sup>98</sup> Returning to this argument later, Heiden reiterates that this play “lures audiences through familiar myth into a deep and troubling *aporia* where it leaves them to draw what wisdom they can from it.”<sup>99</sup> As I will note throughout this chapter, I adopt many of Heiden’s (and others’) nuanced readings of the text, but I draw a different conclusion. Heiden focuses on the very real issue of the elusive and slippery nature of language and knowledge within this play, and his deconstructionist approach points out the myriad places in which this text resists an easy interpretation and where the possibility of knowledge is called into question. This text does, however, offer more than simply *aporia*; a concept of how meaning *does* emerge and how language *does* function can be drawn from a confusing and complicated web of misunderstanding.

In this chapter, I trace the central prophecy, received by Heracles from Zeus’ shrine at Dodona, through the play and closely examine how it expands and changes, based on the context and the speaker who is recounting the oracle. I also look at the dying words of Nessus and the second prophecy from Zeus, to see how these prophecies interact with one another and to show how one can help us understand the other. Nessus’ dying words are not a prophecy per se, but they provide a linguistic comparandum for Zeus’ words, and they demonstrate many of the linguistic features which cause Zeus’ words to be misunderstood. Thus, Nessus’ words—situated in the middle of four different versions of Zeus’ oracular words—can serve as a key that can “unlock” these oracles. To establish why these oracles are misunderstood in the first place, I draw on pragmatic linguistic theory, which allows me to conclude that the oracles are careful linguistic

---

<sup>94</sup> Most famously, Whitman 1951.

<sup>95</sup> Lawrence 1978.

<sup>96</sup> Segal 1977/1995: 26.

<sup>97</sup> He here argues against many previous Sophoclean scholars, but most directly against those such as Whitman 1951, who would seek to find some stable truth amidst the rampant misunderstandings and whose entire reading, in Heiden’s words, “[d]espite the textual self-contradictions of which he is well aware . . . is based upon a passionate belief in the possibility and desirability of truth” (Heiden 1989: 7).

<sup>98</sup> Heiden 1989: 13

<sup>99</sup> Heiden 2012: 132.



constructions and the characters' misinterpretations and (eventual) correct reinterpretations showcase how language and interpretation functions in the play.

There is, I argue, a subtle difference between the deceptive speeches, elusive language, and misguided interpretations employed by the mortal characters in the play (and here I include Heracles, on the assumption that his suppressed apotheosis has, at the very least, not yet happened at the time of the dramatic events<sup>100</sup>) and those at work in oracular language. The play undoubtedly presents a complicated, shifting landscape of language and meaning, but a great deal of the confusion can be understood by looking at how communication functions among humans as opposed to divine, oracular language. By showing how understanding and communication break down (a particularly salient topic in any examination of oracles), Sophocles also demonstrates how language normally functions and how speakers and listeners normally interact. In this way, oracles highlight how people interpret and misinterpret language and offer a useful look at the theories of language advanced by this text. Knowledge may be impossible for tragic characters, but that does not imply that knowledge is impossible, in broad terms. Rather, the tragic example—a negative example—has a great deal to show us about how language and communication *do* function between humans.

## Pragmatic Theory

The tragedy of the *Trachiniae* can be framed in terms of a mortal failure to understand the terms of the “oracular conversation.” If we want to approach this play through Aristotle’s theory of tragedy, there is a tangible mistake (ἄμαρτία) that drives the trajectory of this play: mortals

---

<sup>100</sup> Segal and Easterling have both argued in favor of the choice to supplement the ambiguous ending of this play with the external mythological tradition (i.e., to assume his apotheosis is implied by Sophocles) (Segal 1977: 138-40 and Easterling 1981: 67-9). Segal has suggested that lines 1206-10 in particular, as well as the persistent emphasis on the oracles and Heracles’ relationship to Zeus, combined with the pyre at the end, “strongly suggest that Sophocles means us to view Heracles’ sufferings against the larger framework of the legend” (Segal 1981: 99-100). Both Segal and Easterling make compelling points, and the audience almost certainly supplies Heracles’ apotheosis as a sort of postscript to this play, which makes the absence of any *clear reference* to his apotheosis that much more striking. As Whitman 1951: 120 points out, “if Sophocles had wished to refer to Heracles’ apotheosis on Mount Oeta, he could have done it more clearly. Instead, he studiously suppresses it.” While I do feel that an audience would assume that Heracles’ apotheosis would follow the shortly after the events of the play, I side with Hoey 1977 and Heiden 1989 in reading the play’s ending as a very aporetic moment. While this is not to say that Sophocles *denies* the apotheosis of Heracles, which is clearly taken as a fact in his *Philoctetes*, he does conspicuously suppress any clear allusion to apotheosis—Heracles, Hyllus, and the Chorus do not have the consolation of apotheosis to balance the suffering at the end of the play. If we are to understand an apotheosis, it is not a concern of this play and it is not anything that the characters have access to—as with all knowledge of the future in this play, any anticipation of apotheosis is perhaps accessible to Zeus and to the audience, but to none of the characters within the tragedy.

interpret divine communication in the same way that they interpret mortal communication. Their misunderstandings stem from applying an entirely reasonable set of linguistic rules and assumptions to a type of communication that simply does not follow those rules.

As I will argue, the crucial linguistic issue that keeps Deianeira from properly understanding the meaning of the oracle from Zeus is her assumption that ἢ . . . ἢ represents an *exclusive or* (that is, A or B, but not both). Only in the end is the oracle's true meaning revealed as "both A and B," since A and B (death and happiness) prove to be the same thing in the end. Similarly, Heracles and the Chorus do not anticipate the riddling nature of their version of the oracle. They take a straightforward interpretive approach to something that proves to be far more enigmatic than they had anticipated. Sophocles provides two different examples of each type of interpretive misstep, offering multiple case studies for how language can fail to communicate meaning effectively.

On this point, the tools from linguistic theory that I laid out in the introduction will be extremely helpful. Drawing on the work of Grice and many neo-Griceans,<sup>101</sup> we can provide a more analytical justification for these misinterpretations. However, any theoretical approach that uses Grice as a starting point presents a clear problem when applied to oracles in tragedy—pragmatic theory rests on the cooperative principle, which suggests that both members of a conversation are engaged in a shared attempt to convey meaning. In this and subsequent chapters, I will argue that the gods are not bound by these conventions, and that gods are not participating in a cooperative conversation, not through any uncooperative intent, but simply because the gods are not part of the mortal world and are not bound by human linguistic conventions. Nessus, however, has a decidedly uncooperative intent, and his speech is motivated by malice and a desire for revenge. His words to Deianeira are carefully crafted to mislead her, flouting several of the Gricean Maxims (manner, quality, and select submaxims of each) so that she will infer something that is not true, even though his words are not an outright lie. Pragmatic theory gives us the tools to analyze Nessus' words effectively in light of the context in which he delivers them, and this analysis can, in turn, help us make sense of how and why Zeus' oracles are misunderstood.

Pragmatic theory, then, provides not only a way to identify what goes wrong in mortals' attempts to understand the gods but also a way to make sense of why the gods so consistently communicate in this cryptic manner in Sophocles. From the perspective of the mortal characters, there is no reason to think that the characters within the play are aware of the dramatic conventions

---

<sup>101</sup> See the Introduction or Appendix B for a more detailed explanation of these theories

surrounding oracles and their potential for misinterpretation. At the very least, characters within the play are convinced of the accuracy of the oracles (Deianeira refers to them as *μαντεῖα πιστὰ* at line 77) and they express no qualms about their clarity or the potential for misinterpretation. At no point is there any sort of metatheatrical reference to the elusive, slippery nature of oracles. For all intents and purposes, the characters seem unaware that they are likely to be tricked by the oracles. It is worth noting here that the characters within the play *do* communicate with one another in a way that accords with Grice's and Levinson's theories. Despite being mythological characters, they exhibit realistic psychological and emotional responses to the events of the play and frame their own interpretive processes in a way that assumes cooperative conversations and accords with pragmatic theory. As such, while the methods that mortal characters employ will prove to be ineffective tools for understanding the oracles themselves, the theoretical framework laid out by neo-Gricean theories of pragmatics will be extremely helpful in understanding precisely how and why mortals interpret oracles ineffectively.

## The Multifform Prophecy from Zeus

### 43-8: Deianeira's ominous δέλτος

45	<p>σχεδὸν δ' ἐπίσταμαί τι πῆμ' ἔχοντά νιν·  χρόνον γὰρ οὐχὶ βαιόν, ἀλλ' ἤδη δέκα  μῆνας πρὸς ἄλλοις πέντ' ἀκήρυκτος μένει.  κάστιν τι δεινὸν πῆμα· τοιαύτην ἐμοὶ  δέλτον λιπῶν ἔστειχε, τὴν ἐγὼ θαμὰ  θεοῖς ἀρῶμαι πημονῆς ἄτερ λαβεῖν.</p>	43-8	<p>I know for near certain that he is experiencing some sort of suffering, for it has not been a brief stretch of time, but he has been unheard from for ten months, plus five more in addition. It is some terrible suffering. He went off and left me with a tablet of the sort that I am constantly praying the gods that I received it free of misfortune.</p>
----	---	------	--

When the play opens, we begin to learn about these prophecies in an entirely piecemeal way; as the play develops, more (and at times, contradictory) details about the oracle come to light. The content of the oracle, though it is often described as a fixed entity, paradoxically proceeds to grow and change throughout the course of the play. Even when the content stays fundamentally similar, the language used to express that content still shifts. In fact, even the language used here to describe this must necessarily be ambiguous—it is difficult to know whether we ought to speak of *an* oracle or oracles (plural), since the different accounts depart so significantly from one another. Significantly, both the language used to talk about the oracle and the language used to convey the contents of the oracle shifts throughout the play, as we shall see.

The first mention of any prophecy is in Deianeira's ominous final words of her opening speech (lines 46-8), in which the audience learns of the writing tablet (δέλτον), which Deianeira connects to the dreadful misfortune of some sort (τι δεινὸν πῆμα), recalling the πῆμα from a few lines earlier (σχεδὸν δ' ἐπίσταμαί τι πῆμ' ἔχοντά νιν, 43).<sup>102</sup> As Deianeira's opening speech concludes with her constant prayer that she will have taken the tablet without misfortune (πημονῆς ἄτερ), we are left with very little information about the content of the tablet but a distinct impression that it contains something foreboding and calamitous.<sup>103</sup>

### 76-85: Deianeira's first account

76	<p>Δηιάνειρα ἄρ' οἴσθα δῆτ', ὦ τέκνον, ὡς ἔλειπέ μοι μαντεῖα πιστὰ τῆσδε τῆς χώρας πέρι;</p> <p>Ἵλλος τὰ ποῖα, μήτηρ; τὸν λόγον γὰρ ἀγνοῶ.</p>	<p>Deianeira Do you know, my child, that he left me reliable oracles about that land [sc. Oechalia]?</p> <p>Hyllus What are they, mother? I do not know the account.</p>
80	<p>Δηιάνειρα ὡς ἢ τελευτήν τοῦ βίου μέλλει τελεῖν ἢ τοῦτον ἄρας ἄθλον εἰς τό γ' ὕστερον τὸν λοιπὸν ἤδη βίοτον εὐαίων' ἔχειν. ἐν οὖν ῥοπή τοιᾶδε κειμένω, τέκνον, οὐκ εἴ ξυνέρξων, ἠνίκ' ἢ σεσώμεθα [ἢ πίπτομεν σοῦ πατρὸς ἐξολωλότος] κείνου βίου σώσαντος, ἢ οἰχόμεσθ' ἅμα;<sup>104</sup></p>	<p>Deianeira That either he will achieve the completion of his life, or, having accomplished this labor, in the future he will have a happy life, for the rest of it. With his life laying in the balance like this, child, Aren't you going to help him, since either we are saved [or, with your father destroyed, we fall] If his life is saved, or we perish together with him?</p>

<sup>102</sup> I am not persuaded by T. von Wilamowitz' suggestion that this repetition is the product of corruption and the text should instead read χρῆμα. While I would not rule out the possibility of corruption, there does not seem to be a problem with the text that the manuscript provides. Rather, when joined with πημονῆς in line 48, this repetition seems to reflect an obsessive concern about potential misfortune.

<sup>103</sup> The seeming contradictions between this account and later accounts have caused many to try to excise portions of these lines. T. von Wilamowitz 1917 and Wunder 1841 find fault with lines 44-8 and delete them, as an actor's interpolation; Nauck 1880 largely follows them, declaring 46-8 to be interpolated. Reeve 1970 goes farther and removes line 43 as well. Davies' text includes all these lines and defends their inclusion effectively, however. Their apparent contradictions can be resolved with a more nuanced approach to the text and the characterization that Sophocles employs. With Davies (who builds on Kranz 1921), I find these lines to be dramatically effective and a means to reveal the truth slowly and progressively throughout the play.

<sup>104</sup> This passage nearly mirrors the oracle (78-80). With her exhortation to Hyllus in the middle, Deianeira and Hyllus' fate mirrors that of Heracles. The structure is almost chiasmic, and this neat symmetry may have contributed to the interpolation of line 84 (cf. Easterling and Davies on the arguments for its deletion, following Bentley). Heracles' death (τελευτήν τοῦ βίου μέλλει τελεῖν) is mirrored by Deianeira and Hyllus' destruction (οἰχόμεσθ' ἅμα). Working inward, we have the preferred fate for Heracles (τὸν λοιπὸν ἤδη βίοτον εὐαίων' ἔχειν) and Deianeira and Hyllus (σεσώμεθα), arranged neatly around the scale imagery (ἐν οὖν ῥοπή τοιᾶδε) and forming a scale-like balance of the outcomes of all the people involved.

At line 77, however, we learn more about Deianeira’s concerns—oracles (μαντεῖα) left to her by Heracles. Though the verbal echoes<sup>105</sup> might suggest that these are at least connected to the tablet from before, Easterling correctly notes (*ad loc.*) that we are not yet explicitly told whether these μαντεῖα πιστὰ are in fact inscribed on the tablet. To further complicate things, the prophecy seems to have shifted from being about a time (in 44ff.) to being about a place (τῆσδε τῆς χώρας πέρι).<sup>106</sup> This is an effective means of introducing more information about the oracle and characterizing Deianeira’s mental and psychological condition. Her preoccupation with Heracles’ prophesied fate is evident in her interactions with Hyllus—at the mention of Oechalia (a location that is not explicitly mentioned in any of the incarnations of this prophecy), Deianeira recounts the oracle. As we will see below, Oechalia could potentially be Heracles’ “labor” (ἄθλον), but there is no necessary connection between those two, based on the information we learn about the oracle. Three scenarios could explain Deianeira’s interpretation.<sup>107</sup> Potentially, the version of the oracle she recounts here omits a reference to Oechalia that was in the original oracle, and her segue is not as tenuous as it seems. Another option is that she has chosen to interpret the oracle as being about Oechalia, which is perhaps a logical assumption, given that it is the closest ἄθλον to the oracle’s deadline and the most natural way to understand the reference to a labor. Finally, perhaps Deianeira is simply so obsessed with this ominous oracle that she is making connections where there may not necessarily be any. For now, let us leave this as an open question, noting only that while all three incline us to interpret Deianeira’s mental state in slightly different ways, they all fundamentally reflect her own mindset. Deianeira’s own mental state will be the lens

---

<sup>105</sup> ὡς ἔλειπέ μοι here echoes the ἐμοὶ . . . λιπῶν from less than 30 lines before. As noted above, Deianeira is obsessed with Heracles’ fate in a way that her language and interactions persistently reflect. Rather than a simple coincidence of phrasing, this wording certainly suggests that the tablet and the prophecies are essentially the same.

<sup>106</sup> The manuscripts read χώρας here. Hense suggests the intriguing χρείας (printed by Lloyd-Jones and Wilson’s 2000 text), a word that would fit the sense here nicely, but there is no clear reason why the transmitted text needs to be emended and χώρας provides an entirely acceptable reading. Dronke reads ὦρας instead, in order to align this account of the oracle with the previous mention at 44ff., when the thrust of the oracle was the *time* of fulfillment and not the place. This oracle is protean in nature though—in all five iterations of it, the wording and focus change. There is no reason to emend the passage on these grounds, when the manuscripts provide a reading that is perfectly acceptable.

<sup>107</sup> My preferred interpretation here follows closely from Easterling (*ad 77*): “it is dramatically more effective at 76 for Hyllus’ comparatively casual mention of Eurytus’ city to strike a chord in D.’s mind than for here merely to interrupt him.” Jebb *ad 76* makes essentially the same argument, as does Kranz 1921: 35. Kamerbeek *ad 76* and Martina 1980: 70-1 disagree: Kamerbeek argues that Oechalia was in the actual oracle but that Sophocles does not allow Deianeira to mention it earlier for dramatic effect, and Martina argues that this reference to Oechalia is not Deianeira’s interpretation of the oracle, but instead that of Heracles. This line of reasoning does not, as Heiden 1989: 35 n. 47 points out, explain the fact that Oechalia is never mentioned in association with the oracle, even after this scene. It is much more plausible that this passage instead reflects Deianeira’s mental state.

through which we view prophecy throughout much of this play and, as will be noted later, it is nearly impossible to extricate Deianeira's own condition from the prophecy. Language cannot be considered in a vacuum and Deianeira's versions of this prophecy provide a case study of sorts to examine the factors that inform and complicate how language works.

In the first explicit formulation of the prophecy (78-80), Deianeira outlines a bifurcated fate for Heracles: either he will die (ἢ τελευτήν τοῦ βίου μέλλει τελεῖν), or he will accomplish the labor and live a peaceful existence afterward (ἢ τοῦτον ἄρας ἄθλον εἰς τό γ' ὕστερον / τὸν λοιπὸν ἤδη βίον εὐαίων' ἔχειν). The language here is particularly critical, because while the semantic range of ἢ . . . ἢ allows for inclusive or exclusive uses,<sup>108</sup> the most natural reading of this passage assumes that *either* option 1 or option 2 will come about, *but not both*. Clearly, Deianeira has interpreted the ἢ . . . ἢ to be an "exclusive or," since she invokes the imagery of a scale or a balance (ἐν ῥοπή, 81).<sup>109</sup> To her mind, as reflected in the imagery she chooses, this is the critical moment upon which his fate hinges, and it could be tipped in favor *either* towards option 1 or 2 (but presumably not both, or the scale imagery falls apart). It is only after the tragic events of the play unfold that the ἢ . . . ἢ is revealed to be an "inclusive or."

In general, there does not seem to be a clear way in which ἢ . . . ἢ constructions function in Greek, and Appendix A includes a more thorough analysis of the different ways that ἢ . . . ἢ *can* function in Greek. In short, looking at examples from Homer through Euripides and Sophocles (excluding fragments, since the context is often unclear with fragments and it is difficult to draw conclusions about the implications of the "or" structure), I conclude that ἢ . . . ἢ primarily suggests an exclusive interpretation, but there are several ways in which this disjunction is used with an inclusive meaning. In addition to uses that are more readily distinguished, there are also many uses of ἢ . . . ἢ which are vague enough that they cannot be easily classified as inclusive or exclusive. With this range of meanings available to this construction, the context and the expectations and assumptions of the speaker and the listener shape the way that disjunctions are interpreted, since there are many potential interpretations of items connected with ἢ . . . ἢ and the process of selecting one of those interpretations is complicated.

---

<sup>108</sup> I am here adopting the logical (and computing) terminology of inclusive and exclusive or (and inclusive and exclusive disjunctions). I am using "exclusive or" to refer to a disjunction in which only one of the two options can be true, but not both. "Inclusive or" refers to a situation in which one or both of the alternatives can be true.

<sup>109</sup> Ῥοπή is etymologically connected to ῥέπω, which implies the inclination of a balance (Beekes). The meaning of ῥοπή is tied to the idea of a scale tipping and the metaphor implies one outcome (or side of the scale) prevailing to the exclusion of the other.

Drawing further on pragmatic theory, theories of scalar implicatures are particularly helpful here. As described earlier,<sup>110</sup> scalar implicature suggests that a hearer assumes a speaker will provide as much information as they are in a position to provide and so, when a speaker makes a weaker claim, it is because they cannot make a stronger claim. In my previous discussion of implicatures, I provided the following sentence:

*The cat is in the hamper or under the bed,*

as well as the implicature that it generates:

*I don't know for a fact that the cat is under the bed.*

This implicature is generated because a hearer assumes that if the speaker has definite knowledge where the cat is, then the speaker would simply provide that location rather than offering two alternatives, if they knew one was certainly false. This rests on an underlying scale of informativity, < and, or >, in which *and* is a stronger or more informative claim than *or*, and a hearer naturally assumes that the speaker will make the strongest possible claim they can, in an attempt to remove ambiguity and convey meaning effectively.

As will be discussed in greater detail below, this question of interpretation is at the center of the tragedy. There is nothing inherently wrong with the way Deianeira interprets the oracle—that is, her interpretation is certainly within the semantic range of these words and is the most natural interpretation of those words, from a pragmatic perspective. It is not until the other, far less natural reading is revealed at the end of the play that it becomes clear that there was a flaw in her initial interpretation. Pragmatics suggest, however, that this alternate interpretation of the oracle (the one that proves to be correct) should not be an available meaning. Resolving this apparent contradiction will prove critical for an understanding of this play.

#### 164-174: Deianeira's second account

165	<p>χρόνον προτάξας ὡς τρίμηνον ἠνίκα          χώρας ἀπέιη κἀνιαύσιον βεβῶς,          τότε ἢ θανεῖν χρεῖη σφε τῶδε τῶ χρόνῳ          ἢ τοῦθ' ὑπεκδραμόντα τοῦ χρόνου τέλος          τὸ λοιπὸν ἤδη ζῆν ἀλυπήτῳ βίῳ.          τοιαῦτ' ἔφραζε πρὸς θεῶν εἰμαρμένα</p>	<p>He established the length of time—that when he had been gone from this place for a year and three months, it would be necessary either for him to die at that time or, if he escaped the end of his time, he would live in the future without pain.</p>
170	<p>τῶν Ἡρακλείων ἐκτελευτᾶσθαι πόνων,          ὡς τὴν παλαιὰν φηγὸν αὐδῆσαι ποτε          Δωδῶνι δισσῶν ἐκ Πελειάδων ἔφη.</p>	<p>He explained that these things had been decreed by the gods to bring the labors of Heracles to an end, and he said that the ancient oak at Dodona had spoken, through the two Peleides.<sup>111</sup></p>

<sup>110</sup> See the Introduction or Appendix B for a fuller treatment.

<sup>111</sup> The identity of the Peleides here is unclear. Jebb's Appendix (p. 203-7) details the history of the priests and priestesses of Dodona, using Strabo's account of the site. According to Strabo, who himself draws on Pindar (7.7),

	καὶ τῶνδε ναμέρτεια συμβαίνει χρόνου τοῦ νῦν παρόντος, ὡς τελεσθῆναι χρεῶν· 164-74	The unfailing truth of these things comes to fulfillment at this present moment in time, when it is necessary that they be fulfilled.
--	--	---

Before going any further, it will be helpful to look at another passage. In the third—and thus far, most complete—reference to this prophecy, the division between Heracles’ own words and the prophetic words from Dodona is blurred. It seems safe to conclude that the partitioning of Heracles’ inheritance is not on the tablet,<sup>112</sup> and in Deianeira’s account here, the fifteen-month timing is repeated from lines 44-45. The urgency of her anxiety makes more sense with this added bit of information. The time has effectively run out on Heracles’ fate and the decisive moment is at hand (χρόνου τοῦ νῦν παρόντος, 173-4). In fact, Deianeira’s whole speech reflects an obsessive awareness of time, in a variety of forms, as I explore below. As Deianeira is acutely aware, this is the moment when the oracle’s meaning will emerge—the *ancient* oak (τὴν παλαιὰν φηγὸν) was the source of this *ancient* tablet (παλαιὰν δέλτον) that is going to be realized at the *present* time (χρόνου τοῦ νῦν παρόντος).

It is not until line 155ff. that we can begin to connect the prophecies with the tablet from the opening of the play. Here, Deianeira describes an ancient tablet (παλαιὰν δέλτον, 157), inscribed with ξυνηθήματα (signs or signals). The use of ξυνηθήματα is significant here. Jebb<sup>113</sup> notes that this is an archaizing word choice, since Sophocles “may have felt that it suited the heroic

---

when Dione’s temple was combined with Zeus’ (σύνναος τῶι Διὶ προσαπεδείχθη καὶ ἡ Διώνη), the Selloi (male priests) were replaced by priestesses, who were known as Pelciai or Peleciades. See also Pausanias (10.12.10) on this account. Priestesses at Delphi were known as μέλισσαι, so an animal epithet for priestesses is not unprecedented (see Sourvinou-Inwood 1979: 240). Strabo (7. Frag 1) also offers an account— φασὶ δὲ καὶ κατὰ τὴν τῶν Μολοττῶν καὶ Θεσπρωτῶν γλώτταν τὰς γραίας πελίας καλεῖσθαι καὶ τοὺς γέροντας πελίουσ· καὶ ἴσως οὐκ ὄρνεα ἦσαν αἱ θυλοῦμεναι πελειάδες, ἀλλὰ γυναῖκες γραῖαι τρεῖς περὶ τὸ ἱερόν σχολάζουσαι—in which Πέλειαι is simply an alternate form of πολιαί, and the name relates to their age. Compare Eustathius (*ad Od.* 14.327) on this account. Parke, meanwhile, thinks that this refers to actual doves who, in an earlier period of Dodona’s history, lived in the sacred oak at Dodona and whose cooing and rustling of the leaves were seen as divine communication (Parke 1967: Chapter 3). For more on animals in religious contexts, see also Bodson 1978 and Lloyd 1975 (*ad Herodotus* 2.55). Herodotus’ own account at 2.55 derives the name of the priestesses from a prophetic dove, but does not suggest that there was ever any sort of dove-based divination taking place at Dodona. I tend to side with Easterling (*ad loc.*) in seeing these as actual (human) priestesses, but I also agree with Parke’s argument that Sophocles is deliberately vague here (Parke 1967:63), allowing the audience to imagine either priestesses or doves.

<sup>112</sup> Scholars have variously interpreted these markings as a will of some sort--Davies (*ad* 157-8) calls Pearson’s revival (1925) of Pretor’s idea of a will “unfortunate” and dismisses it, with T. von Wilamowitz--and the play thus far certainly does not preclude that interpretation. However, by the end of the play (1167 ff.), it becomes clear that Heracles himself has written some prophecies down—the far simpler interpretation of this passage understands the tablet to contain the prophecies about Heracles’ fate.

<sup>113</sup> Easterling (*ad* 157-8) tentatively follows Jebb on this on the archaizing effect: Jebb (*ad* 157 ff.) suggests that “[i]n later Greek συνηθήματα meant a preconcerted cipher: . . . There is possibly a touch of designed archaism in the poet’s phrase; he may have felt that it suited the heroic age to speak of writing as a mystery. This is more likely than that he thought of Heracles as using secret symbols.”



age to speak of writing as a mystery,”<sup>114</sup> but it particularly apt, beyond just the archaizing effect, since these inscriptions defy ready human interpretation.

In this second iteration of the oracle,<sup>115</sup> we are also given far more context about the oracle. It was delivered at Dodona, making it an oracle associated with Zeus instead of Apollo. More importantly, the phrasing of the oracle is modified:

ὥς ἢ τελευτήν τοῦ βίου μέλλει τελεῖν ἢ τοῦτον ἄρας ἄθλον εἰς τό γ' ὕστερον τὸν λοιπὸν ἤδη βίοτον εὐαίων' ἔχειν. (78-80)	τότ' ἢ θανεῖν χρεῖη σφε τῶδε τῶ χρόνῳ ἢ τοῦθ' ὑπεκδραμόντα τοῦ χρόνου τέλος τὸ λοιπὸν ἤδη ζῆν ἀλυπήτῳ βίῳ. (166-8)
That either he will achieve the completion of his life, or, having accomplished this labor, in the future he will have a happy life, for the rest of it.	it would be necessary either for him to die at that time or, if he escaped the end of his time, he would live in the future without pain.

In its second full iteration, the apparent meaning of the oracle is not substantively different; both versions reflect the seemingly disjunctive fate and both use etymologically connected words (τελευτή, τελέω, τέλος) to describe the possibility of death, together with descriptions of a future (τὸν λοιπὸν ἤδη) with a pleasant and painless life (βίοτον εὐαίων'; ἀλυπήτῳ βίῳ). Rather than noting the similarities, however, it is more illuminating to look at the differences between the two passages. While we are repeatedly reminded that the oracles are inscribed (and, therefore, have a fixed form) on a tablet, the wording of this oracle has changed significantly in the span of less than 100 lines.<sup>116</sup> Given the grave import of oracular prophecies, this shift is striking. Overall, her

<sup>114</sup> Cf. the description of writing in the story of Bellerophon (*Il.* 6.168-9): πόρεν δ' ὄγε σήματα λυγρὰ / γράψας ἐν πίνακι πτυκτῶ θυμοφθόρα πολλά.

<sup>115</sup> Dobree found lines 166-8 “frigid” and deleted them, arguing that “*hic ubi omnia pessima ominatur, inepta sunt ista 167-8, neque audivisse videtur Chorus 823-4*” (*ad loc.*). Nauck and Wecklein follow him in removing the lines. However, as I will explore here, this repetition does add significantly to the presentation of the oracle, and there is not sufficient evidence to delete these lines.

<sup>116</sup> Deianeira’s own literacy is a difficult and unresolved question and the import of having a written account of the oracle is diminished significantly if she is not in fact able to read it, but instead is only accessing the oracle from her memory of what Heracles explained to her. I will be operating under the assumption that she is literate, though it only changes but does not invalidate my argument if she is not. If we imagine an illiterate Deianeira (as would be common in antiquity, and even more common among women in a much earlier time, as the heroic age was imagined to be), her shifting pronouncements are less striking, since she is drawing on a less fixed account that she must recall from 15 months earlier, but her versions of the oracle are still accurate, in the end. As such, these need not be viewed as spurious or interpolated accounts—their legitimacy as oracles is corroborated by their eventual realization. Cole lays out the varying degrees of female literacy displayed in tragedy and argues (against Harvey 1966: 622) that Sophocles does not necessarily suggest an illiterate Deianeira. Deianeira, Cole argues, needs Heracles to explain the ξυσθήματα on the tablet because it is an oracle that is particularly difficult to understand—the ξυσθήματα are “the enigmatic expressions of the oracle . . . not the words of a text which she cannot read” (Cole 1981: 224-5). Dillon offers a broad look at the literary evidence for women’s literacy and concludes that both Sophocles and Euripides are interested in the question of elite female literacy, but that many of the depictions are inconclusive. Euripides’ Phaedra is certainly able to write in the *Hippolytus*, but Iphigenia needs someone else to write a letter for her (*IT* 582-7), and Clytemnestra’s literacy seems to vary. Dillon concludes, with Cole, that Deianeira seems to have read the tablet (Dillon 2014: 406ff).

second account of the prophecy has an increased vividness and pessimism. Instead of the vaguer, more euphemistic phrasing she used before (he is going to “achieve the completion of his life”), Deianeira here phrases the oracle in stronger terms—her earlier μέλλω has shifted to χρή, and it is necessary for him to die *at that time* (which, as we learn, is the current time). This shift in tone continues in the following line. If Heracles can *run out from under* (ὑπεκδραμόντα)<sup>117</sup> the end of his time, then he can experience a painless life. Previously, all that Heracles needed to do was αἶρειν the ἄθλον. Since Heracles’ defining heroic characteristic is his ability to win contests and trials, this should not have been a difficult thing for him to accomplish.<sup>118</sup> Yet the tone has shifted in a decidedly pessimistic direction between these two accounts of the oracle; the difficulty of avoiding death and the sureness of that death have both increased. This is significant because, if the underlying oracle has changed, and there is no reason to believe it has, any shift must then have been generated from Deianeira’s increasing concerns and pessimism about Heracles’ fate.

Viewed within the larger context, however, the shift in the oracle makes more sense. Of course, her own sense of foreboding, established at the start of the play, explains to some degree the increasingly pessimistic tone. As discussed above, however, the passage as a whole places a great deal of emphasis on time. Time is, of course, a motif that permeates this play,<sup>119</sup> but Deianeira herself focuses much more on time in this passage than she has before. The phrasing of the oracle exhibits this emphasis (τῶδε τῶ χρόνῳ, τοῦ χρόνου τέλος, τὸ λοιπὸν ἤδη), but the oracle’s wording and emphasis on time reflects Deianeira’s broader concerns. Beginning at line 155, Deianeira returns to time-related words over and over—ὁδὸν...τὴν τελευταίαν (155); παλαιὰν (157); πρόσθεν ... ποτέ (158); νῦν δ’ (161); χρόνον ... ὡς τρίμηνον ... κἀνιαύσιον (164-5); τὴν

<sup>117</sup> ὑπεκτρέχω does not occur often in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century texts, but when it does, it generally has a connotation of escaping an unfortunate fate, as it must here. In a Euripidean fragment (ὅμως δ’ ἀγῶνα τόνδε δεῖ μ’ ὑπεκδραμεῖν / ψυχὴν γὰρ ἄθλα κειμένην ἐμὴν ὄρῳ., frag. 88 Kannicht), it refers to escaping a trial. It also occurs in Euripides’ *Medea* in the sense of escaping a storm at sea (δεῖ μ’, ὡς ἔοικε, μὴ κακὸν φῦναι λέγειν, ἀλλ’ ὥστε ναὸς κεδνὸν οἰακοστρόφον ἄκροισι λαίφους κρασπέδοις ὑπεκδραμεῖν / σὴν στόμαργον, ὦ γύναι, γλωσσαλγίαν, 522-5), twice in his *Andromache*, both of escaping death (ἦν δ’ οὖν ἐγὼ μὲν μὴ θανεῖν ὑπεκδράμω, / τὸν παῖδά μου κτενεῖτε; 338-9; and ἦν δ’ ὑπεκδράμηις μόρον, / μέμνησο μητρός, οἷα τλᾶσ’ ἀπωλόμην, 414-5), and one in his *Phoenissae*, of escaping or outrunning the gods (ὡς δὲ θεοὺς ὑπεκδραμούμενοι, 873). The verb only occurs one other place in Sophocles, at *Antigone* 1085-6 (ἀφῆκα θυμῶ καρδίας τοξεύματα / βέβαια, τῶν σὺ θάλπος οὐχ ὑπεκδραμῆ), and Herodotus uses it once as well (ἄρρωδέων δὲ μὴ καὶ ὕστερον κοτὲ οἱ Λυδοί, ἦν τὸ παρεὸν ὑπεκδράμωσι, ἀποστάντες ἀπὸ τῶν Περσέων ἀπόλωνται, 1.156). In both of these two instances, it is used to describe escape from weapons/military attack. All these instances do seem to share a common theme of escaping a pursuing fate (death, arrows, a storm, etc.). We might translate this as something like “evade the approaching or oncoming disaster.”

<sup>118</sup> See Lu 2013 for more on this point.

<sup>119</sup> For detailed explanations of the role of time, see Easterling 3-5 and Segal 1995: 30-2 and 2000: 153.

παλαιὰν φηγὸν (171); ποτε (171); τοῦ νῦν παρόντος (174); τελεσθῆναι (174). Deianeira is obsessively focused on the issue of time because the decisive moment in Heracles' fate is at hand. Filtered through her own concern about time (and his time potentially running out), the change in the oracle's phrasing is understandable.

However, this second, different version presents a very real problem in the interpretation of the oracle. If its form can shift significantly in such a short span, how secure are any interpretations based on an oracle that is being paraphrased with questionable fidelity<sup>120</sup>? While this is an issue that potentially arises with any oracle, this particular oracle has not been transmitted by word of mouth. This oracle was inscribed on a tablet. Sophocles provides a set form for the oracle, though only the characters within the play have any access to the original. It is only through their perspective, then, that the audience can access the oracle, and this is important because it acknowledges and emphasizes the problems inherent in communication. The individual concerns, preoccupations, and perspective that each character naturally brings to the interpretation of this oracle shape the way that they understand it on a fundamental level. The process of interpretation—even of a common, fixed text—is fraught with unavoidable complications and I here adopt many of Heiden's suggestions about the impossibility of reaching any sort of objective knowledge. From the perspective of the audience, any real understanding about the specifics of the oracle is impossible and the best we could do is try to wade through the varied accounts and come up with some approximation of what the underlying oracle must have said.<sup>121</sup> Heiden's deconstructionist reading

---

<sup>120</sup> It is worth noting that all these versions could be seen as paraphrases, if we assume that any actual oracle would be in hexameters, and since none of our versions in the play are in hexameters, these are all paraphrases, and paraphrases are likely to change from iteration to iteration. The use of hexameters for oracular responses seems to be a purely literary convention, however—out of all the responses to inquiries at Dodona catalogued by Eidinow, none are in hexameter form (Eidinow 2007: 72-124). We should be cautious about assuming that the audience or Sophocles saw these non-hexameter forms as a clear paraphrase, since audience members might well be equally familiar with literary conventions as with actual oracular practices. Regardless, the characters in the play treat these versions of the oracle as true and accurate, and they perform close readings on the text, paraphrased or not. Sophocles chose *not* to have Deianeira (or anyone else in the play) cite a hexameter form. An analysis of this play should, I think, treat the multiple incarnations of the oracle at face value—particularly since all the different versions prove to be true in the end. Although this first shift in the form of the oracle is minor, we should still see the changes as significant, since Sophocles could easily have repeated the original form verbatim, but chose not to. As I have argued above, this choice points to the way that memory and emotional state relate to language transmission (since Deianeira's emotional state is coloring the oracle, and it takes a slightly more pessimistic tone as she grows anxious) and it also adds an additional formulation to an oracle that will take on many forms in this play—this first shift is subtle, but starts to establish this pattern, which later iterations of this oracle will develop further.

<sup>121</sup> This process, I note, nearly resembles the process of a textual critic working back from extant manuscripts to recreate the original text of an ancient author. An ancient audience of this play (and this is only exacerbated by the additional remove of time and textual transmission, for a modern audience) would only have the versions of the oracle that had been transmitted and filtered through the different characters in the play. In the case of the Chorus, whose knowledge comes from an unidentified source, we cannot even posit how many intermediaries might have shaped the

understands this *aporia* as an end in itself, however, and does not look for any sort of positive conclusions in the midst of a sea of elusive language. I share his convictions that trying to excavate the content of the underlying oracle is an exercise in futility, but it is precisely this ambiguous and elusive nature of the oracle—and of the varied interpretations of it—that provides fertile ground for deeper analysis. The precise content of the oracle is not particularly important. It is only in the juxtaposition of all these different accounts that a coherent picture of how communication functions can (and does) emerge.

### 821-830: The Chorus' account

821	ἴδ' οἶον, ὧ παῖδες, προσέμειξεν ἄφαρ τοῦπος τὸ θεοπρόπον ἡμῖν τᾶς παλαιφάτου προνοίας, ὅ τ' ἔλακεν, ὅποτε τελεόμηνος ἐκφέρωι	Look, girls, how suddenly the prophetic word with its ancient foresight has come upon us:
825	δωδέκατος ἄροτος, ἀναδοχὰν τελεῖν πόνων τῷ Διὸς αὐτόπαιδι· καὶ τὰδ' ὀρθῶς ἔμπεδα κατουρίζει. πῶς γὰρ ἂν ὁ μὴ λεύσσων ἔτι ποτ' ἔτ' ἐπίπνονον πόνων	When the twelfth plowing [i.e., year], with all its months, should come to a close, it would bring the series of toils to an end for the son of Zeus himself. And these things are truly coming to unfailing fulfillment.
830	ἔχοι θανῶν λατρείαν;	For how could one who no longer looks upon the light of day possibly still experience the painful servitude of toils, after he is dead?
821-30		

This passage provides the first version of the oracle that does not come from Deianeira. As such, this is our first external point of reference for this prophecy since, as noted above, Deianeira's account is inconsistent and very likely distorted by her own mental state. It is striking, though, just how different a form the oracle takes here from what Deianeira has described previously. The Chorus recognizes that the oracle has now come to completion, at what seems to be the proper time for its fulfillment, but they date this moment by a very different standard. The version of the oracle that they know established a time period of twelve years (ὅποτε τελεόμηνος ἐκφέρωι / δωδέκατος ἄροτος).<sup>122</sup> Critically, the oracle (τοῦπος τὸ θεοπρόπον) with which they are familiar did not lay out two different potential outcomes for Heracles. Rather, as recounted here, it

---

oracle's words before it reached them. More significant, however, are the respective mental states and concerns and desired outcomes of each of the characters and the influence these have on their interpretive processes. This web of influences and interpretive bias present an ineluctable mess from which an underlying oracular utterance simply cannot be extracted.

<sup>122</sup> LSJ suggest that the phrase τελεόμηνος ἄροτος means “a full twelvemonth,” following a scholiast who glosses τελεόμημος as ὁ ἐνιαυτὸς ὁ τέλειον ἔχων τὸ δωδεκάμηνον· καὶ ἄροτος ὁ ἐνιαυτὸς ἀπὸ τοῦ ἄπαξ κατ' ἐνιαυτὸν ἀροῦν. While twelve years presents some interpretive difficulty, one year is harder to reconcile with the rest of the play and—as Easterling notes (*ad* 825-5)—“there are no close parallels for such transference with numerals.”

foretold that Heracles would end his series of labors (ἀναδοχὰν τελεῖν πόνων) after twelve years. The Chorus correctly interprets that someone who has died cannot be a slave to labors any longer.

Much ink has been spilled over the time discrepancy (fifteen months versus twelve years),<sup>123</sup> but there is no clear reason why these cannot make sense. These two different time periods are entirely compatible if—as both Kamerbeek and Easterling suggest—the original oracle was given twelve years ago.<sup>124</sup> As Kamerbeek notes (*ad* 824, 5), “It is only logical that, if there was an oracle referring to the end of his labors, the term was reckoned from their beginning.” Reconciling the two accounts merely requires acknowledging that Heracles adjusted the time, providing only the amount of time left of the original twelve-year span—fifteen months—when recounting the oracle to Deianeira.

The more relevant question to the present discussion is how the Chorus knows what they know.<sup>125</sup> Their choice to date the oracle from when it was first given would seem to indicate that they are familiar with the oracle from before the moment when Deianeira describes it, if not from the time when it was given. There is no clear reason why this would be the case—as women from Trachis, it seems implausible that they would have some sort of special access to an oracle from Dodona. Although Easterling may be correct in suggesting that this oracle was common enough knowledge that the *audience* would already know its source,<sup>126</sup> within the context of the play itself

---

<sup>123</sup> More troubling, to my mind, is the Chorus’ mention at 646-7 that Heracles has been gone for a year. T. von Wilamowitz (1917: 130) has pointed out, however, that a year of service followed by three months attacking Oechalia add up to the fifteen months mentioned here: *Die Frist von fünfzehn Monaten ist natürlich erst von ihm ausgerechnet, indem er zu dem Jahre der Knechtschaft in Lydien drei Monate für den Feldzug gegen Oichalia zufügte, wie denn überhaupt die Hinterlassung des Orakels bei Deianeira und ihre Motivierung mit der Hinterlassung des Testamentes eine Erfindung des Sophokles sein wird.* For additional information on this, see also Kranz 1921. Easterling suggests that the looseness is natural, because Heracles’ year in Lydia has been prominently mentioned at 69-70 and 253 (if 253 is genuine, though I feel confident it is—Wunder’s arguments against them are not convincing, and both Easterling and Davies print 252-3). I am not bothered by Heiden’s objections (1989: 48-9) to this reckoning of time, on the grounds that Deianeira may well have miscalculated the time that has passed and—if an intercalary month is factored in, as it often was in ancient Greece—the elapsed time will in fact be 16 months. A potential (though not necessarily real) mathematical error of this sort does not seem like solid grounds on which to doubt that the prophecy’s moment of fulfillment is at hand.

<sup>124</sup> Apollodorus (2.4.12) provides an account of this myth in which the labors are fated to take twelve years. Both Kamerbeek and Easterling point to this passage as potential corroboration for the idea that twelve labors in twelve months was part of a familiar myth about Heracles. The account in Apollodorus is complicated, however, in that it recounts a Pythian oracle that only mentions ten labors in twelve years before eventually going on to describe 12 labors: κατοικεῖν δὲ αὐτὸν εἶπεν ἐν Τίρυνθι, Εὐρυσθεὶ λατρεύοντα ἔτη δώδεκα, καὶ τοὺς ἐπιτασσομένους ἄθλους δέκα ἐπιτελεῖν, καὶ οὕτως ἔφη, τῶν ἄθλων συντελεσθέντων, ἀθάνατον αὐτὸν ἔσεσθαι.

<sup>125</sup> Davis (*ad* 825) finds the Chorus’ “sudden and unexpected knowledge” about this oracle to be “logically indefensible” but “dramatically necessary.”

<sup>126</sup> Machin 1980: 153-4 takes up this oft-lamented issue in somewhat more detail, tracing the attempts to make sense of the Chorus’ unexpected knowledge about the oracle back through the line of interpretation begun by T. von Wilamowitz 1917. Machin takes particular aim at Jebb, who suggests that “[t]he answer is simply that this inconsistency

this explanation is dramatically unsatisfying. Deianeira was clearly not aware of the oracle until Heracles told her about it and its realization has caused her a great deal of anxiety. We cannot assume that the oracle is common knowledge within the play itself, particularly when there is so strong a focus on how and when Deianeira comes to learn about the oracle. The source of knowledge and the process of gaining understanding are major themes within this play and the Chorus' sudden knowledge cannot easily be explained. I side with Machin 1980, however, in interpreting this as an intentional choice by Sophocles, and not an oversight, though I am nonetheless unable to provide a compelling or satisfying answer to how they came by their knowledge,<sup>127</sup> beyond noting that the abrupt introduction of the Chorus' version of the oracle only further highlights the issue of the sources and veracity of knowledge within this play.

If we grant, however, that the Chorus does have some knowledge of the oracle, it is important to note that this version of the oracle has a significantly different formulation than the previous versions—a formulation that is importantly not influenced by Deianeira's mental state. There are not two options in this account of the oracle. Instead, the oracle foretold an end to toils after twelve years. The Chorus solves the quasi-riddle by realizing that the “end of toils” is in fact death, because no one can experience a “servitude of toils” once they are dead. Suddenly, the oracles related by Deianeira also snap into focus, since the same interpretive move that the Chorus has just made will also resolve her disjunctive version of the oracle—peace and death are, we find, one and the same.<sup>128</sup>

---

of detail was simply overlooked by the poet” (1908: 123) and Kirkwood, who revisits Jebb's arguments and modifies them: “it may be more accurate to say that the poet counted on his audience to overlook the inconsistency, while he went ahead and used whatever parts of the oracle suited his purpose at various points in the play” (1958: 79), but generally agrees with Jebb's understanding of the oracle and how Sophocles uses it throughout the play. This is essentially the same approach that Easterling adopts, though Machin raises important objections to this explanation and (rightly, I think) concludes that Sophocles includes these elements in a much more intentional way and is not solely concerned with individual scenes at the expense of the overall continuity of the plot. As Segal aptly notes, “we need not accept his [T. von Wilamowitz'] view that Sophocles is willing to purchase an immediate dramatic effect in an individual scene at the price of inconsistencies and contradictions in the details of his plot” (2000: 155-6).

<sup>127</sup> Heiden 1989: 120 is unconcerned with the presumptive source of this knowledge, since it is “verified, or at least rendered credible, by its correspondence with Heracles' account.” Presumably, they must have come to this knowledge by some means that bypassed Deianeira's version, since their account bears no trace of her disjunctive understanding of the prophecy—though, her disjunctive incarnation might be a recent interpretive move, colored by her recent fear. In the end, how they learned of the prophecy is not crucial, since it too is fulfilled and is validated in that way, even if we cannot identify a clear source for the oracle.

<sup>128</sup> This solution should come as no surprise to a Greek audience, since it echoes traditional sentiments like “the best thing is never to have been born, and the next best thing is to die soon” (a sentiment common in pessimistic Greek though, but found in perhaps its most famous form at *OT* 1224-7: μή φῦναι τὸν ἅπαντα νι- / κᾶ λόγον· τὸ δ', ἐπεὶ φανῆ, / βῆναι κείθεν ὄθεν περ ἧ- / κει πολὺ δεύτερον ὡς τᾶχιστα).

### 568-577: Nessus' dying words

570	<p>ἐκθνήσκων δ' ὁ θῆρ  τοσοῦτον εἶπε· παῖ γέροντος Οἰνέως,  τοσόνδ' ὀνήση τῶν ἐμῶν, ἐὰν πίθη,  πορθμῶν, ὀθούνεχ' ὑστάτην σ' ἔπεμψ' ἐγώ·  ἐὰν γὰρ ἀμφίθρεπτον αἶμα τῶν ἐμῶν  σφαγῶν ἐνέγκῃ χερσίν, ἧ μελαγχόλους  ἔβαψεν ἰοὺς θρέμμα Λερναίας ὕδρας,  ἔσται φρενός σοι τοῦτο κλητήριον  τῆς Ἡρακλείας, ὥστε μήτιν' εἰσιδῶν  στέρξει γυναῖκα κείνος ἀντὶ σοῦ πλέον.</p>	<p>The beast, as it was dying, told me this much:  “Child of old Oeneus, you will profit to this extent  from my ferrying, if you obey me, since you were my  final passenger. If you collect in your hands the  clotted blood from my wound, where the offspring  of the Lernaian Hydra dyed the arrows with black  bile, you will have a charm for the mind of  Heracles, so that he will never look at another  woman and love her more than you.”</p>
568-77		

Before moving to the final iteration of Zeus' oracle at Dodona, it is worth backtracking briefly to look at another statement about the future which occurs in this play—the dying words of Nessus, the centaur. Faced with Heracles' affection for Iole, Deianeira recalls the ancient gift (παλαιὸν δῶρον, 555) that will be her means of remedying the situation (λυτήριον λύπημα, 554). We should, as Heiden cautions,<sup>129</sup> be very skeptical about this particular phrase—the text as transmitted in the manuscripts<sup>130</sup> gives a reading that is both unusual and loaded. Nonetheless, an unusual reading is not reason enough to emend the text and λυτήριον λύπημα recalls language from elsewhere in the play. In lines 21 and 181, words with a λυ- root (forms of ἐκλύω and λύω, respectively) have both been used of questionable releases relating to Heracles. The nature of this λυτήριον λύπημα is extremely ambiguous and also belies an imprecise understanding of the philter itself on Deianeira's part—an ambiguity echoed in the later use of φάρμακον (at line 685) to describe the same blood.

<sup>129</sup> All of what follows here borrows heavily from Heiden 1989: 85-92 and his interpretations of λυτήριος (and words in the λυ- root) as well as φάρμακον. I do not endorse all Heiden's arguments on this point—some of the layers of ambiguity that he teases out of this passage (lines 552-581) seem somewhat forced, but I am grateful for the nuanced analysis that I here borrow.

<sup>130</sup> This phrase is particularly difficult and there have been numerous attempts to emend away these difficulties in some fashion. Whereas Heiden titles an entire chapter from this passage (“A Pain that Cures,” 1989: 81ff.) and embraces the difficult ambiguity it presents, Campbell, Dawe 1979, and Easterling 1982 all dagger λύπημα. Davies defends the manuscript reading and remains unconvinced at the numerous attempts to emend the difficult reading: κήλημα (Hermann); τέχνημα (Blaydes, *prob.* T. von Wilamowitz); νόημα (Campbell); λώφημα (Jebb). Davies, following Lloyd-Jones (*Sophoclea*, p. 162), does not find the manuscript to be in need of emendation and cites parallels such as Aeschylus' ἄκος τομαῖον (*Cho.* 539) to support the passage as referring to a remedy that is “naturally painful but can also be conceived as bringing relief” (Davies *ad* 554). For my purposes, the λυτήριον is the more important element—whatever else this gift is, she views it as a means of deliverance.

In this scene, Nessus' dying words to Deianeira function somewhat like an oracle, in that he describes future events, though his legitimacy as a source of prophecy is certainly dubious.<sup>131</sup> Although he does not have access to the sort of oracular authority bestowed by Dodona or Delphi, dying words are powerful and often prophetic.<sup>132</sup> It will be useful to think of his words as a prophecy of sorts, if not on par with proper oracles, because they present another measure of Deianeira's ability to interpret such language, as well as the way that language can mislead regardless of the form it takes. Like the oracle of Zeus, the critical element of Nessus' prophecy will prove true, but not in the way that Deianeira assumes. Still, it is striking that a malicious centaur's words prove true at all, given that he could easily lie (by which I mean say something that is completely false). By making Nessus' words misleading but ultimately accurate, Sophocles effectively makes Nessus into a cipher for decoding Zeus' oracles; the overt similarities between Zeus' and Nessus' words invite us to read these passages against one another and the differences between them illuminate some important linguistic features of Zeus' oracles.

It is worth noting, however, that much of this speech by Nessus can only be salvaged by somewhat tenuous interpretations of his words. For example, Nessus' words begin with a dangerously imprecise instruction: "If you collect in your hands the clotted blood from my wound..." (ἐὰν γὰρ ἀμφίθρεπτον αἶμα τῶν ἐμῶν / σφαγῶν ἐνέγκῃ χερσίν, 572-3). Taken literally, these instructions would presumably kill Deianeira. Additionally, it is unusual to describe Deianeira receiving Nessus' blood with the verb ὀνίνημι, or to call it a φρενός . . . κλητήριον—it is strange indeed to call Heracles' death a "profit" to Deianeira, though many commentators have raised no objections here,<sup>133</sup> and the poison's effect might potentially be called a κλητήριον,

<sup>131</sup> See Bowman 1999 on prophecy and authority in the *Trachiniae* and the reasons why Nessus' authority and legitimacy as a source of prophecy is very suspect. See also Bushnell 1988 on oracular authority more generally, especially 19, 22-5.

<sup>132</sup> Janko outlines the prophetic powers that people often obtain when they near death in his *Iliad* commentary (*ad* 16.852-4), citing Xenophon (*Cyr.* 8.7.21), Plato (*Apol.* 39C and *Phaedo* 84E), Aristotle (*frag.* 10), Aeschylus (*Ag.* 1444ff.), among others. There are also hints of this idea underlying Heracles' words at the end of the play: ὦς τελευταίαν ἐμοῦ / φήμην πύθησθε θεσφάτων ὅσ' οἶδ' ἐγώ (1149-50).

<sup>133</sup> Jebb, Easterling, and Davies are all silent on these passages. Kamerbeek simply notes that "the 'profit' may turn out an injury" (*ad* 570, 1), which is clearly true in this situation, but in all Sophocles' other uses of ὀνίνημι (*OT* 644) or ὀνησις (*Ant.* 616; *OC* 288, 452; *Aj.* 400; *Elec.* 1061), it refers unambiguously to an actual benefit. We might compare ἀπολαύω's different uses here, since ἀπολαύω can mean to benefit or enjoy something but it can also be used in an ironic sense, as at Eur. *Phoen.* 1204-5 (Jocasta, talking about Creon losing his son: Κρέων δ' ἔοικε τῶν ἐμῶν νυμφευμάτων / τῶν τ' Οἰδίπου δύστηνος ἀπολαύσαι κακῶν) and *IT* 526 (Orestes speaking about Helen: ἀπέλαυσα κάγῳ δὴ τι τῶν κείνης γάμων). ὀνίνημι has a similar semantic range and though there are not many parallels for this sort of usage, ἀπολαύω provides a useful comparandum. See also *II.1.410*, in which the "benefit" described with ἐπαυρέω is not a benefit at all, but rather the negative consequences of Agamemnon insulting Achilles (ἴνα πάντες ἐπαύρωνται βασιλῆος).



though its locus of attack is not limited to his φρήν.<sup>134</sup> The oblique formulation of his final lines allows this part of his speech to be cryptically true (although Nessus does not seem to be similarly concerned with the validity of the rest of his speech, a point which I will revisit at the end of the chapter). At this point in the events of the play, however, none of the characters recognize the seemingly obvious cause for suspicion (i.e., Nessus is unlikely to want to help the people responsible for his death) and both Deianeira and the Chorus blindly believe in Nessus' sincerity and the efficacy of this philter to re-inflame Heracles' love for Deianeira.<sup>135</sup>

Nessus' words—unlike the prophecy from Dodona, which was literally inscribed onto a tablet (δέλτον έγγεγραμμένην, 157)—is fixed in her mind *as though* it were written on a bronze tablet (χαλκῆς ὅπως δύσνιπτον ἐκ δέλτου γραφήν, 863). The verbal echo is striking, since both descriptions imply a fixed permanence for the words, and yet at least the oracle from Dodona—the one that was *literally* written down and unchangeable—has appeared in three different forms thus far in the play.

Similarly, in fact, this final utterance is also flexible and, despite being fixed in her mind, it appears in two different versions:

<p>ἐκθνήσκων δ' ὁ θῆρ  τοσοῦτον εἶπε· παῖ γέροντος Οἰνέως,  τοσόδ' ὀνήση τῶν ἐμῶν, ἐάν πίθη,  πορθμῶν, ὀθούνεχ' ὑστάτην σ' ἔπεμψ' ἐγώ·  ἐάν γάρ ἀμφίθρεπτον αἶμα τῶν ἐμῶν  σφαγῶν ἐνέγκῃ χερσίν, ἧ μελαγχόλους  ἔβαψεν ἰοῦς θρέμμα Λερναίας ὕδρας,  ἔσται φρενός σοι τοῦτο κλητηρίον  τῆς Ἡρακλείας, ὥστε μήτιν' εἰσιδῶν</p>	<p>ἐγὼ γὰρ ὦν ὁ θῆρ με Κένταυρος, πονῶν  πλευράν πικρᾶ γλωχίνι, προῦδιδάξατο  παρήκα θεσμῶν οὐδέν, ἀλλ' ἐσωζόμην  χαλκῆς ὅπως δύσνιπτον ἐκ δέλτου γραφήν.  καί μοι τάδ' ἦν πρόρρητα καὶ τοιαῦτ' ἔδρων·  τὸ φάρμακον τοῦτ' ἄπυρον ἀκτίνος τ' αἰεὶ  θερμῆς ἄθικτον ἐν μυχοῖς σῶζειν ἐμέ,  ἕως νιν ἀρτίχριστον ἀρμόσαιμί που.  κᾶδρων τοιαῦτα.</p>
--	---

<sup>134</sup> Sullivan 1999 looks in detail at the use of psychological and related terminology in Sophocles. Chapters 2 and 3 address the φρήν, both in Sophocles and in contemporary use. Sullivan notes that φρήν is the most common of the “psychic terms” that Sophocles uses (Sophocles follows Aeschylus in this). Aeschylus occasionally uses *phrenes* to refer to a physical part of the body (*Ag.* 997, *Choe.* 831, *Eum.* 158), though this is much rarer in Sophocles and only occurs once (*Trach.* 931) with a clearly physical meaning, rather than a psychological meaning (either intellectual or emotional) (Sullivan 1999: 13, 43-59). However, Heracles is suffering both in body and mind, and he describes physical pain (ἀλλήκτοις ὀδύνας, 985-6; πλευραῖσι γὰρ προσμαχθὲν ἐκ μὲν ἐσχάτας / βέβρωκε σάρκας, πλεύμονός τ' ἀρτηρίας / ῥοφεῖ ξυνοικοῦν, ἐκ δὲ χλωρὸν αἶμά μου / πέπωκεν ἤδη, καὶ διέφθαρμαι δέμας / τὸ πᾶν, ἀφράστῳ τῆδε χειρωθεῖς πέδη., 1053-7), but much of Heracles' lament describes suffering (which could apply equally to body and mind, as δύσμορον and ἀπολεῖς μ'), illness (ἐπὶ τῶδε νοσοῦντι, 113) as well as regret (993-1003) and betrayal (1010-1016).

<sup>135</sup> Heiden 1989:87-8 takes a detailed look at what effects Deianeira and the Chorus anticipate that the blood will have—Deianeira seems unsure whether it will diminish Heracles' love for Iole or increase his love for Deianeira, as hinted by her use of πῶς at line 584, in describing her hoped-for success with the philter (φίλτροις δ' ἐάν πῶς τήνδ' ὑπερβαλώμεθα / τὴν παῖδα καὶ θέλκτροισι τοῖς ἐφ' Ἡρακλεῖ, 584-5). If Mudge's emendation is correct (πανίμερος for πανάμερος to describe Heracles at 660), the Chorus seems to anticipate that it will increase Heracles' desire for Deianeira as well. When Hyllus recounts these events, he says that Deianeira intended to apply a στέργημα (1138) that Nessus had persuaded her would inflame his desire for her (Νέσσοσ πάλαι Κένταυρος ἐξέπεισέ νιν / τοῖῶδε φίλτρῳ τὸν σὸν ἐκμῆναι πόθον, 1141-2).

στέρξει γυναίκα κείνος ἀντὶ σοῦ πλέον. 568-77	680-8
The beast, as it was dying, told me this much: “Child of old Oeneus, you will profit to this extent, if you obey me, since you were my final passenger. If you collect in your hands the clotted blood from my wound, where the offspring of the Lernaian Hydra dyed the arrows with black bile, you will have a charm for the mind of Heracles, so that he will never look at another woman and love her more than you.”	The beast, the centaur, instructed me as he was suffering from the harsh barb in his flank. And I neglected none of those things, but I kept them safe, as though they were written on a bronze tablet that cannot be wiped clean. These were his <i>prorrheta</i> <sup>136</sup> to me, and I did these things: to protect that drug, away from the fire and always out of reach of the sun’s warm rays, in a hidden place, until such time as when I should prepare it, freshly-spread. And I did these things.

Deianeira first quotes the centaur in *oratio recta* and gives the impression, at least, that she is recounting his dying words verbatim. Approximately 100 lines later, when she revisits this same moment, she includes a great deal more information than she had before. Davies (*ad* 686ff.) suggests that “these significant details were not mentioned in D’s initial account of Nessus’ remarks (569ff.). They are kept back until their significance is dramatically crucial.”

The details were omitted from the initial account, but it does a disservice to Sophocles to suggest that his inclusion of these details at a later point in the play is merely a means to heighten the tension with a dramatic revelation. Rather, by delaying this information, Sophocles provides a nuanced characterization of Deianeira as she returns to the same story, but tells it through a different lens, since she has since seen the remnants of the wool she used to apply the philter, and she now suggests, in her second account, that her earlier actions may have been a mistake.<sup>137</sup> We can see then that she has rethought her actions and is starting to struggle with this new piece of information, and the second account she provides has changed in psychologically plausible ways. Her characterization here not only demonstrates how language and meaning can shift and flow, based on context, but it also creates a situation that more nearly mirrors the interpretive issues with Zeus’ oracle. Immediately after Deianeira’s second account of Nessus’ instructions (680ff.), she offers a new, corrected interpretation of the entire interaction. *After the fact* (μεθύστερον, 710), she can see clearly what she had the tools to see all along: she has done a terrible deed (ἔργον δεινόν, 706). Nessus had no reason to help her, since he was dying because of her (ἦς ἔθνησχ’

<sup>136</sup> I will revisit this word in greater detail and justify my preferred interpretation of it—not, as LSJ suggest, as “proclaimed, commanded,” but instead as “prophetic.” For the time being, I leave it untranslated, so as not to bias any interpretations of this passage.

<sup>137</sup> 666-7, 669-70: I do not know, but I am afraid that I will soon be shown to have done a great evil, out of the hope of doing good...Absolutely, so that I would never advise anyone to zealously undertake a task which is unclear to them (οὐκ οἶδ’· ἄθυμῶ δ’ εἰ φανήσομαι τάχα /κακὸν μέγ’ ἐκπράσας’ ἀπ’ ἐλπίδος καλῆς...μάλιστά γ’ ὥστε μήποτ’ ἂν προθυμίαν / ἄδηλον ἔργου τῷ παραινέσει λαβεῖν).

ὑπερ, 708); his justification for why he would help her (since she was his last ferrying passenger, 571) was always a flimsy pretext, but it is only after Deianeira has followed his instructions that she can see any of this.<sup>138</sup>

From a purely psychological perspective, it is not surprising that her words have changed. Just as her account of the oracle of Zeus changes in a way that reflects her heightened alarm and anxiety about Heracles' safety, intervening events have given her reason to be far more alarmed and skeptical about the efficacy of the potion. In fact, in her exchanges with the Chorus (before and after the passage from which her speech above is excerpted), Deianeira's fear is repeated in many different forms:

<p>Δη: γυναῖκες, ὡς δέδοικα μὴ περαιτέρω πεπραγμέν' ἢ μοι πάνθ' ὅσ' ἀρτίως ἔδρω.          Χο: τί δ' ἔστι, Δηάνειρα, τέκνον Οἰνέως;          Δη: οὐκ οἶδ' ἄθυμῶ δ', εἰ φανήσομαι τάχα κακὸν μέγ' ἐκπράξασ' ἀπ' ἐλπίδος καλῆς.          Χο: οὐ δὴ τι τῶν σῶν Ἡρακλεῖ δωρημάτων;          Δη: μάλιστα γ', ὥστε μήποτ' ἂν προθυμίαν ἄδηλον ἔργου τῶ παραινέσαι λαβεῖν.          Χο: διδάξον, εἰ διδακτόν, ἐξ ὅτου φοβεῖ.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">663-671</p>	<p>Dei: Women, how I fear that I have gone too far in the things which I have just done.          Cho: What is it, Deianeira, child of Oeneus?          Dei: I do not know. I am despondent that I will soon be shown—from my noble intentions—to have brought about a terrible evil.          Cho: You don't mean your gift to Heracles?          Dei: Yes . . . I would never advise anyone to take eager action when the situation is uncertain.          Cho: Explain, if it can be explained, the source of your fear.</p>
<p>Χο: ταρβεῖν μὲν ἔργα δειν' ἀναγκαίως ἔχει, τὴν δ' ἐλπίδ' οὐ χρὴ τῆς τύχης κρίνειν πάρος.          Δη: οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν τοῖς μὴ καλοῖς βουλευμασιν οὐδ' ἐλπίς, ἣτις καὶ θράσος τι προξενεῖ.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">723-6</p>	<p>Cho: <b>Fear</b>, yes, is necessary about terrible deeds, but you must not condemn hope before you know the outcome.          Dei: There is not—in the midst of bad decisions—any hope. Or at least not hope which provides any sort of confidence.</p>

So, psychologically, the shift here makes perfect sense. Now that Deianeira has a concrete reason to question the safety of the philter, her account of it changes as a result of her own apprehension. The emphasis has shifted from a narrative, verbatim account of Nessus' words to a paraphrase (in *oratio obliqua*) that focuses on how faithfully Deianeira followed the instructions she was given (παρῆκα θεσμῶν οὐδέν, 682) and how permanently and accurately she recalled them (ἀλλ' ἐσωζόμην / χαλκῆς ὅπως δύσνιπτον ἐκ δέλτου γραφήν, 682-3)—the juxtaposition here is

<sup>138</sup> As a result of a conversation with Ruth Scodel, I am more sympathetic to Deianeira's mental processes here. While it is easy for an external audience to recognize that Nessus was not trustworthy, Deianeira's account of his death does not suggest that she feels personal guilt about her role in his death, and it seems plausible that she does not think that she is responsible for his death. More importantly, Nessus dies while being sexually excited (about Deianeira) and Heracles kills him to protect Deianeira, motivated by his own sexual attraction. It would not be surprising for the result of a sexual conflict to have romantic or erotic powers, and Deianeira is not entirely naive to think that this philter might have the powers Nessus suggests. Since the philter was the result of Heracles defeating a romantic rival, Deianeira might well suspect that (via sympathetic magic) it could help her defeat a romantic rival (Iole). This reading also adds an ironic note to Heracles' death, since Nessus dies because he was unable to control his sexual appetite, and Heracles will ultimately die for the same reason, even if Deianeira does not intend for that to be the case.

particularly striking since she previously gave a verbatim account recently. As she begins to go back over the steps she has taken, now that she has seen the wool ominously disintegrate in the sunlight, her phrasing changes subtly to reflect how she is both retroactively seeking to justify her actions and also acutely aware of the mistakes she has made. If we are to accept line 684 (as I think we ought<sup>139</sup>), Deianeira prefaces her second account of Nessus' instructions by reminding the Chorus that she had been given instructions and she was simply carrying them out (τοιαῦτ' ἔδρων, 684). On the one hand, this phrasing deflects blame from Deianeira herself for the outcome—after all, she was only carrying out what Nessus had instructed her to do, long ago (προῦδιδάξατο, 681). However, as opposed to the previous account of Nessus' death, this version includes mention of the pain that Nessus was in (πονῶν / πλευρὰν πικρᾶ γλωχίῃ, 680-1), hinting that perhaps Deianeira has now—in retrospect—finally recognized that Nessus, while dying from Heracles' poisoned arrow, might not have the best intentions toward her or Heracles. As Heiden notes on this passage, “[t]he dissolution of the wool merely reminds her of what she already knows that could lead her to expect that the drug might be harmful” (1989: 105). As Deianeira goes on to call it a φάρμακον (685),<sup>140</sup> rather than the φίλτρον (584) and θέλκτρον (585), even her terminology has shaded toward the ambiguous and dangerous. She, as she now sees, has been enchanted (ἔθειλέ μ', 710), rather than enchanting Heracles, and though she did everything that she was told to do (καὶ τοιαῦτ' ἔδρων . . . κᾶδρων τοιαῦτα, chiasmatically framing her account at 684 and 688), Deianeira is overwhelmed by fear about what she has done, as she reexamines the events that have just played out with far clearer hindsight—the late learning that is the hallmark of this play.

Before turning to Heracles' own account of the oracle, however, we should note how Nessus' words echo elements of the oracle recounted by both the Chorus and (as we shall see shortly) the oracle recounted by Heracles. In the critical, quasi-oracular part of his speech, Nessus promises Deianeira that the blood from his wound, poisoned by the Hydra's blood, will ensure that Heracles will never look at another woman and love her more than Deianeira (ὥστε μήτιν' εἰσιδῶν / στέρξει γυναῖκα κείνος ἀντὶ σοῦ πλέον, 576-7). What Nessus understands but

<sup>139</sup> Line 684 is deleted by Wunder on the grounds that it is repetitive. Davies suggests that the interpolation—if it is an interpolation, which he cautiously determines it to be—is likely due to an attempt to provide a clear construction to govern the infinitive σφῆεν at 686 (which is properly governed by the more distant προῦδιδάξατο at 681. Jebb and Lloyd-Jones have defended its inclusion on stylistic grounds, however, and noted that it denotes urgency and a repetitive emphasis on the detailed steps of a ritual (offering *El* 288 as a parallel). I find it stylistically appropriate (for reasons I discuss below) and without a more compelling reason for deletion, I think that it is worth inclusion here.

<sup>140</sup> See Derrida 1981 and DuBois 1982: 100 for more on the ambiguity inherent in φάρμακον.

Deianeira does not is that the reason that Heracles will never love another woman more than Deianeira once she applies this philter is that Heracles will be dead (and, as a dead man, is incapable of loving anyone to any degree at all).

Nessus' words here have a great deal in common with the Chorus' account of Zeus' oracle, in terms of its formulation and potential for misinterpretation. Unlike the oracles that Deianeira describes, which seem to have two explicit alternatives, the Chorus' account of the oracle (821-30) is more of a riddle. Here too, Nessus presents Deianeira with a prediction about the future that is almost a riddle, in that the language is cryptic and has a hidden "solution," though Deianeira does not realize that she has been presented with anything that needs solving.<sup>141</sup> Though she later realizes why she ought to have been more suspicious of Nessus' intentions, she initially misunderstood the terms of their conversation and assumed that their conversation was cooperative, whereas Nessus is not interested in conveying any information accurately.

In terms of Gricean Maxims, we can see how Deianeira's actions stem from a misapplication of Grice's Maxim of Quality and Manner, replicated here (relevant submaxims in bold):

QUALITY: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

1. **Do not say what you believe to be false.**
2. Do not say that for which you lack evidence.

MANNER: Be perspicuous.

1. **Avoid obscurity of expression.**
2. **Avoid ambiguity.**
3. Be brief. (Avoid unnecessary prolixity.)
4. Be orderly.

Because Nessus does not actually want to convey the truth, he does not follow these maxims, and he tells what is in effect a lie (though his words are carefully crafted so that they are misleading, but they are also technically accurate, once properly understood) and intentionally introduces obscurity and ambiguity into his utterance. In effect, he is engaged in an *uncooperative* conversation and is

---

<sup>141</sup> From the audience's perspective, this riddle also foreshadows Heracles' death, since the "answer" to Nessus' riddling words is the death of Heracles, and at the moment of his death, Nessus' words are fulfilled, just as the oracle at Dodona is also fulfilled by the death of Heracles.

not aiming at any sort of mutual understanding, but his words can have their intended effect precisely because Deianeira mistakes this for a cooperative conversation.

Because she is tragically unaware of Nessus' malicious intent, she approaches his words as though they accord with these underlying maxims. If he *had been* aiming at shared comprehension, Deianeira's interpretation would be right. Nessus would not lie and would presumably have avoided such ambiguous language, and Deianeira would have been correct to infer the most natural meaning from his words. The critical misunderstanding that will lead to Heracles' death is a clear feature of Deianeira misunderstanding the terms of their conversation and applying tools and approaches to Nessus' words that are not appropriate. Because of his malicious intent, the rules of cooperative conversation do not apply and Deianeira ought to have adjusted the way she approached his words. This critical moment will be a useful lens through which to approach Heracles' own misinterpretation of the oracle from Dodona.

### 1159-1173: Heracles' prophecies and interpretations

In this fifth and final iteration of the central prophecy of the play, the different prophecies collide with one another. Zeus, we learn, told Heracles that he would not die at the hands of anyone living:

ἐμοὶ γὰρ ἦν πρόφαντον ἐκ πατρὸς πάλαι,  
πρὸς τῶν πνεόντων μηδενὸς θανεῖν ποτε,  
ἀλλ' ὅστις Ἄιδου φθίμενος οἰκῆτωρ πέλοι.  
For there was, of old, a prophecy for me, from my father  
That I would never die by the hand of anyone living  
But someone who was already dead, an inhabitant of Hades (1159-61).

This prophecy has not been mentioned before, and as will become clear in a few lines, this is an older prophecy that seems to predate the prophecy given to Heracles at Dodona. Just as the Chorus did at 821ff., Heracles provides the “answer” to this riddle—the dead centaur killed Heracles, fulfilling what was divinely foretold (ὡς τὸ θεῖον ἦν / πρόφαντον, 1162-3). In the same moment, Nessus' dying promise is also fulfilled. Heracles cannot love any woman more than Deianeira if he is dead. In this moment, the two seemingly-discrete prophecies merge into one event. Then, strikingly, Heracles connects these prophecies to the other major oracle about his death, which has appeared so frequently throughout the play. He promises to show Hyllus how the “new” prophecies (presumably the ones given at Dodona, though they have henceforth always

been identified as ancient) corroborate the old ones (φανῶ δ' ἐγὼ τούτοισι συμβαίνοντ' ἴσα / μαντεῖα καινά, τοῖς πάλαι ξυνήγορα, 1164-5).

We learn that Heracles wrote the oracle down personally, when he received it from the sacred oak at Dodona. At this point, then, we have four versions (not including Deianeira's initial mention of the oracle, without any specific details, at 46ff.):

Deianeira	Deianeira
ὡς ἢ τελευτήν τοῦ βίου μέλλει τελεῖν ἢ τοῦτον ἄρας ἄθλον εἰς τό γ' ὕστερον τὸν λοιπὸν ἤδη βίον εὐαίων' ἔχειν. (79-81)	τότ' ἢ θανεῖν χρεῖη σφε τῶδε τῶ χρόνῳ ἢ τοῦθ' ὑπεκδραμόντα τοῦ χρόνου τέλος τὸ λοιπὸν ἤδη ζῆν ἀλυπήτῳ βίῳ. (166-8)
That either he will achieve the completion of his life, or, having accomplished this labor, in the future he will have a happy life, for the rest of it.	it would be necessary either for him to die at that time or, if he escaped the end of his time, he would live in the future without pain.
Chorus	Heracles
ὅποτε τελεόμηνος ἐκφέρῃ δωδέκατος ἄροτος, ἀναδοχὰν τελεῖν πόνων τῶ Διὸς αὐτόπαιδι· (824-6)	ἦ μοι χρόνῳ τῶ ζῶντι καὶ παρόντι νῦν ἔφασκε μόχθων τῶν ἐφεστῶτων ἐμοὶ λύσιν τελεῖσθαι· (1169-71)
When the twelfth year, with all its months, should come to a close, It would bring the series of toils to an end For the son of Zeus himself	It [the oak] told me that now, in the living and present time, A liberation from the toils imposed on me Would be accomplished

Since we know that Heracles received the oracle in person, his version has been passed through fewer intermediaries than the other accounts and should have the most direct access to the original oracle.<sup>142</sup> By the same logic, however, Deianeira is in possession of the tablets that contain the oracle, and her version should therefore bear at least some resemblance to the actual oracle. Yet, Heracles and Deianeira recount very different versions of this oracle. Both accounts are ambiguous, but in fundamentally different ways. Deianeira's account involves a disjunction and a misunderstanding about what sort of disjunction it is. Heracles' (like the Chorus' account) hinges instead on ambiguous wording and Heracles assumes that his "release from toils" will mean a good life (πράξειν καλῶς). As he and the Chorus realize, the only release from toils that he will achieve

<sup>142</sup> It is worth noting that a few scholars have suggested that there may not be a contradiction between these two accounts. Linforth 1952: 257, Kane 1969: 82, and Dickerson 1972: 445 (fn. 45) have all suggested that Heracles may refer only to his interpretation and perceptions immediately after victory at Oechalia (that is to say, his version only differs from Deianeira's because he has effectively eliminated the other alternative, once he is victorious and seems to no longer be at risk of death). The text leaves this option open, and it does present an intriguingly different picture of this oracle, but there is nothing in the text to suggest this interpretation (T. von Wilamowitz 131 n. 1 argues strongly against this suggestion).

is death—there is no toil for those who are dead (τοῖς γὰρ θανοῦσι μόχθος οὐ προσγίγνεται, 1173).

### Pragmatic Analysis

How Deianeira arrived at her accounts of the oracle tells a great deal about her own preoccupations and reliability, but it does not fundamentally change the accuracy of her two versions of the oracle. Her oracles are true in the end, even if they are not the same as what was written on the tablet.<sup>143</sup> Heiden's point that the existence of multiple versions represents an "interpolation in the text of the oracle, for Deianeira has not only interpreted the oracle, but also inserted her interpretation into the text" (1989: 34-5) is well taken and, as I have noted elsewhere, Deianeira's own fears and concerns and preoccupations undoubtedly shade her language and her transmission of the oracle. It is, however, significant that these seemingly-adulterated versions of the oracle's original text are all borne out in the end. This suggests that there is something very unusual about oracles in general, if all the different distortions and variations are nonetheless true. While this might point to a more skeptical reading of the whole conception of oracles as little more than open-ended wording that *could* apply to nearly any situation (in the same way that we might approach a modern psychic who creates a supernatural illusion by practicing cold-reading),<sup>144</sup> the text itself does not suggest this reading. Rather, there seems to be some sort of divine guarantee behind these oracular iterations and, regardless of the interpretive bias or lens placed upon Zeus' words, they all prove true.

With this in mind, working from Deianeira's accounts, the fundamental problem is not in her formulations of the oracle (which, of course, prove to be accurate). The problem is rather in her interpretations of those formulations. She approaches communication from the gods in the same way that she would approach communication with a mortal: she assumes that the gods are

---

<sup>143</sup> We can perhaps infer from this that the actual oracle was at least ambiguous enough to accommodate her interpretations and that whatever underlying message Zeus gave to Heracles is compatible with all the variations we find in the play. I am not convinced that Sophocles had a particular underlying oracular message in mind, though, and it seems like an ill-advised exercise to try to excavate an "original" oracle through all these variants.

<sup>144</sup> To this point, Heiden suggests that perhaps the divine backdrop of this play is an illusion and "Sophoclean piety" ("belief in the absolute knowledge of the gods and the validity of their oracles") is very much in doubt here (1989:14)—in fact, he argues, even Zeus' paternity of Heracles is also called into question, as is the very existence of Zeus (1989: 38-9, 144-8, 160-1). The resulting "truth" of the oracles is in fact little more than Heracles' own self-realization of the oracles. Because he wants the oracles to be true, Heiden argues, Heracles manufactures an ending to the play that does fulfill the oracles (1989: 151). This reading, while perhaps available, is certainly not strongly suggested or demanded by the text.



trying to communicate effectively through their oracles, and so she applies contextual clues to the words she is hearing and she reasonably infers things based on the implications she perceives. She applies the basic assumptions that underlie human communication to divine communication without knowing that those rules do not apply to the gods, and that the gods communicate without the same concern for how context shapes meaning.<sup>145</sup> What makes oracles so consistently misleading is the fact that divine language is semantically identical to mortal language, but from a pragmatic perspective, it is very different. The fact that these languages are semantically identical invites (one might say tricks) mortals into assuming that the two languages are entirely identical, and it is this assumption that leads Deianeira astray.

Turning to Heracles,<sup>146</sup> we see a different sort of confusion, though it stems from the same basic source. In the two different oracles he has received—that he will not die at the hand of any living creature and that he will have a release from his toils at the appointed, present time—the true meaning is not obvious. For the audience, the most obvious import of “no one living will kill you” would seem to point toward the well-known myth of Heracles’ apotheosis, since someone who is dead cannot generally commit murder, so “no one living” would mean, in effect, “no one.”<sup>147</sup> While the subsequent line—someone who is dead and in Hades—rules out this interpretation, it is still a fundamentally paradoxical idea that someone who is dead might kill the living. This contrast is emphasized a few lines later, with the semantically unnecessary ζῶντά (1163)<sup>148</sup> to highlight how strange and unexpected the “solution” to this riddle is.

In the case of the second oracle, Heracles even outlines his own source of confusion. “Release from toils” (μόχθων . . . λύσιν, 1170-1) certainly can apply to death, but there are far

---

<sup>145</sup> “At first, it would seem that in tragedy, too, oracular language differs little from ordinary language; the gods speak in a human tongue, rather than through omens. But the divine oracle uses a privileged language that can deceive those who treat it as if it were ordinary speech” (Bushnell 1988: 14).

<sup>146</sup> The Chorus’ confusion is largely similar to that of Heracles, though we have less context for their assumptions and interpretations. As I understand their situation, however, they suffer from the same basic interpretive issue that Heracles does. Since their access to the oracle is probably mediated through Heracles, though we are not told how they hear the oracle, it is impossible to determine whether Heracles’ own misinterpretation was passed along to the Chorus, or if they reached a similar misunderstanding on their own. For these reasons, I will omit the Chorus in this discussion, with the assumption that any misunderstanding on their part has the same basic causes as Heracles’ own.

<sup>147</sup> For more modern comparanda, we might think of Shakespeare’s “Laugh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (*Macbeth* 4.1.90-92), which causes Macbeth to think (incorrectly) that he cannot be killed. Similarly, Tolkien’s Witch-king of Angmar, about whom Glorfindel prophesies “not by the hand of man shall he fall,” thinks that he cannot be killed. All these prophetic formulations suggest that the subject of the words cannot be killed (though, in all three instances, that does not prove to be true).

<sup>148</sup> Interestingly, this echoes the description Deianeira gives of Nessus and his final instructions to her: τοῦτ’ ἐνοήσασ’, ὦ φίλοι, δόμοις γὰρ ἦν / κείνου θανόντος ἐγκεκλημένον καλῶς, / χιτῶνα τόνδ’ ἔβαφα, προσβαλοῦσ’ ὅσα / ζῶν κείνος εἶπε (578-81).

less ambiguous options. To return to the pragmatic analysis from before, Heracles assumes that the “speaker” of the oracle is playing by the standard rules of conversation. He assumes—per pragmatic theory—that a speaker would say something like “death” if that is what the speaker knows to be the outcome. Given a divine “speaker” for the oracle, the problem here cannot be a lack of knowledge. Instead, the problem must be that the speaker is either intending to mislead the listener, Heracles, or there is a different explanation for this transgression of pragmatic principles.

Heracles, like the Chorus, understood this oracle in the most natural way. His mythological identity is closely associated with labors that he has been forced to endure. From the audience’s perspective, it seems ironically appropriate that his labors have consumed his life and his identity so thoroughly that the end of his labors is the end of his life. This awareness—like our awareness of the misleading nature of oracles—is something that seems only to operate outside the play. Within the play, Heracles’ interpretation seems like the natural interpretation. It is, of course, an interpretation that aligns with Heracles’ own self-interest, but his behavior is also plausible and realistic. These misunderstandings are the result of entirely human impulses.

It is worth turning briefly to Nessus’ dying words for a moment. In general, for an examination of divine oracular communication, Nessus does not qualify. While he is not a human, he is also not a god and does not fit neatly into any particular category in an examination of the ways that gods communicate (or fail to do so) with humans.<sup>149</sup> However, he is a useful foil when considering the broader psychological issues with oracular interpretation.

Nessus’ final words are ambiguous yet true, like the oracles in the rest of the play. A great deal of weight is placed on the final words he speaks before his death: ὥστε μήτιν’ εἰσιδῶν / στέρξει γυναῖκα κείνος ἀντὶ σοῦ πλέον (576-7). These are undoubtedly true, in a perverse way. However, throughout the rest of his speech, there is a great deal that cannot readily be validated. For example, he describes Deianeira receiving his blood with the verb ὀνύνημι (570) and describes the blood as a φρενός . . . κλητήριον (575). These are far more difficult to explain, but there is an obvious reason why these passages have not upset scholars—Nessus *wants* to cause harm and is willfully misleading Deianeira in order to cause suffering in the future.

---

<sup>149</sup> See Heiden 1989: 86-7 on Nessus’ liminal identity. I am not fully persuaded by some of the specific claims that Heiden makes, drawing on Jebb (*ad* 557) on the association of centaurs with meaningless sound. Some of his examples of liminality push the evidence farther than I would like. However, his overall analysis of the liminality of Nessus in this moment (drawing on the deep and rushing river he transverses and the general liminality of centaurs, at the border between human and animal) are certainly convincing. For more on this, see duBois 1982.

The ambiguity, then, is a weapon that Nessus wields in order to get his revenge. Deianeira only carries out the actions that she does because of her false impression that she knows what the effect of the Hydra's blood will be.<sup>150</sup> The riddle itself allows Nessus to have his revenge. On the one hand, he does create this false sense of confidence and security in Deianeira by phrasing the blood's effect in a willfully deceptive way, so as to mislead her. Why, then, does he not completely lie about the blood? Why craft his final utterance as a riddle that proves to be true, but only on a certain, unintuitive reading?

The ambiguous yet accurate nature of Nessus' words accomplishes two things. On one level, his dying words have access to a sort of power. While most mythical comparanda for the power of dying words involve either a curse or a prophecy, Nessus' words bridge the divide between these two. They are a prophecy in a sense, but this prophecy does not passively comment on an immutable future, as we might expect. Instead, the very utterance of this prophecy serves to bring about its completion—though, much like a curse, this prophecy will coincide with Nessus' revenge on Heracles, his own killer. This alone is significant, and while there are not explicit rules for how dying words can possess this special efficacy, one imagines that there needs to be some measure of truth in them. So while Nessus might be more deceptive in other aspects of his speech to Deianeira, the power of his final words might offer one rationale for why he opts for a riddle of this sort.

There is, however, another aspect to his word choice, which speaks to Sophocles' reasons for shaping Nessus' words this way rather than the motivations of the characters within the play. Although he is dead before the play begins, Nessus provides the mechanism through which the entire plot unfolds. Between his riddling prophecy and the blood that Deianeira takes from his fatal wound, Nessus offers both the physical and psychological tools which lead Deianeira to kill Heracles. Although his words are not an oracle, strictly speaking, they very much mirror the proper oracles from Zeus. His prophecy seems to offer two alternatives—another woman (μήτιν' . . . γυναῖκα) or Deianeira (ἀντὶ σοῦ)—which are not two options in actuality, just as Deianeira's seemingly disjunctive accounts of the oracle turn out not to be two different options at all. Further, her misunderstanding of both prophecies gives Deianeira a false confidence about the future that allows the events of the play to unfold the way they do. Deianeira falsely assumes that, by surviving

---

<sup>150</sup> See Heiden 1989: 87-8 for a discussion of Deianeira's language and the ways in which her own language (in particular, her use of πῶς at line 584: φίλτροις δ' ἐάν πῶς τήνδ' ὑπερβαλώμεθα) reveals Deianeira's potential confusion about the specific effect of the charm.

his final competition in Oechalia, Heracles is out of harm's way, since he won the competition and therefore will not fulfill the other option in the prophecy by dying. Similarly, she falsely assumes (through the design of Nessus) that the blood she has is a love potion. It is only at the intersection of these two misunderstandings that she acts to prevent a long, peaceful future in which Heracles loves another woman, Iole. Similarly, Nessus offers the sort of ambiguity that we see in the version of the oracle that Heracles recounts—an easy interpretation presents itself, but that natural reading will prove to be wrong, in both cases. In terms of the overall structure of the play, Nessus' words help crystallize why and how the oracles are misunderstood. Placed between two sets of oracles, Nessus's words can be seen as a sort of key which can unlock both sets of oracles which surround it, by pointing to the pragmatic principles which caused the oracles to be misunderstood and by providing the “answer” to the different oracles, which is Heracles' death.

Further, to return to Deianeira's second account of Nessus' dying words, we see another significant theme that mirrors the central oracle. Both Heracles and the Chorus reinterpret Zeus' prophecy, once they see its fulfillment, and demonstrate the ways in which the oracle did turn out to be true, just not in the way that they anticipated.<sup>151</sup> Deianeira too offers a reinterpretation of Nessus' words and deeds once she can look back at them. In her first account of Nessus' words, the only description of his speech that she provides is *τοσοῦτον εἶπε* (569), followed by what is presented as a direct quotation of his words. Once she has reason to think that Nessus perhaps misled her, the way in which she presents his words shifts. Now, he has taught her *θεσμά* and the content of his instruction is referred to as *πρόρρητα*. We find out that her previous verbatim account left out a great deal of information about the care and preservation of Nessus' blood and—as with the multiple, shifting accounts of Zeus' oracle—we are left with a very unclear picture of what Nessus may have actually told her, since the two accounts do not mesh neatly together.

This opens up another point of contact between Nessus' words and the broader prophecy. Although Nessus' authority to give prophecies is questionable,<sup>152</sup> Deianeira recasts his words as

---

<sup>151</sup> Heiden has argued that Heracles forces a fulfillment of the oracle here, out of a desire to impose unity and an illusion of justice and order onto an otherwise meaningless and terrible death. Heracles' final commands to Hyllus, as well as the necessity of the pyre, are strange events indeed, as Heiden rightly points out, but their strangeness does not imply that the oracles are not fulfilled. I would suggest that even a forced-fulfillment (i.e. actions taken by Heracles to consciously ensure the accuracy of the oracle) would still constitute fulfillment of the oracle, in broad terms. However, there is nothing in the text to suggest that Heracles might recover from being engulfed in flames and continue his mortal life and—as Heiden too notes, though it contradicts his argument to some extent—choosing a death on the pyre actually threatens the validity of the oracle, since one could certainly argue that it changes his killer from the prophesied inhabitant of Hades to Hyllus (or whomever Hyllus finds to light the pyre) (1989: 150-156).

<sup>152</sup> See fn. 132.

πρόρρητα (684). This word is not used elsewhere until very late, but it is etymologically derived from προ + ἔρῳ<sup>153</sup>—an etymological kinship that does little to provide a conclusive meaning. LSJ offer “proclaimed, commanded” as a definition for πρόρρητος, and cites only this passage (the only use of this particular form, aside from scholiasts writing about this passage). Given its proximity to προυδιδάξατο (681), and the two glosses in the scholia, one of which equates πρόρρητα with προειρημένα,<sup>154</sup> this definition is not unreasonable, but it perhaps loses some of the semantic range that προερέω and its derivatives can have. The other scholiast on this passage suggests ἀπόρρητα as a possible meaning for πρόρρητα—while the majority of the uses of ἀπόρρητα cluster around ideas of secrecy, which does not make much sense for its use in the *Trachiniae*, this gloss should perhaps incline us to think about the other major use of προερέω-derived words, in the context of prophecy. Πρόρρημα and πρόρρησις both refer to predictions, prophecies, or prognosis (as does the derived adjective, προρρητικός). These often refer more to predictions (often in a medical sense), but the idea of “speaking before” is central to that of prophecy.<sup>155</sup>

With this in mind, there is no compelling reason that πρόρρητα cannot have shades of a more prophetic meaning. In this light, Deianeira appropriately blurs the line between calling Nessus’ words instructions and predictions. In the end, they turn out to be a suitably ambiguous combination of those two ideas—they are a self-fulfilling prophecy that is only fulfilled precisely *because* of their ambiguity, since it is the confusion generated by this ambiguity that causes Deianeira to take the actions that she does. Nessus’ words and how they are transmitted and interpreted reflect the overarching prophecy about Heracles just as his words play a critical role in the realization of the prophecy. His deliberately misleading and ambiguous dying words mirror the prophecy from Dodona. By realizing these parallels, we can use Nessus’ words to illuminate something about Zeus’ words, as well as the inability of mortals to interpret them.

<sup>153</sup> As a direct compound, this produces προερέω, though προεἶπον is often the more common form of this (προερέω or προεῶ serving as future of προεἶπον).

<sup>154</sup> The first scholiast on this passage writes πρὸς ἐμὲ ὑπὸ Νέσσου προειρημένα and the second writes προμελετημένα μοι ἢ ἀπόρρητα, *Scholia vetera in Sophoclis Trachinias*, 684a1 and a2.

<sup>155</sup> For πρόρρησις as a prediction or prognosis, see Hp. *Prog.* 15, D.S. 12.36, Plot.3.1.2. It can also be a proclamation, as at D. 9.13, or a sort of prefatory statement, as at <Arist.> *Rh.Al.* 1438b11. Diogenes Laertius uses πρόρρησις to mean the practice of predicting the future and pairs it with astronomy and prophecy: τοὺς δὲ Χαλδαίους περὶ ἀστρονομίαν καὶ πρόρρησιν ἀσχολεῖσθαι ... ἀσκεῖν τε μαντικὴν καὶ πρόρρησιν, καὶ θεοὺς αὐτοῖς ἐμφανίζεσθαι λέγοντας (*Vit.Phil.* 1.6, 7). πρόρρημα is not a word that occurs often, but it is used of prognosis in a medical context: τὰ δὲ προρρήματα λαμπρὰ καὶ ἀγωνιστικά, ἀπὸ τοῦ διαγινώσκειν, Hp. *Art.* 58 (see also Hp. *Prorrheticon* 2.1-2). We also find reference to the προρρητικός δύναμις (S.E. *M*5.1) in addition to providing the title of one of Hippocrates’ works, *Prorrheticon*.

As noted above, the critical misunderstanding in all these instances hinges on the fact that Heracles and Deianeira approach the oracle as though it were a form of human communication.<sup>156</sup> Most importantly, they assume that the gods are participating in good faith in a cooperative conversation that is governed by all the underlying assumptions that govern human conversation. From our external vantage point, however, we know that oracles do not work that way. Either the gods are not capable of communicating more clearly with humans (though this seems unlikely if we are to imagine some sort of continuity with the Homeric world, in which gods certainly *can* appear to humans and speak clearly and intelligibly to them, when they want), or they do not want their meaning to be readily understood, or the gods and their motives are profoundly inaccessible to mortals. As the final lines of the play—delivered either by the Chorus or Hyllus—assert, there is nothing in the tragic outcome that is not Zeus (κούδεν τούτων ὅ τι μὴ Ζεὺς, 1278). How are we to take this final sentiment? The interpretive difficulty of the oracle(s)—which are all oracles from Zeus—is certainly the vehicle through which Heracles meets his fatal end and regardless of who speaks the final lines, they stand as a final haunting indictment of Zeus’ role in the outcome. Viewed in juxtaposition with Nessus’ words, which bear a striking number of similarities to the different versions of the oracle, it would be tempting to understand a malicious and willfully deceptive Zeus. However, in closing this chapter, I would like to offer a very different interpretation.

## Conclusions

The oracles in this play are shown to be true, but the characters in the play can only understand this in retrospect. Given the eventual outcome of the play, the ambiguous oracular language does seem to be malicious on Zeus’ part, as Sophocles plays with the literary convention of ambiguous oracles and manipulates them in a way that seems ultimately cruel. This cruelty is compounded by the constant reminders throughout the play that Heracles is the son of Zeus.<sup>157</sup> While his presumed apotheosis may temper this cruelty to some extent, Sophocles suppresses the idea of apotheosis and deliberately withholds any consolation for all the suffering.

When considering the ending of the play, however, and the play as a whole, it is essential to recognize that Zeus’ motives are not the focus of this play, however central they may seem, both to characters within the play and to readers outside the play. Like the original text of the oracle, Zeus’

---

<sup>156</sup> On the nature of effective human communication, see the Introduction.

<sup>157</sup> Easterling discusses this motif in her commentary on lines 19, 200, 8267-7, 983, and 1278.

motives cannot truly be discerned. When the play closes with the assertion at line 1278 that there is nothing there that is not Zeus, we have only one more potentially biased perspective on events, focalized through the characters.<sup>158</sup> Like all the accounts of the oracle, this too is subject to distortion, even though it occurs in a particularly powerful place in the play, as the final line. This final line forces the audience to think about Zeus' role in the horrors they have just seen—Deianeira's suicide, Heracles' suffering and imminent death, and Heracles' odd and semi-incestuous request that Hyllus marry Iole. The play ends with the line *κούδέν τούτων ὅ τι μὴ Ζεὺς* and the audience must determine what to make of what they have seen, and the only available responses are to agree or disagree. Either Zeus is complicit in these horrors, as the final line suggests, or Zeus is fundamentally inscrutable and mortals simply cannot know what his role and intentions were. On the latter reading, all that we have access to are the linguistic pronouncements that come *from* Zeus, but language is an ineffective form of communication between mortals and humans, so we cannot know anything about Zeus, and the play cannot tell us anything about Zeus, but only about language. In response to these examples of divine language, we can see the basic assumptions that human characters are bringing to bear on these prophecies and we can also see that these fundamental assumptions—that the “speaker” is aiming at being understood and is entering into a cooperative conversation in good faith—are called into question. As the gods are mediated through language (Zeus here, but we will see this with other gods in subsequent chapters), it becomes clear that when language is the way that mortals attempt to

---

<sup>158</sup> As an initial note, I am of the opinion that all the lines which come down to us in the manuscript tradition ought to be retained. Ritter 1861 deleted the final 4 lines completely (as he did with many other tailpieces), Hartung deleted 1259-78, Bergk deleted 1264-78, and Dawe deleted 1257-78 (in his first edition of the text). I side with Lloyd-Jones and Wilson, however, in thinking that there is insufficient reason to delete any of the final lines. The more difficult question concerns who speaks the final four lines. The manuscripts provide an inconclusive answer, and a scholiast even reflects this confusion, which apparently dates back to antiquity (*τοῦτο λέγει ὁ Χόρος ἢ ὁ Ὑλλος*): ZgT give these lines to Hyllus, whereas P.Oxy. 3688 and KTa give the lines to the Chorus, and the remaining manuscripts are split. Hermann, Jebb, and Pearson give the lines to Hyllus, as do Davies and Lloyd-Jones and Wilson, whereas many other modern editors (e.g., Brunck, Campbell, Easterling) give these lines to the Chorus. Nauck, as something of an outlier removes Hyllus, gives 1259-1269 to Heracles and 1270-1278 to the Chorus. The question hinges on line 1275, and who is addressed with *παρθέν'*. Generally, we would expect the Chorus to deliver final lines, particularly lines of this nature. Because the Chorus does not elsewhere in extant Sophocles address another member of the Chorus with a singular form, many have thought that Hyllus must be speaking to a member of the Chorus (presumably the Chorus leader), since the only other living female, Iole, is presumably gone from the stage in lines 1219-20, based on the way that Heracles and Hyllus refer to her (*Ἡρ.: τὴν Εὐρυτείαν οἶσθα δῆτα παρθένον; / Ὑλ.: ἰόλην ἔλεξας, ὥς γ' ἐπικάζειν ἐμέ*). However, as Kaimio 1970: 190-1 argues, Hyllus addressing the Chorus with *παρθένε* would also be unparalleled. I find both sides compelling and while I tend to prefer assigning these lines to Hyllus, the arguments on both sides of the question are compelling enough that I prefer not to rest my argument on a firm attribution. For more on this debate, see Easterling 1981: 70-1, Davies 1991: 265-7, Jebb's Appendix (p. 208), and Lloyd-Jones and Wilson 1990: 177-8.

interact with the gods, they are subject to the limitations of the linguistic medium. Despite the appearance that gods and mortals speak the same language, since both are nominally speaking Greek, we find instead that divine, oracular language is fundamentally different from human language. Language, then, is both the potential means of access to the divine and a marker of the boundary between gods and mortals.

Oracles are strange and fantastical by nature—they are liminal and magical and give humans access to the knowledge of the gods. As such, the liminality and strangeness of oracular speech affords Sophocles the flexibility to play with language to create artificial exceptions to pragmatic principles. Oracular speech—precisely because it is not bound by the rules of “normal” speech—is a useful and effective tool to explore the ways in which pragmatic principles fail and what sorts of artificially-constructed miscommunications can “break” these rules. By exploring the limits of communication and miscommunication, Sophocles illustrates exactly what the guiding principles that undergird effective communication are. This play offers four different misinterpretations of what is ostensibly the same oracle. In so doing, it gives us four different examples of the ways humans naturally hear and interpret complex language. Pragmatic theory helps illuminate this play so well because the play is concerned with precisely the issues that are at the heart of pragmatics—how meaning emerges both from what is said *and* from what is unsaid and what sorts of rules or principles govern this process. And it is precisely by shifting our focus toward the mortal characters that we can see this more clearly.

All of the different ways that mortal characters misinterpret Zeus’ oracle are shaped by fundamentally human approaches to language. As I detailed throughout, Deianeira, Heracles, and the Chorus all approach oracular communication as though it is normal communication, which is governed by a set of underlying principles and reasonable assumptions. They make the same kinds of inferences that usefully generate meaning, in the context of human communication, moving beyond the strict semantic meaning of the words they hear and bringing a rich array of pragmatic tools to bear on the words of Zeus. Because Heracles and the Chorus can correctly reinterpret the oracle once it is actually being fulfilled, it is tempting to look back through the play and think that the characters should have been able to understand the oracle all along. To do so suggests that we ought to attribute this failed communication to the hearers who made improper inferences and not to the speaker who—by standards of human communication—implicated things that were not true.



In conclusion, by looking at the ways in which oracular communication and interpretation fails spectacularly, Sophocles advances a conception of how human communication *does* work. Both the Chorus and Heracles explain how they misunderstood what a rest from toils meant<sup>159</sup>—they took it as its most natural meaning and did not consider other meanings it might have. They recognize that they were operating under a set of assumptions (as described effectively by pragmatic theory) that were common to them both; these oracles are misunderstood precisely because of the mechanisms that are subconsciously a part of human communication. By creating a situation in which these mechanisms and assumptions fail, Sophocles also highlights their very existence. At a time when sophists and philosophers were beginning to discuss the nature of language, Sophocles' conception of language and his underlying pragmatic theories represent a nuanced and generally overlooked contribution to this discussion.

---

<sup>159</sup> Chorus at 828-30 and Heracles at 1171-3.

## Chapter 2: Oedipus, Tiresias, and Apollo Loxias

### Introduction

The *Oedipus Tyrannus* is perhaps the most well-known of Sophocles' plays and the story recounted within it has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly work in many different fields. My argument here does not seek to examine many of the popular questions that scholars have asked about this text, and I will not offer an opinion as to the nature of the Sophoclean hero,<sup>160</sup> or the psychoanalytic implications of this play,<sup>161</sup> or issues of fate and free will,<sup>162</sup> and I do not intend to examine the question of Oedipus' guilt.<sup>163</sup> Instead, my interests are quite narrow. The *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a play (the only other surviving Sophoclean play, besides the *Trachiniae*) whose plot is entirely concerned with oracles and their interpretations and fulfillment. The oracles within this play are woven much more thoroughly into the entirety of the work (as opposed to those in the *Trachiniae*, which can be neatly extracted) and the central prophecy—that Oedipus will kill his father and sleep with his mother—has in fact already been fulfilled before the play even begins. This, too, represents a departure from the sort of oracle that operates in the *Trachiniae*. Put

---

<sup>160</sup> Most famously, Whitman 1951 (and later, Whitman 1982) and Knox 1964 (and, to a lesser extent, Knox 1957) address the tragic hero, though the theme has been taken up by many others since then, including Segal 1995 and, most recently, Van Nortwick 2015. See also Currie 2015 for a recent survey on Sophocles and hero cult.

<sup>161</sup> See Liapis 2012: 84 on the Freudian influence on interpretations of this play, with a bibliography for treatments and rebuttals of pro-and anti-Freudian arguments. See also Rudnytsky 1987 for a more extended treatment, as well as Segal 1994 and Nussbaum 2006.

<sup>162</sup> On this topic, see Dodds 1966, Mastrorarde 1994, Cairns 2013, Gregory 2005. For the commonly-expressed view that this play is a “tragedy of fate,” there are myriad examples, but because of his deep influence on the modern reception of the play, I will here provide Freud's description of this play as a *Schicksalstragödie* in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Before moving into his famous formulation of the Oedipal Complex, Freud concludes that “König Ödipus ist eine sogenannte Schicksalstragödie; ihre tragische Wirkung soll auf dem Gegensatz zwischen dem übermächtigen Willen der Götter und dem vergeblichen Sträuben der vom Unheil bedrohten Menschen beruhen; Ergebung in den Willen der Gottheit, Einsicht in die eigene Ohnmacht soll der tief ergriffene Zuschauer aus dem Trauerspiele lernen” (“V. Das Traummaterial und die Traumquellen”). Knox 1957 and Dodds 1966 both argue against this simplistic line of interpretation. To this end, Dodds invokes Knox' analogy (Knox 1957: 39-40) to Peter in the Gospel of Matthew, in which Peter is prophesied to deny Jesus three times (Matthew 26:34-5, 60-75). The fact that he does so, both Dodds and Knox suggest, does not mean that Peter was bound by fate. Rather, free will and predestination can coexist and Peter can fulfill the prediction by an act of free choice (Dodds 1966: 42-3).

<sup>163</sup> I, as most all classicists do, accept that Sophocles is quite clear about Oedipus' guilt and there can be no question that the oracles have been fulfilled and he has committed both incest and parricide. However, Goodhart 1978 and 1996 argue that Sophocles does not in fact establish Oedipus' innocence or guilt, but instead equivocates on this question. Ahl 1991 makes this same point, which has been picked up by scholars outside the field of classics. See also Girard 1986 and Chase 1986.

another way, the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is not a play that displays the inevitable and tragic fulfillment of an oracle, but one that performs a sort of autopsy on an already-fulfilled prophecy.

In this chapter, I look at three different prophetic elements that run throughout this play: (1) Apollo's oracle about how Thebes can remove the plague; (2) the different versions that Jocasta and Oedipus each received of the oracle that Oedipus would sleep with his mother and kill his father; and (3) Tiresias' conversations with Oedipus, which explain elements of these oracles as well as foretelling the realizations that lie in Oedipus' immediate future. Before looking at any of these elements, however, I start by examining the Riddle of the Sphinx and the associated pragmatic principles that govern the solving of riddles. The oracles in this play are not riddles, but the genre of the riddle introduces a far more complex pragmatic scheme than I outlined in the first chapter. Riddles, like other playful linguistic interactions (jokes, puns, etc.), are neither straightforward cooperative conversations nor are they lies. The genre of riddles provides a valuable perspective on how oracular language functions, and looking at the mechanics of riddles allows us to see exactly how some of the oracular misunderstandings in this play occur.

### **The Riddle of the Sphinx**

The Sphinx looms as a shadow behind the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. She died long before the events of the play begin, but defeating the Sphinx is Oedipus' defining heroic accomplishment and it is the grounds upon which he becomes the ruler of Thebes.<sup>164</sup> It is repeatedly invoked, by Oedipus and others, as a crucial moment. In a sense, the Sphinx is the catalyst for the events of the play. The Sphinx' presence is the (somewhat feeble) excuse that Creon gives for why no one

---

<sup>164</sup> Barrett (2002: 205) notes the many ways that Oedipus' identity is tied to the Sphinx, though his arguments are based in large part on the assumption that the riddle that Oedipus solves is the traditional formulation, in which case his name (which, as noted by the Corinthian at line 1036, is derived from his pierced—and thereby swollen—feet) and his great victory over the Sphinx are both connected. The Sphinx is deeply connected to Oedipus' heroic identity. Edmunds 2000: 36 notes that there is no explicit discussion of how Oedipus comes to be ruler, but it must be some sort of a reward for defeating the Sphinx (Oedipus describes his rule as a gift from the city at 384). Oedipus' status as ruler of Thebes is attained directly by marrying the queen (see Finkelberg 1991 on this type of succession, in which rule is passed from father to son-in-law, rather than father-to-son, and marriage is the means of acquiring kingship). By the end of the play, however, it has become clear that he has also inherited kingship *from* his father, though he did not do so *because* of his connection with Laius. As far as Thebes knows, kingship was transmitted in the same fashion that Finkelberg details and which occurs in so many other heroic, literary examples (Tyndareus to Menelaus, for example). Finkelberg cites Oedipus as providing a cautionary counter-example to all the instances in which kingship was passed to the king's son-in-law, since kingship by marriage would generally rule out the king's son as an option for the next king.

investigated who Laius' murderers were (*OT* 130-131) and it is the reason why Oedipus marries Jocasta: the Sphinx allows for the very situation that fulfills Oedipus' terrible fate.

Despite this, the Sphinx' riddle is never described in the play. The traditional formulation of the Sphinx' riddle was almost certainly known by the time of this play (see Fig. 1),<sup>165</sup> but Sophocles does not even allude to that version or to the content of the riddle at all. At first glance, this seems like an odd choice, since there are striking parallels between the story of Oedipus and the traditional formulation of the riddle, which would have very likely been something of the following form:<sup>166</sup>



Figure 1, Red Figure Vase from the Vatican Museum (16541)

ARV<sub>2</sub> 451.1 = LIMC VII, s.v. Oidipous, no. 19. Though not visible in this image, a retrograde ΑΙΤΡΙ is inscribed between the Sphinx and Oedipus, which has been conjectured to be κ|αί τρι[πον (or κ|αί τρι[πουν, depending on dialect)

<p>ἔστι δίπουν ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ τετράπουν, οὗ μία μορφή, καὶ τρίπουν, ἀλλάσσει δὲ φύην μόνον ὅσσ' ἐπὶ γαῖαν ἐρπετὰ κινεῖται καὶ ἀν' αἰθέρα καὶ κατὰ πόντον· ἀλλ' ὅπῃ τρισσοῖσιν ἐπειγόμενον ποσὶ βαίνη, ἔνθα τάχος γυίοισιν ἀφανρότατον πέλει αὐτοῦ.</p>	<p>There is, on the earth, a thing that is two-footed and four-footed, and one form [or voice], and it is three-footed as well, and it alone changes its form [or its nature], out of so many creatures that move across the land and through the air and in the sea. But</p>
---	---

<sup>165</sup> Lloyd-Jones 1978, building on Lesky 1928 and refining many of his own positions in Lloyd-Jones 1963, concludes that the riddle of the Sphinx likely does not date back to early epic. In the *Oedipodeia*, there is no evidence that the Sphinx poses riddles or is anything more than a murderous monster. It could originate with the *Thebais*, though Lloyd-Jones finds this unlikely, but there is strong evidence that it is well known by the time of Aeschylus. The famous cup in the Vatican with Oedipus and the Sphinx is dated to c. 470 BCE (Beazley ARV, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 451) and it includes the words (κ)αί τρι(πον). Lloyd-Jones suggests that the significantly different formulation found in P.Oxy. 2459 (a fragment of Euripides' *Oedipus*) suggest that the nearly-identical forms that we find in our later sources are likely drawing on a more authoritative version than that of Euripides—in addition to the sources listed above, the riddle is also attested in hypotheses to Soph. *OT* (ed. Dain-Mazon ii.71) and Eur. *Phoen.* (ed. Schwartz i.243-4) as well as Σ *Phoen.* 50 (ed. Schwartz i.256), Σ Lycophr. 7 (ed. Kinkel, p. 65), and Tzetz. *ad Lycophr.* (ed. Scheer, ii 11). Lloyd-Jones concludes that this more authoritative source is most likely Aeschylus' *Oedipus*, which is a satisfying though unprovable suggestion.

<sup>166</sup> Lloyd-Jones 1978: 60-1 provides a thorough text and history of the text and variants. The version he compiles is essentially the version that Athenaeus provides (10.456B = FGrH 12 F 7a = AP 14.64), but Athenaeus has φωνή instead of μορφή at the end of the first line and gives φύσιν instead of φύην in line 2 (this line varies significantly between versions). Athenaeus also has γίνονται instead of κινεῖται in line 3 and πλείστοισιν ἐρειδόμενον instead of τρισσοῖσιν ἐπειγόμενον in line 4 (drawing heavily on Aesch. *Ag.* 80-2, which he understands as an allusion to the riddle of the Sphinx). Lloyd-Jones' text compiles the best available readings and his choice of readings seems preferable to Athenaeus'. On line 4, a reading of τρισσοῖσιν suggests that an elderly man with a cane is slower than a crawling child, whereas πλείστοισιν suggests that the old man is faster than the small child. I have printed Lloyd-Jones' text as he prints it, though I am not sure about this particular reading, and both options seem plausible, depending what level of infirmity the Sphinx is imagining in the man aided by a cane.

whenever it goes about, moving itself forward with three feet, then the swiftness in its limbs is weakest.
--

The answer to this riddle is “Man,” and the thematic resonances of this have been well noted and explored.<sup>167</sup> A great deal less study has gone into the question of why this riddle is not mentioned in the play. While the riddle of the Sphinx is clearly not oracular speech, I nonetheless open my examination with an overview of how the riddle of the Sphinx functions within the play and what its significance is for the play as a whole, since an understanding of how riddles function linguistically offers us useful tools for approaching oracular speech in this play.

Since we are not given any information about the content of the Sphinx’ riddle, it is worth starting with what we *do* learn about the riddle. We hear about the riddle three times within the play, and here we have a proper riddle (described with the word αἴνιγμα in two different places: 393 and 1525) rather than the somewhat looser use of “riddle” I made in the previous chapter, in describing Nessus’ cryptic dying words.

The riddle of the Sphinx is invoked by a priest at the start of the play to highlight Oedipus’ great service to the city, and we hear how he released (ἐξέλευσας, 35) the city from the Sphinx. The word used to describe this release, ἐκλύω, anticipates the actions Apollo demands to save the city (λύοντας, 101) and echoes the traditional language used to describe solving a riddle.<sup>168</sup>

Linguistically, these are all closely related and Oedipus’ defining heroic act of solving the riddle is linked to his attempts to save Thebes. This seemingly obvious connection—defeating the Sphinx *was* what saved the city at the time—will become far more complicated by the end of the play, since Oedipus saves the city from one threat (the Sphinx) while exposing it to another (the plague).<sup>169</sup>

35	ὅς γ’ ἐξέλευσας ἄστυ Καδμείων μολῶν σκληρᾶς ἀοιδοῦ δασμόν ὄν παρείχομεν, καὶ ταῦθ’ ὑφ’ ἡμῶν οὐδὲν ἐξειδῶς πλέον οὐδ’ ἐκδιδαχθεῖς, ἀλλὰ προσθήκη θεοῦ λέγει νομίζει θ’ ἡμῖν ὀρθῶσαι βίον· <i>OT</i> 35-39	And you, when you came to the city of the Cadmeans, you released us from the tribute we were paying to the harsh songstress. And further, having no special knowledge and not having been thoroughly instructed, but by the assistance of a
----	---	---

<sup>167</sup> See Barrett 2002: 190-222.

<sup>168</sup> However, as LSJ note (*ad* αἴνιγμα), solving a riddle can be described with διειπεῖν and εἰδέναι, the passages it cites for both these verbs are from the *Oedipus Tyrannus* (*OT* 393, 1525) and of little use when making an argument about language within this play. The other verb it provides for solving an αἴνιγμα is μαθεῖν (used at *E.Ph.* 48, 50 to describe Oedipus’ actions). However, λύω is an extremely common word for solving riddles (found with both γρίφος and αἴνιγμα) and occurs at *Vit. Hom.* 7 West (*Vita Romana*), D. Chr. *Orat.* 10.31, Arist. *LI* 969b.4-6, Jos. *AJ* 5.290, D.S. 4.64.3, Str. *Geog.* 10.3.23, *et al.* We find also αἴνιγμα . . . δύσλυτον at *Plu.* Fr.25.3 and a wide range of compounds of λύω to also describe solving riddles: ἐπιλύω at *Ath. Deip.* 10.71, 10.73; and διαλύω at *Ath. Deip.* 10.73, 10.88 and *Plut. Septem* 154B.

<sup>169</sup> On the relationship between Oedipus and the Sphinx, and the way that Oedipus both vanquishes and (in a sense) becomes the Sphinx, see Moore 1980.

	god, you are spoken of and credited as having restored our life.
--	--

By invoking Oedipus' victory over the Sphinx, the priest reminds the city and, more importantly, the audience that Oedipus *earned* his position—he is an embodiment of the positive elements of a *tyrannus*.<sup>170</sup> He did not inherit rule, but he achieved it through his own actions. Yet, the priest is careful to remind us, Oedipus did not accomplish this entirely on his own. He had assistance (προσθήκη) from a god. Jebb notes that the use of προσθήκη here “is appropriate, since the achievement of Oed. is viewed as essentially a triumph of human wit: a divine agency prompted him, but remained in the background” (*ad* 38). I would elaborate and say that the divine agency is intentionally ambiguous. The priest can thus characterize Oedipus as a pious man without diminishing his accomplishments as the savior of the city; there is no specific god with whom Oedipus must share the credit. Instead, our introduction to Oedipus as a ruler casts him as a man who—in the eyes of his people—has a very pious understanding of his privileged relationship with the gods. The priest, speaking on behalf of the Theban suppliants, makes it clear that they have *not* come to Oedipus for help because they think that he is an equal to the gods (θεοῖσι μὲν νυν οὐκ ἰσούμενόν σ' ἐγὼ / οὐδ' οἶδε παῖδες ἐζόμεσθ' ἐφέστιοι, 31-2). Quite the opposite, in fact. They think that he is the best *among men* at dealing with the challenges of life and dealings with the divine (ἀνδρῶν δὲ πρῶτον ἔν τε συμφοραῖς βίου / κρίνοντες ἔν τε δαιμόνων συναλλαγαῖς, 33-4).<sup>171</sup> This description complements what we find a few lines later, about the

<sup>170</sup> See Knox 1957 for the most well-known look at the themes of tyranny and the rhetoric and imagery surrounding the figure of the *tyrannus* (and Athens as the *polis tyrannos*). As Knox 1957: 54 notes, “This sense of the word tyrannos is exactly appropriate for Oedipus...: he is an intruder, **one whose warrant for power is individual achievement, not birth**” (emphasis mine). Recent work on the topic, however, has found some fault with Knox: Edmunds 2002 revisits this question, looking at Oedipus in light of both the Athenian ideology of tyranny as well as the more ambivalent Panhellenic ideology of tyranny. Edmunds concludes that Oedipus' intelligence is an anomalous or heterogeneous element of his tyranny (as opposed to the generic characteristics of tyranny). Seaford 2003 also finds some problems with Knox' interpretation, since parallels between the figure of the tyrannus and the tyrannical city would have been easy for Sophocles to make explicit, and yet he does not chose to do so. Instead, Seaford highlights the ambivalent, tyrannical depiction of Oedipus, particularly when Oedipus is viewed across the *OT* and the *OC*. In short, Knox' comments on the (at least partially) meritocratic characterization of Oedipus as a *tyrannus* are not undisputed, but they certainly serve to highlight the individual accomplishment of Oedipus, which is a defining aspect of his depiction. On the general topic of tyranny in Greece, and in Athens in particular, *Popular Tyranny: Sovereignty and Its Discontents in Ancient Greece* (2003, ed. Morgan) is a useful, recent look at the topic.

<sup>171</sup> This passage is particularly difficult to translate and understand. The συμφοραῖς βίου seem straightforward enough, but the δαιμόνων συναλλαγαῖς are much less clear. Jebb argues strongly for δαιμόνων as a subjective genitive, meaning “‘conjunctures’ caused by gods . . . Special visitations, as opposed to the ordinary chanced of life (συμφοραῖς βίου)” (*ad* 34). He lists the Sphinx and the plague (described as ὁ πυρφόρος θεὸς at line 27) among these δαιμόνων συναλλαγαῖς and thinks that the use of συναλλαγή in the sense of “a conjuncture of events” at *OC* 410 makes this a preferable reading, rather than understanding this as “dealings (of men) with gods.” I side with Dawe (*ad* 34) in thinking that there is no compelling reason to choose any of the available meanings of συναλλαγή and that it is best to choose a translation (he suggests “dealings”) that is vague and open enough to accommodate the possibility that

assistance of a god. Oedipus seems to have a good working relationship with divinities, as far as the people can tell. He knows his place in relation to the gods, and the gods augment his own knowledge and abilities.<sup>172</sup> By associating Oedipus and his heroic, interpretive victory with the gods, the priest makes an implicit connection between the gods and effective interpretation—a connection that will be challenged by Oedipus himself as well as by the outcome of the play.

Later, when Oedipus accuses Tiresias of plotting with Creon to overthrow him, he invokes the Sphinx as well, but in a very different manner:

390	ἐπεὶ φέρ' εἰπέ, ποῦ σὺ μάντις εἶ σαφής; πῶς οὐκ, ὅθ' ἡ ῥαψωδὸς ἐνθάδ' ἦν κύων, ἠὔδας τι τοῖσδ' ἀστοῖσιν ἐκλυτήριον; καίτοι τό γ' αἶνιγμ' οὐχὶ τοῦπιόντος ἦν ἀνδρὸς διειπεῖν, ἀλλὰ μαντείας ἔδει·	Come then, tell me, when have you shown yourself to be a true prophet? Why did you utter no saving word on behalf of the citizens, when the rhapsodic bitch <sup>173</sup> was here? After all, the riddle was not for just any passerby to explain fully, and there was need of a prophet's skill—a skill which, coming either from birds or any of the gods, you were conspicuously seen to be lacking. But I came, Oedipus who knew nothing, and I stopped her, accomplishing it with my intellect alone, having learned nothing from birds . . . And I whom you attempt to banish, thinking that you will stand near to the Creontic throne. I think that you and the one who plotted these things will regret your eagerness to drive the pollution out of the land. If you did not seem so old, you would have learned a painful lesson suited to your attitude.
395	ἦν οὐτ' ἀπ' οἰωνῶν σὺ προυφάνης ἔχων οὐτ' ἐκ θεῶν του γνωτόν: ἀλλ' ἐγὼ μολῶν, ὁ μηδὲν εἰδῶς Οἰδίπους, ἔπαυσά νιν, γνώμη κυρήσας οὐδ' ἀπ' οἰωνῶν μαθῶν· ὄν δὴ σὺ πειρᾶς ἐκβαλεῖν, δοκῶν θρόνοις	
400	παραστατήσιν τοῖς Κρεοντείοις πέλας. κλαίων δοκεῖς μοι καὶ σὺ χῶ συνθεῖς τάδε ἀγηλατήσιν· εἰ δὲ μὴ 'δόκεις γέρον εἶναι, παθῶν ἔγνωσ ἄν οἷά περ φρονεῖς.	
	OT 390-403	

I will not dwell on the dramatic irony that pervades this tirade, though it is of course striking. I am more concerned with the effect of invoking the riddle of the Sphinx here. Before, the priest mentioned the Sphinx in order to emphasize the great service Oedipus had done to Thebes. In the process, he highlighted Oedipus' piety and his meritocratic claim to rule. The riddle, however, was not mentioned at all. In this second version, the focus is entirely on the riddle (αἶνιγμ', 393) and the difficulties it posed. This riddle could not be solved by just anyone (καίτοι τό γ' αἶνιγμ' οὐχὶ τοῦπιόντος ἦν / ἀνδρὸς διειπεῖν, 393-4). Its difficulty demanded some sort of

this means "'dealings' with the gods, or a crisis caused by them, or even a reconciliation with them," since all these possibilities are attested uses of συναλλαγή.

<sup>172</sup> Dawe notes (*ad* 31) that "it is most important that we should know at an early stage whether Oedipus is the kind of tyrant who might wish to be regarded as divine, or whether he keeps himself free from such impiety . . . Oedipus is the sort of man who might reject extreme adulation with words like οὐ τίς τοι θεός εἰμι· τί μ' ἀθανάτοισιν ἔῖσκες; like Odysseus, Hom. *Od.* 16.187; or λέγω κατ' ἄνδρα, μὴ θεόν, σέβειν ἐμέ, like Agamemnon, Aesch. *Agam.* 925. The suppliants know this, and respect his wishes. They feel that he has some special relationship with the gods (38) but they carefully draw the vital distinction between gods (31) and men (33)."

<sup>173</sup> Her description as both an ἀοιδός (36) and a ῥαψωδός (391) reinforces what we might have already expected about the riddle's meter, which is that it was in hexameter. See Lloyd-Jones 1978: 60 on this point.

extraordinary skill—Oedipus suggests that mantic skill should have allowed Tiresias to solve the riddle, but since it did not, Oedipus had to use intellectual skill instead. It is not clear, however, that a riddle might require prophetic abilities.<sup>174</sup> In less tragic contexts, riddles were popular party games; they allowed party guests to match wits with one another, not to showcase their prophetic abilities.<sup>175</sup> Even if the reference to prophetic skill is not entirely appropriate, it is rhetorically useful, since it allows Oedipus to compare his service to the city to that of Tiresias. The citizens needed a seer to save them, but Tiresias, the seer *par excellence*, did not utter any saving word (ἐκλυτήριον, 392). Oedipus, who goes to great lengths to point out that he is not a seer and has no special knowledge, accomplished with his intellect alone (γνώμη) what Tiresias could not do. Oedipus' own language echoes that used by the priest (ἐξέλυσας, at line 35) to describe the service Oedipus rendered to the city, and Oedipus here casts himself, as he has been cast by others, as the bringer of release and the solver of riddles—and the sole savior of the city.

As opposed to the previous mention of the Sphinx, which painted a picture of a pious and heroic Oedipus who freed the city from a monster, we now see a different version of Oedipus who makes no mention of divine assistance (προσθήκη θεοῦ, 38) but instead takes full credit for himself and his intellect and offers his own abilities as an alternative to Tiresias' divinely inspired ones. His speech here certainly serves to characterize him as hubristic, antagonistic, and defensive, but it also does something else that is subtle yet significant—Oedipus detaches the gods from his moment of interpretive clarity. Unlike the priest, he asserts that there was no divine assistance here and it was his own interpretive capabilities at work. He may be hubristic, but we cannot be sure that he is wrong. In no other moment in the play do we see Oedipus effectively understanding any sort of divine communication or receiving any discernible divine help.<sup>176</sup> In a play that focuses relentlessly

---

<sup>174</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that prophets were not associated with riddles. For instance, the *Melampodia* (frag. 278 MW = Strabo 14.1.27) recounts Calchas' death, which occurs after he loses a contest against Mopsus. It is somewhat nebulous whether this should be seen as a riddle competition or a divinatory competition, and I tend to think that this is a competition in divining, but the distinction between the two categories is not an entirely clear one (this is, incidentally, the same sort of non-riddle riddle that Bilbo poses to Gollum in *The Hobbit*, which I detail at greater length below). We have a similar example, but with poets instead of prophets, in the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*. Poets are not prophets, *per se*, but the connection between prophecy and poetry has a long tradition in Greek literature. Oedipus' words, taken together with these examples, suggest that a while a prophet's divine knowledge isn't necessary to solve a riddle, it should nonetheless help him solve a riddle better than a mere mortal.

<sup>175</sup> On this, see Collins 2005, *The Muse at Play* (2013, eds. Kwapisz, Petrain, and Szymański), and Beta 2009. Plutarch's *Septem sapientum convivium* and *Quaestiones conviviales*, as well as Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*, all display this practice (and, in a less explicitly riddle-game format, Xenophon's *Symposium*).

<sup>176</sup> Perhaps we should take his claim more seriously, since the mere linguistic hint of Apollo seems to obscure understanding, as I will explore later. If the events of the play are any indication, Apollo at least was no part of Oedipus solving the Sphinx' riddle.



on misunderstood communication from the gods, it is significant that the one moment in which Oedipus is most conspicuously successful at interpretation occurs outside the confines of the play and—if we take him at his word—occurs without any interference from the gods.

This transition is interesting and serves both to characterize Oedipus and to illuminate his own ideas about interpretation and the role of the gods. Although the riddle of the Sphinx has no clear connection to the oracles from Apollo, it is precisely this apparent divide between the two that makes it so useful. The riddle’s relevance, for my purposes, lies in its potential to elucidate the oracles that we see elsewhere in this play. In much the same way that Nessus’ dying words in the *Trachiniae* are not a proper oracle, but are an effective foil for looking at issues of interpretation in the play, the riddle of the Sphinx is also a useful lens through which to view the actual oracles in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*.<sup>177</sup>

Before drawing out the broader implications of this, I would like to address the only other mention of the Sphinx within this play,<sup>178</sup> which is a very brief mention in passing:

128	Οιδίππους κακὸν δὲ ποῖον ἐμποδῶν, τυραννίδος οὔτω πεσοῦσης, εἶργε τοῦτ’ ἐξειδέναί; Κρέων	Oedipus With the ruler (tyrant) dead in this fashion, what sort of trouble kept you from finding out what happened?
130	ἢ ποικιλῶδὸς Σφιγξ τὸ πρὸς ποσὶν σκοπεῖν μεθέντας ἡμᾶς τάφανῆ προσήγετο. Οιδίππους ἀλλ’ ἐξ ὑπαρχῆς αὔθις αὔτ’ ἐγὼ φανῶ· OT 128-132	Creon The Sphinx, enigmatic singer, forced us to let go of these obscure things and focus on more immediate things. Oedipus I will start back up again and I will reveal these things.

<sup>177</sup> Interestingly, both these examples involve monsters who are liminal and partially human (the Sphinx and the centaur). There is a great deal to say about this, but it is sadly outside the scope of this project. Cf. duBois 1982: 95-109, which focuses on the divide between humans and animals. Though duBois does not explicitly discuss the Sphinx, her statements about monsters (Geryon, for example, and Acheloo) also apply to the Sphinx, in that the Sphinx is a non-human who threatens an organized, civilized *polis*. The human subject, duBois notes, concerns himself with “keeping his enemies, animals as well as barbarians, the alien and the monstrous, at bay” (duBois 1982: 95). The Sphinx is, in many ways, both animalistic and barbarian (as well as female) and an encapsulation of all that is “enemy” to the civilized *polis*, as duBois lays out these polarities. However, in its ability to engage in logical games and human speech, the Sphinx also demonstrates fundamentally human characteristics, making her an ambivalent and liminal figure who is well suited to a play concerned with the most liminal sort of communication (oracles).

<sup>178</sup> I am excluding lines 1524-5 here, since many scholars agree that these are later additions that are spurious. I do not agree that these lines should be omitted from texts of this play, but I also do not want to rest too much of my argument on lines whose authenticity are debated. Though I see the arguments of those who have argued against the authenticity of different lines at the end of the play (see, for instance Dawe 2001, who feels strongly that everything from 1424-1530 is spurious), I cannot concur with them. Dawe argues that the play’s plot demands the exile that Oedipus requests at 1410-2. He suggests that a “series of surprises” (3) makes up the end of the play, and this should indicate clearly that it is all spurious. Others, such as Ritter 1861, simply omit from line 1524 onward. Dawe and Ritter are both more enthusiastic emenders of texts than I am, however, and I do not find the arguments against these lines to be compelling enough to merit their removal. For a defense of these lines, see Serra 2003.

Though we do not hear about the riddle in this passage, the Sphinx and her effect are described in ways that echo traditional characteristics of riddles: riddles are obscure and hard to make out (τάφανῆ, 131) as well as artful or otherwise complex and intricate (ποικίλος can be inferred from ποικιλῶδός, 130). A riddle’s efficacy hinges on obscure language, doubled meanings, and the potential for the listener to mis-identify how the language maps onto underlying realities.

Since, as I noted earlier, the specific contents of the Sphinx’ riddle are conspicuously missing<sup>179</sup> from the *Oedipus Tyrannus*—though the traditional version of the riddle (whose answer is “Man”) was almost certainly known at the time of this play—I will start with a general examination that can apply to riddles more broadly, and not just the traditional version of the riddle.

### Mechanics of Greek Riddles

In an examination of the collection of ancient riddles found in Book 14 of the *Greek Anthology*, Luz finds that there are several categories of riddles (or, more precisely, several types of mechanisms that operate in riddles).<sup>180</sup> I will exclude for now the mythological riddles, in which the solution hinges on a depth of mythological knowledge (usually of mythological murders),<sup>181</sup> as well

---

<sup>179</sup> By “conspicuously absent,” I mean that the text gestures toward the riddle of the Sphinx, but does not ever *explicitly* discuss the form of the riddle. Sophocles could easily have made the connection that so many other readers of this play have made over the years, that Oedipus can solve a riddle about Man, but cannot solve the riddle of just one man (himself), and that he can answer a riddle about feet, but cannot use his own pierced feet as a clue to understand his own past. Sophocles could well have used the traditional riddle formulation to draw out these parallels for the audience, but he chooses not to. I see this as a conscious choice, since this version of the Sphinx’ riddle was known by the time he is writing, meant to highlight these connections in a very subtle way—by omitting any mention of the details of the riddle, but by hinting at it at times, as with τὸ πρὸς ποσὶν at line 130, Sophocles invites the audience to make those connections on their own, but does not foreground these parallels. The same occurs at line 397, ὁ μὴδὲν εἰδὼς Οἰδίπου, where the popular folk etymology which derives his name from οἶδα + ποῦς, is called to mind, but whereas a proper folk etymology would identify Oedipus as the man who knows about feet, only “knowing” is mentioned here, and the ποῦς part is missing—as, one could argue, is the case with Oedipus’ own search for his identity, in that he’s missing what a clue his own feet are.

<sup>180</sup> Luz 2013. See also Ar. *Poet.* 22 for a useful look at an ancient conception of riddles and the right syntactic balance and register that is necessary for an effective riddle: ἀλλ’ ἂν τις ἅπαντα τοιαῦτα ποιήσῃ, ἢ αἰνίγμα ἔσται ἢ βαρβαρισμός· ἂν μὲν οὖν ἐκ μεταφορῶν, αἰνίγμα, ἐὰν δὲ ἐκ γλωττῶν, βαρβαρισμός. αἰνίγματός τε γὰρ ἰδέα αὕτη ἔστι, τὸ λέγοντα ὑπάρχοντα ἀδύνατα συνάσαι· κατὰ μὲν οὖν τῶν <ἄλλων> ὀνομάτων σύνθεσιν οὐχ οἶόν τε τοῦτο ποιῆσαι, κατὰ δὲ τῆν μεταφορῶν ἐνδέχεται, οἶον “ἄνδρ’ εἶδον πυρὶ χαλκὸν ἐπ’ ἀνέρι κολλήσαντα”, καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα. τὰ δὲ ἐκ τῶν γλωττῶν βαρβαρισμός. It should be noted that <ἄλλων> is omitted in Z, and the reading here is Twining’s, ex Piccolomini versione (Ar.).

<sup>181</sup> For example, one of these that is particularly appropriate for this chapter is *Anth. Pal.* 14.38: Κτεῖνα κάσιον, κτάνε δ’ αὐ με κάσις, θάνομεν δ’ ὑπὸ πατρός· / μητέρα δ’ ἀμφοτέροι τεθναότες κτάνομεν (I killed my sibling, and my sibling killed me in return. We died because of our father, but by both dying, we killed our mother). The solution is either Polynices or Eteocles, and while the description obscures the story somewhat, the main skill required to solve this is a knowledge of the story of Oedipus’ family and not any sort of particular mental gymnastics.,

as spelling-based riddles<sup>182</sup> since, as Luz notes, “the largest group [of riddles in the *Greek Anthology*] are riddles whose solution consists in an everyday object such as wine, a mirror, a fish, smoke,”<sup>183</sup> and we might here compare Aristotle’s definition of a riddle as something that uses metaphors to join together impossible things with things that exist (αἰνίγματός τε γὰρ ἰδέα αὕτη ἐστί, τὸ λέγοντα ὑπάρχοντα ἀδύνατα συνάψαι).<sup>184</sup> We can see, then, that riddles are primarily metaphorical descriptions of relatively common things, and it is the combination of common items with uncommon language choices that unites this genre.<sup>185</sup> Further, the mechanisms of these most-common types of riddles have a great deal in common. The different categories overlap quite a bit,<sup>186</sup> but Luz distinguishes three major categories that are relevant here:

(1) Metonymy/analogy: objects are described with vocabulary and images from another sphere of life

<p>Εἷς ἄνεμος· δύο νῆες· ἐρέττουσιν δέκα ναῦται· εἷς δὲ κυβερνήτης ἀμφοτέρως ἐλάει. <i>Anth. Pal. 14.14</i></p>	<p>One wind, two ships; ten sailors row One pilot directs both</p>
---	--

<sup>182</sup> A particularly clever example of this is *Anth. Pal. 14.105*: εἰμὶ χαμαιζηλον ζώων μέλος· ἦν δ’ ἀφέλης μου / γράμμα μόνον, κεφαλῆς γίνομαι ἄλλο μέρος· / ἦν δ’ ἕτερον, ζῶων πάλιν ἔσσομαι / ἦν δὲ καὶ ἄλλο, οὐ μόνον εὐρήσεις, ἀλλὰ διηκόσια (I am the part of animals which reaches for the ground. If you take from me a single letter, I am another part of the head, and if you take another, I am back to an animal / and if you take another, I will not find me to be one, but two hundred!). The answer is πούς (foot), from which you can take remove the π to leave you with οὖς (ear), and which then shrinks to ὕς (pig), and finally ς (the sign for 200).

<sup>183</sup> Luz 2013: 93

<sup>184</sup> For more on this, see Ar. *Poet.* 1458a. He explains that the poet should aim for clarity (σαφήνεια), but not for so much clarity that the writing becomes ταπεινός (banal or insipid). Instead, poets should use unfamiliar or unusual words (ξενικοί), which makes their poetry σεμνή (erudite or elevated) and ἐξαλλάττουσα τὸ ἰδιωτικόν (distinguished from commonplace writing). He elaborates that ξενικοί words can be γλῶτται (obsolete or foreign words), μεταφοραί (metaphors), ἐπεκτάσεις (lengthenings), and anything else out of the ordinary (πᾶν τὸ παρὰ τὸ κύριον). If a poet uses exclusively ξενικοί words, however, they will be writing a riddle or something unintelligible (ἢ αἰνίγμα... ἢ βαρβαρισμός). Riddles, he says, are composed of metaphors, whereas too many archaic or foreign words produce something unintelligible. A riddle is defined, at its core, as something that combines descriptions of real and impossible things (αἰνίγματός τε γὰρ ἰδέα αὕτη ἐστί, τὸ λέγοντα ὑπάρχοντα ἀδύνατα συνάψαι). This is only possible by combining metaphors, and not by using other names of things (κατὰ μὲν οὖν τὴν τῶν ἄλλων ὀνομάτων σύνθεσιν οὐχ οἷόν τε τοῦτο ποιῆσαι, κατὰ δὲ τὴν μεταφορῶν ἐνδέχεται).

<sup>185</sup> There is a rich linguistic bibliography on the pragmatics of jokes and other sorts of enigmatic communication. For more on this topic (with a particular focus on folk-riddle phenomena), see Georges and Dundes 1963; Cray and Herzog 1967; Johnson 1975; Attardo 1993; Manetti 1993; Clark 1994; Rokem and Shulman (eds.) 1996 (Cohen 1996 and Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1996 are of note); Dienhart 1998; and Mooney 2004.

<sup>186</sup> For example, *Anth. Pal. 14.21* (20 is essentially the same riddle, but in a slightly different form) combines the mythological and spelling types of riddles, as well as the metonym/analogy type, since Hephaestus is used to mean fire: Ἐς μέσον Ἥφαιστοιο βαλὼν ἑκατοντάδα μούνην, / παρθένου εὐρήσεις υἷα καὶ φονέα (Throwing just 100 into the middle of Hephaestus, you will find the son and murderer of a maiden). Here, Hephaestus must be converted into a more common word for fire, πῦρ, though it retains its genitive case and becomes πυρός. If ρ, the sign for 100, is inserted into πυρός, it becomes Πύρρος, the son of Achilles and the young princess, Deidamia, and the murderer of another maiden, Polyxena.

The answer here is a double flute. The wind is the flautist’s breath, the two ships are the two pipes, and the ten sailors are the ten fingers. Here, the language is clearly nautical, which misdirects the hearer. It is only by recontextualizing these words that the listener can solve the riddle (potentially by starting with the easiest word to reimagine in another context—*ἄνεμος*, wind—and then working out from there to imagine another context in which some other sort of wind could drive two objects, and then out still further to figure out who or what the sailors might be). Often, these types of riddles also employ some sort of metonymy with the use of divine names to stand in for things with which those gods are associated.<sup>187</sup>

- (2) Pun/double meaning: a particularly common example of this involves *κόρη* used in a way that seems to indicate *young girl*, for example, but the solution requires it to be understood as *pupil* or *eyeball*

<p>Ἐν πυρὶ κοιμηθεῖσα κόρη θάνεν· ὁ προδότης δὲ οἶνος· ὑφ’ οὗ δὲ θάνεν, Παλλάδος ἦν στέλεχος· ὁ κτείνας ναυηγός· ἐνὶ ζώοντι δὲ τύμβῳ κεῖται μεμφομένη τὰς Βρομίου χάριτας. Παλλὰς καὶ Βρόμιός τε καὶ ὁ κλυτὸς Ἀμφιγυήεις, οἱ τρεῖς τὴν μούνην παρθένον ἠφάνισαν. <i>Anth. Pal. 14.109</i></p>	<p>A sleeping girl (<i>κόρη</i>) died in a fire. The traitor was wine. The thing by which she died was a log of Athena’s, the one who killed her was shipwrecked; in a living tomb she lies, blaming the blessings of Bromius. Pallas and Bromius and the famed lame one, the three did away with a single girl.</p>
---	--

Here, the story of Odysseus blinding Polyphemus is told in an oblique fashion. The “girl” mentioned at the start is in fact the Cyclops’ eye and she (the eye) is “killed” by a heated (by means of fire, or Hephaestus, the “famed lame one”) stake of olive wood (Pallas) wielded by the shipwrecked Odysseus. The eye/girl now lies in the “living tomb” that is the eye socket of the still-living Polyphemus. Bromius, of course, is the wine that incapacitated Polyphemus.

- (3) Paradox: a seemingly impossible situation is described which signals to the hearer that it is a riddle

<p>Μὴ λέγε, καὶ λέξεις ἐμὸν οὔνομα. δεῖ δέ σε λέξαι; ὦδε πάλιν, μέγα θαῦμα, λέγων ἐμὸν οὔνομα λέξεις. <i>Anth. Pal. 14.22</i></p>	<p>Do not speak and you will say my name. But do you need to speak? Well—what a marvelous thing!—by speaking you will also say my name!</p>
---	---

<sup>187</sup> As an example of this, see *Anth. Pal. 14.53*: Ἥφαιστῳ ποτὲ Παλλὰς ὑπ’ ἀγκοῖνησι δαμείσα / εἰς εὐνήν ἐμίγη Πηλέος ἐν θαλάμοις / τοῖ δ’ ὥς οὖν λιπαρῆσι καλυφθήτην ὀθόνησι, / αὐτίκ’ ἐγεννήθη νυκτιπόλος Φαέθων (Once, Pallas was mastered by the embraces of Hephaestus and she mixed with him in sleep in the bedchambers of Peleus. And when the two of them were covered by fine, shining linen, suddenly night-roaming Phaethon was born). Here, Pallas metonymically represents (olive) oil and Hephaestus represents fire. The “bedchambers of Peleus,” playing on the popular derivation of Peleus from *πηλός* (clay) here represent a lamp, and Phaethon is the light that comes out of the lamp, once oil and fire are combined.

<p>Οὐδείς βλέπων βλέπει με, μὴ βλέπων δ' ὄρα·  ὁ μὴ λαλῶν λαλεῖ, ὁ μὴ τρέχων τρέχει·  ψευδῆς δ' ὑπάρχω, πάντα τάληθῆ λέγων.  <i>Anth. Pal. 14.110</i></p>	<p>No one who looks sees me, but one who isn't looking sees. The one who is not speaking, speaks; the one who is not running, runs.  I am false, while speaking all truth.</p>
---	--

In the first instance, the answer is silence,<sup>188</sup> since by not speaking at all, someone could be understood to be “speaking silence,” as well as by actually saying the word “silence.” Here, the riddle hinges on the fact that “silence” is both an absence of sound and a word. For the second riddle, the answer is a dream, since only someone whose eyes are closed in sleep (i.e. not “looking”) can see a dream. Similarly, a sleeping person cannot speak or run, but they can seem to do so in a dream, and dreams are simultaneously both false and true, since the events seen in a dream are not *actually* occurring, but the message conveyed by the dream is understood to be true.<sup>189</sup> This type of riddle sets up things that seem to be incompatible but turn out to be true, from an unexpected perspective. By framing the solution in this apparently unrealizable way, it clearly identifies itself as a riddle—if the statement is true, then something about it must need to be reinterpreted to make sense of the contradictions.<sup>190</sup>

Finally, as noted above, the majority of riddles have very commonplace solutions, at least in the sample that survives. The requisite skill set to solve a riddle is not, in general, a breadth of knowledge. Instead, it is a mental agility. Luz notes that:

The dense and highly sophisticated way the riddles describe their objects forms a certain contrast with the nature of these objects themselves. They are commonplace things or famous episodes or characters drawn from a common stock of knowledge such as everyday life or Greek myth and literature. No extraordinary knowledge of the world is required as far as the solution of the riddles is concerned. The point of the riddles is not to present an object as rare or *recherché* as possible but to disguise something mundane in the most sophisticated and hard-to-guess way. Hence it is not the *objects* of the riddles which require wide-ranging knowledge as well as the ability to see through allusions and to deal with their

<sup>188</sup> This solution is not universally acknowledged. Buffière 1970 *ad loc.* provides a range of other conjectured answers to this riddle, though the lemma (*Paris. 1409*) provides σιγή as the solution. Other conjectures include μὴ πάλιν (Lange), οὐδέ (Prévost), οὐδέν (Welcker), the negation (Rossignol), and Μῆ...δεῖ...α/Μῆδεια (Buttmann). Buffière emends λέξεις to λήξεις in the second line, which he feels makes the riddle more of a *jeu de mots*. I see no need to emend, however, and the riddle seems to work just as well (in fact, better) with λέξεις as the final word.

<sup>189</sup> My initial reading of this riddle assumed that it referred to perception that dreams can be both true or (at times) notoriously false. I was here thinking in particular of Agamemnon's famously false dream from Zeus in *Iliad* 2. Through conversation with Scodel (*per litt.*) I have come to realize that the far stronger reading understands this as a reference to the ways in which any dream is simultaneously false and true, as described above. It is true that dreams can, at least in certain literary contexts, be false, but I am convinced that this riddle must be disregarding such situations and instead assuming that the prophetic message of a dream is always true.

<sup>190</sup> As will be explored in greater detail later, this is a fundamental semiotic issue, in that riddles involve finding a secondary (or even tertiary) relationship between the signifier and the signified. For an application of Saussurean semiotics to classical texts, see Manetti 1993.

intricate and roundabout expressions; rather it is the *process of decoding* the riddles' disguise which demands all this and challenges the recipient's intellectual capacity.<sup>191</sup>

Let us return then to the riddle of the Sphinx. As noted earlier, the well-known riddle of the Sphinx is absent from the play. Nonetheless, at least a portion of the audience would likely supply some form of this riddle and it is as good an *exemplum* as any to explore the genre of riddles.<sup>192</sup> Looking at this riddle, we can see the same mechanisms at work as in our broader sample of riddles from the *Greek Anthology*:

<p>ἔστι δίπουν ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ τετράπουν, οὗ μία μορφή, καὶ τρίπουν, ἀλλάσσει δὲ φυὴν μόνον ὅσσ' ἐπὶ γαῖαν ἔρπετὰ κινεῖται καὶ ἀν' αἰθέρα καὶ κατὰ πόντον· ἀλλ' ὁπόταν τρισσοῖσιν ἐπιγόμενον ποσὶ βαίνη, ἔνθα τάχος γυίοισιν ἀφαυρότατον πέλει αὐτοῦ.</p>	<p>There is, on the earth, a thing that is two-footed and four-footed, and one form [or one voice], and it is three-footed as well, and it alone changes its form [or its nature], out of so many creatures that move across the land and through the air and in the sea, but whenever it goes about, moving itself forward with three feet, then the swiftness in its limbs is weakest.</p>
---	--

The adjectives are all neuter (a two-footed and four-footed *thing*) and the words here are far more commonly used for animals (ἔρπετὰ and ἔρπω are not commonly used of humans, though they can be),<sup>193</sup> and the descriptions of land and sea and air incline the listener to think of a non-human animal. Here, we see the metonymic type of riddle operating and only by thinking more broadly about what might be included in the category of “creatures that move across the land and through the air and in the sea” can we see that the solution is Man. Whether or not we are justified in thinking that this particular riddle was the riddle that Sophocles' Oedipus solved before the play begins, solving any riddle would presumably require the same sort of interpretive skill—an ability to

<sup>191</sup> Luz 2013: 96

<sup>192</sup> Either Sophocles has no particular riddle in mind, and only the generic idea of the riddle, or he intends to call this version of the riddle to mind in his audience while leaving it conspicuously unmentioned. Either way, there are clear references to an αἴνιγμα and we are, I think, justified in supplying this particular riddle as a placeholder in order to examine the broader linguistic principles that govern riddles.

<sup>193</sup> ἔρπω is, admittedly, much semantically broader and is used of Odysseus (Hom. *Od.* 17.158), Aphrodite (*h. Ven.* 156), and the Pythia (Aesch. *Eum.* 39). It is also used in a general sense, to describe abstract subjects, as a rough equivalent to “come (slowly/gradually)” without the animalistic connotations of “crawl,” as at Pind. *N.* 7.67-8 (ὁ δὲ λοιπὸς εὐφρων / ποτὶ χρόνος ἔρποι) and Aesch. *Ag.* 450-1 (φθονερὸν δ' ὑπ' ἄλγος ἔρπει προδίκους Ἀτρεΐδαις). ἔρπω does, however, often refer to animals, as at Pind. *O.* 7.52 (ζωοῖσιν ἐρπόντεσσι) and it is often used to describe the range of living things that move about the earth, as at *Il.* 17.446-7 (οὐ μὲν γάρ τί πού ἐστιν οἴζυρῶτερον ἀνδρὸς / πάντων, ὅσα τε γαῖαν ἐπι πνέει τε καὶ ἔρπει.) and *h. Cer.* 365 (ὅποσα ζῶει τε καὶ ἔρπει). ἔρπετόν, however, does not have this semantic range and occurs to describe monsters (as of the varied forms that Proteus will take at Hom. *Od.* 4.418, Typhon at Pind. *P.* 1.25, and Python at *Anth. Graec.* 3.6) and non-human animals (a dog at Pind. *Frag.* 106.3, creeping animals that attack gardens at Arist. *Av.* 1069-70, and non-flying creatures, at Her. *Hist.* 1.140). As noted by the range of definitions provided in LSJ, it is used primarily (and broadly) of a “beast or animal which goes on all fours” and “creeping thing, reptile, esp. snake.”

think abstractly about language and make unexpected connections and associations to bring a secret, hidden meaning out of the words. The claims, by both the priest and Oedipus, that Oedipus knew nothing when he solved the riddle of the Sphinx (οὐδὲν ἐξειδῶς πλέον, 37; ὁ μηδὲν εἰδῶς Οἰδίπους, 397)<sup>194</sup>—an odd word choice for a man who is famous for knowing the riddle that no one else could solve—now make somewhat more sense. The skill of the riddle-solver is specifically not one of specialized or rare knowledge. His heroic victory over the Sphinx was a victory of decoding artificially intricate language to reveal the simple underlying reality,<sup>195</sup> not a victory of superior information.

As we will see, the oracles in this play are not particularly cryptic or riddling, in the traditional sense. There is no question about the *semantic* meaning of the prophecy that Oedipus will kill his father and marry his mother, but there is a very real question of what those words correspond to. This play hinges on Oedipus’ eventual understanding of the oracular “riddle” that he was unable to solve before; the way he described Tiresias’ inability to solve the riddle of the Sphinx will be precisely Oedipus’ own failing. Oedipus accuses Tiresias of not being able to explain fully (διδίπαιν, 394) what the riddle meant (and, by extension, of not being able to save the city).<sup>196</sup> He cannot mean that Tiresias did not understand the semantic meanings of the words the Sphinx used, but he is instead reproaching Tiresias for his inability to find the unexpected solution that met the description provided in the riddle.<sup>197</sup>

<sup>194</sup> The clever pun in this line should be noted. Oedipus’ name has several different folk etymologies, but one of them derives his name from οἶδα + ποὺς (Oedipus is the man who knows about feet) and collocating his name with a form of οἶδα nods to this folk etymology. This is also a prime example of the allusions within the play to the content of the Sphinx’ riddle without explicitly mentioning the riddle, as discussed at fn. 19.


<sup>195</sup> It is worth noting that this is precisely what constitutes linguistic communication as well, on a basic semiotic and semantic level. If we adopt a basic definition of semantics as being “concerned with the relations of signs to denotata” (Matthews 2007, paraphrasing C.W. Morris), then Oedipus’ great victory as a riddle-solver is both pragmatic (since a riddle requires a recontextualization of language) as well as semantic in nature. He is the one who is able to identify, in the signs of the riddle, the proper denotatum (man). Riddles draw on unintuitive signifier-signified relationships, but they are entirely concerned with the relationship between signifier and signified.

<sup>196</sup> δίδίπαιν is, as Dawe 1982 and others have noted, a somewhat odd word choice. It also occurs at *Trachiniae* 22, where its use is not so odd: καὶ τρόπον μὲν ἂν πόνων / οὐκ ἂν δίδίπαιμι· οὐ γὰρ οἶδ’ (*Trach.* 21-2). In this play, however, it occurs twice, both in complicated passages. Here, we have it used to describe Oedipus’ interactions with the Sphinx, as well as at line 854, to describe Apollo’s oracular warning about the child that Laius and Jocasta would bear (εἰ δ’ οὖν τι κάκτρεποιτο τοῦ πρόσθεν λόγου, / οὔτοι ποτ’, ὤναξ, σὸν γε Λαίου φόνον / φανεί δικαίως ὀρθόν, ὃν γε Λοξίας / δίδίπαι χρῆναι παιδὸς ἐξ ἐμοῦ θανεῖν, *OT* 851-4).

<sup>197</sup> On this point, and the peculiarity of δίδίπαιν, Bollack 1990 is useful. Bollack’s understanding of the use of δίδίπαιν offers a particularly clever and illuminating reading that merges the disparate meanings that the context suggests, as both a sort of speaking (since ἠῦδας at 392 is contrasted with δίδίπαιν—whereas Tiresias could not *speaking* anything that would save the citizens, Oedipus was able to δίδίπαιν) as well as a sort of solving (since the direct object of δίδίπαιν is τό...αἴνιγμα’ at 393). Bollack suggests that the great triumph of Oedipus is not only that he knows the answer to the riddle, but that he is capable of *translating* the riddle and speaking what needs to be spoken in response to it. The

Ironically, Oedipus' inability to replicate this feat will be the central interpretive failure of the play, as he fails to see that *he* is the unexpected solution that meets all of Apollo's descriptions. The language is almost deceptively clear in the oracles that Oedipus receives, but there is a critical piece of information left out (the identity of Laius' killer, in the case of the plague; the identity of Oedipus' father and mother, in the oracle about his fate). Without this information, a clever riddle-solver could still broaden their interpretation and understandings of the oracles and find the correct meaning, assuming they recognized the necessity of doing so.

In fact, to return to one of the sample riddles I provided above, about silence, the critical missing piece of information would be that we are shifting between a word and the external reality to which it corresponds—or, to use the Saussurean terminology, between the signifier and the signified. In the context of an actual riddle, this ruins all the fun, but meaning emerges much more effectively:

<p>Do not speak and you will say my name. But do you need to speak? Well—what a marvelous thing!—by speaking you will also say my name!</p>		<p>Be silent and you will enact my meaning. Alternatively, you can also say the word that represents me and you will be representing me that way too!</p>
---	---	---

Meaning emerges, but the riddle is no longer a riddle. Our “marvelous thing”—the ability of an unexpected solution to solve an apparent paradox—is gone, but in its place we have clarity and ready comprehension.

The riddle of the Sphinx, whatever its form, is such a useful starting point because it helps us to see what sort of interpretive moves Oedipus needed to have made in order to understand the oracles about himself. It also helps us to think in a more nuanced way about why he does not “solve” the riddle of himself. There are specific rules in play when solving a riddle which mostly

---

nature of Oedipus' victory is, in this view, a distinctly linguistic accomplishment, one that is tied up with the spoken word and Oedipus' ability to render something that is unintelligible to others into a clear, intelligible form. In Bollack's words, Oedipus can turn *la parole chantée* into something spoken, whereas it remains *inassimilable* and *indicible* to Tiresias and the others : “L'idée de solution peut être retrouvée dans le verbe, sans qu'on en modifie l'acception obvie, si la 'parole,' et les distinctions qu'elle établit, sont opposées à la récitation 'rhapsodique' de la Sphinge, qui s'exprime par symboles. Son chant reste confus tant que la chose absente n'est pas cernée par l'introduction d'un sujet dans une proposition prédicative qui explicite les références. 'Dire l'énigme,' c'est donc en posséder la représentation qui permet de se l'approprier par le langage. Le fait qu'Œdipe puisse 'parler' . . . montre que la parole chantée a pu être assimilée par Œdipe, alors que pour les autres, dont le devin, elle était restée inassimilable, et donc indicible. De même, dans les derniers vers, τὰ κλείν' αἰνίγματ' ἦδει [1525] eut ne pas signifier seulement qu'Œdipe connaissait la solution, mais qu'il sut dire ce qu'il fallait. Le 'texte' n'est pas alors, comme dans les vers qui nous ont transmis l'énigme, le 'chant' du monstre, mais sa transposition articulée dans le langage qui en fait une réponse efficace, composée pour le maîtriser” (Bollack 1990 *ad*393f.)



consist of disregarding several of the rules of normal speech. To solve a riddle, a listener must consciously discard the obvious, natural, intended meanings of words and the most logical correspondence between the signifier and the signified. Instead, they must find a less natural or less obvious correspondence which may involve a secondary meaning of a word or a more metaphorical or abstract interpretation of the question. In normal conversations, however, this flies directly in the face of the understood and accepted ways of communicating. I have replicated Grice's Maxims here, as a reference point for what I have argued, in the previous chapter, that standard communication should entail:

**Maxims of Conversations:**

**QUALITY:** Try to make your contribution one that is true.

1. Do not say what you believe to be false [i.e. do not lie].
2. Do not say that for which you lack evidence.

**QUANTITY:**

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

**RELATION:** Be relevant.

**MANNER:** Be perspicuous.

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief. (Avoid unnecessary prolixity.)
4. Be orderly.

For a riddle, all of these maxims are at risk of being broken in some capacity. Riddles abound with willfully misleading language (though, critically, the content must still be true, and can only *seem* to break the maxim of Quality), red herrings (breaking the maxim of Quantity and/or Relation), and ambiguous or obscure expressions (breaking the maxim of Manner). In fact, their efficacy as riddles depends on how they skillfully and judiciously<sup>198</sup> disregard these maxims. We can see, then, that the rules of normal speech and the rules of riddles stand in sharp contrast to one another. When Oedipus does not realize that he ought to approach these oracles as a riddle, he applies the wrong

---

<sup>198</sup> Judiciously, in that a complete and total disregard of these maxims would result in absurdity or nonsense. A well-constructed riddle needs to balance conformity with and divergence from these maxims. An appropriate balance ensures that there is enough readily-intelligible information to solve the riddle but not so much that there is no challenge to the hearer. A failure to strike the right balance is the problem with the final "riddle" that Bilbo Baggins tells Gollum in *The Hobbit*. "What is in my pocket?" is not constructed in a way that gives Gollum enough information to solve it, and he would need to have specific outside knowledge in order to answer correctly, whereas all of the other riddles contain sufficient information to be solved based solely on the language of the riddle. As Luz notes, of this same passage in *The Hobbit*, we can see from this that not all questions are riddles (Luz 2013: 83), as Bilbo himself recognizes, since "that last question had not been a genuine riddle according to the ancient laws."

set of rules to this oracular language and cannot see the true meaning of the words until it is too late.

### **Oracles and Prophecy in the *Oedipus Tyrannus***

The plot of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* centers on prophecies in much the same way that the *Trachiniae* does, though the actual mechanisms of the prophecies turn out to be very different. Rather than a central oracle whose form shifts and changes throughout the play, as we see in the *Trachiniae*, the *Oedipus Tyrannus* prominently features a fairly stable oracle and all the outcomes of these prophecies have already taken place before this play begins. The critical oracular misunderstanding here does not stem from a fatal inability to understand the language that the oracle employs. Instead, Oedipus and Jocasta are both unable to correctly associate the words in the prophecy with the objects they reference. There is nothing inherently cryptic about the words of the oracle, though it will be illuminating to look more closely at what Apollo's oracle specifically does not say; the misunderstandings occur because the hearers think that they can correctly fill in the gaps left by what Apollo does not say when, in fact, they cannot. As I trace the multiple incarnations of these different prophecies, it will become clear that there are multiple sets of "rules" in play. The rules of cooperative conversation, as detailed in Chapter I, remain relevant, but here we can see the rules of riddles in play, too, as well as a complex process of blending and bending of these different sets of rules and linguistic principles.

Although the most famous oracle—that Oedipus will kill his father and sleep with his mother—tends to overshadow any examination of this play, there are two major groups of prophecies that run throughout it. In addition to the more well-known prophecy, which has already been fulfilled by the time the play begins, there is also the "prophecy" with which the play opens, which reveals instructions from Apollo about how Thebes can remove the plague. It is perhaps more accurate to call this second message from Delphi something like "oracular instructions," since this does not describe an unavoidable fate (as is the case with the true prophecy about Oedipus killing his father and sleeping with his mother). However, since it does offer a guaranteed outcome about the future, I feel comfortable classifying this as a second type of prophecy. There is also a third type of prophecy that does not fit neatly into either category, but which shares a great deal with both types. These are the utterances of Tiresias, which predict the exact nature of the fulfillment of the two oracles—that Oedipus will realize that he is guilty of

killing his father (which brought on the plague in the first place) and sleeping with his mother, and that he will blind himself when he realizes all of this.

As I noted above, these oracles cannot be neatly compartmentalized. Oracles are alluded to and hinted at and used in a variety of rhetorical contexts that obscure the details and either minimize or highlight certain elements, as the situation demands. However, I will nonetheless attempt to separate out and examine the three different types and contexts of prophetic utterances that occur in this play before looking at them all more holistically. From this examination, we will see the role that Apollo's speech plays. Though one might easily believe that Apollo is malicious, I argue that we are not compelled to see malice or deception in his words. Rather, I suggest, Apollo is in much the same position as Zeus in the *Trachiniae*—his motives are entirely inaccessible to the mortals in the play and the mortals in the audience. We can only access Apollo through language and, as evidenced by the confusion surrounding the meaning of these oracles, Apollo's language conforms only with the semantic rules of human communication, but not the pragmatic conventions. Not to take too pithy an approach to this complex linguistic issue, but I argue here that Apollo is not necessarily *bad*, but simply misunderstood.

### **I. Oracular Instructions and the Plague**

I will begin, as the play itself does, with the oracular instructions that Creon receives from Delphi about how Thebes can be freed from the plague it is facing. These instructions do not involve the pragmatics of riddles to the degree that other oracles in this play do, but they do allow us to see how Apollo obscures meaning and hinders effective communication. This opening scene juxtaposes plague and healing as well as oracular communication and obfuscation. As such, it includes multiple spheres in which Apollo operates and it displays his potential role as both benefactor and adversary to mortals.<sup>199</sup> Though the details will become clear throughout this

---

<sup>199</sup> This is not a particularly strange or unexpected attribute of a god and Apollo regularly uses his divine attributes to both help and hinder mortals (as in *Iliad* I, when he sends a plague, even though he is the god of healing). Knox 1957 9-10 claims that Sophocles "repeatedly and emphatically" insists that the plague is not to be considered as coming from Apollo. He instead suggests that the Chorus associates the plague with Ares, and whether or not they are correct to do so, Sophocles is "clearly insisting" that the plague is not to be understood as the work of Apollo. While I agree that the Chorus does not attribute the plague to Apollo, I do not see anything to suggest that Sophocles is clearly insisting that Apollo is uninvolved in the plague. The divine is inscrutable throughout this play, and while Knox conclusively proves that the *Chorus* does not associate the plague with Apollo, we cannot, I think, assume that the Chorus is correct. Issues of sickness and health are Apollo's traditional domain and Apollo is deeply involved in the events of this play. I see no reason to think that the plague is not Apollo's work, though it is not explicitly attributed to Apollo in the play. As I discuss in this chapter, a great deal about Apollo is unclear and ambiguous, but the text allows for a reading in which the plague is his doing.

section, my central argument here is that the mere presence of Apollo serves to hinder understanding.<sup>200</sup> By “presence,” I mean something very broad—either his physical proximity (as when Oedipus goes to Delphi) or his linguistic or ideological presence, which is a much more nebulous concept. In my first example, we will see that when Creon recounts the words of the god (a god of light and clarity—themes that are emphasized ironically throughout the play<sup>201</sup>) communication breaks down. In this instance, Apollo is “present” when his words are being recounted by Creon (this is what I mean by his “linguistic presence”). In other instances, he is “present” when Jocasta is talking *about* Apollo. The *idea* of Apollo seems capable of causing misunderstanding, as well as the words he actually says. While I recognize that this is a loosely defined phenomenon, it does nonetheless hold true in a way that complements the more obvious issues with understanding and misunderstanding that occur throughout the play.

Let us turn, then, to the oracular instructions Creon receives concerning the plague in Thebes. The terrible plague (λοιμὸς ἔχθιστος, 28), we are told by the priest, is the result of an unnamed god, who is identified only as ὁ πυρφόρος θεὸς (27), and the city is described quite vividly as drowning in waves of death which involve a blight on crops and herds as well as stillbirths and miscarriages among the women of Thebes.<sup>202</sup> Oedipus tells the citizens that he has given the plague a great deal of thought (πολλὰς δ’ ὁδοὺς ἐλθόντα φροντίδος πλάνοις, 67), and since he could not come up with a solution on his own, he sent Creon to Delphi to consult Apollo.<sup>203</sup> When Creon returns, Oedipus immediately asks to know what the oracle is (ἔστιν δὲ ποῖον τοῦπος;

---

<sup>200</sup> On this note, his epithet Λοξίας is relevant. Though its origins are unclear, the epithet is plausibly connected with λοξός (slantwise) and several texts connect this with the indirect and ambiguous nature of Apollo’s prophecies. Others (e.g., Cleanth. Stoic. I.123) connect this epithet to the elliptical orbit of the sun. However, the belief that Apollo was so named because of his confusing oracles is pervasive and it corroborates my overall argument that Apollo is a force of confusion and misinterpretation.

<sup>201</sup> The plot of the entire play is concerned with vision (in a literal and metaphorical sense) and clarity and bringing secret, hidden truths out into the light, it is not surprising that these ideas are reflected in the language of the play. Though this is certainly not an exhaustive list, it does show the pervasiveness of words relating to clarity and visibility: ἐμφανής (96, 908); σαφής (286, 390, 604, 702, 846, 958, 978, 1065, 1132, 1182, 1325). Of Apollo specifically: 106, 1011); φαίνω and compounds of it (146, 164, 453, 474, 725, 754, 832, 853, 1059, 1229, 1383). φῶς (375, 1183, 1229, 1428). See Buxton 1996 for more on this.

<sup>202</sup> πόλις γάρ, ὡσπερ καὐτὸς εἰσορᾶς, ἄγαν / ἤδη σαλεύει κἀνακουφίσαι κάρα / βυθῶν ἔτ’ οὐχ οἶα τε φοίνιου σάλου, / φθίνουσα μὲν κάλυξιν ἐγκάρποις χθονός, / φθίνουσα δ’ ἀγέλαις βουνόμοις τόκοισί τε / ἀγόνοις γυναικῶν, 22-7.

<sup>203</sup> παῖδα γὰρ Μειοικέως / Κρέοντ’, ἑμαυτοῦ γαμβρόν, ἐς τὰ Πυθικά / ἔπεμψα Φοίβου δῶμαθ’, ὡς πύθοιθ’ ὅ τι / δρῶν ἢ τί φωνῶν τήνδε ῥυσαίμην πόλιν, 69-72.

89).<sup>204</sup> Though we have had hints and allusions to prophecies before now,<sup>205</sup> this is the first overt instance of an oracular pronouncement within the play:

95	Κρέων λέγοιμ' ἄν οἱ ἤκουσα τοῦ θεοῦ πάρα. ἄνωγεν ἡμᾶς Φοῖβος ἐμφανῶς ἄναξ μίασμα χώρας, ὡς τεθραμμένον χθονὶ ἐν τῆδ', ἐλαύνειν μηδ' ἀνήκεστον τρέφειν. Οἰδίπους ποῖα καθαρμῶ; τίς ὁ τρόπος <sup>206</sup> τῆς ξυμφορᾶς;	Creon I will tell you the things I heard from the god. Lord Phoebus clearly bid us to drive pollution out of the land—pollution that he says has been nourished in this land—and not to nourish it, incurable. <sup>208</sup>
100	Κρέων ἀνδρηλατοῦντας ἢ φόνω φόνον πάλι λύοντας, ὡς τόδ' αἶμα χειμάζον πόλιν. Οἰδίπους ποίου γὰρ ἀνδρὸς τήνδε μηνύει τύχην;	Oedipus With what sort of purification? <sup>209</sup> What is the manner of the misfortune? Creon Banishment, or paying back murder with murder, since this blood is storm-tossing the city.
105	Κρέων ἦν ἡμῖν, ὦναξ, Λαίος ποθ' ἡγεμῶν γῆς τῆσδε, πρὶν σὲ τήνδ' ἀπευθύνειν πόλιν. Οἰδίπους ἔξοιδ' ἀκούων· οὐ γὰρ εἰσεῖδόν γέ πω.	Oedipus Yes, of what sort of man is this fate that he reveals? Creon Lord, Laius was our leader in this land, before you restored this city.
110	Κρέων τούτου θανόντος νῦν ἐπιστέλλει σαφῶς	Oedipus I am well acquainted with him, by reputation, for I never looked upon him at all. Creon That man died and now Apollo clearly orders us to punish the murderers, whoever they are, by force. Oedipus Where on earth are they? Where will this trace, hard to make out, of an ancient guilt be found? Creon He said in this land. The thing that's being sought

<sup>204</sup> As Jebb notes on this passage, the τοῦπος here refers to the oracle itself, drawing a contrast with Creon's own words (λέγω, 87; λόγῳ, 90). Jebb here draws a parallel with τοῦπος τὸ θεοπρόπον, at *Trach.* 822, which is a particularly salient comparison in the context of this project.

<sup>205</sup> E.g., μαντεία σποδῶ (21), which Dawe suggests may refer to the temple of Apollo σπόδιος or divination by burnt offerings. At line 52, though it must refer to a good omen in a more generic sense, and not the actual practice of divination through bird signs, ὄρνιθι αἰσίῳ nonetheless calls to mind other practices of divination as well. Creon's report, then, is introduced in a context in which other prophetic alternatives have at least been called to mind. This serves to highlight subtly the differences between these methods of receiving information from the divine. What sets oracular communication apart is its peculiarly linguistic nature (see pages 29-31 in the Introduction for a more thorough discussion of the shift from methods of divination that rely on natural signs to methods that communicate linguistically).

<sup>206</sup> F.W. Schmidt's emendation of πόρος here is tempting, but I read τρόπος with Lloyd-Jones and Wilson, which is in the manuscripts. Dawe's argument is compelling that τρόπος "can be dismissed, for Oedipus can hardly be asking for the characteristics of the misfortune, since everyone present knows them already" (*ad* 99), but a difficult reading is not reason enough to emend the text.

<sup>208</sup> I have tried to leave the ambiguity in this line, since there is debate as to the proper interpretation of ἀνήκεστον. Jebb suggests that the adjective is a proleptic predicate and that "the μίασμα is ἀνήκεστον in the sense that it cannot be healed by anything else than the death or banishment of the blood-guilty. But it can still be healed if that expiation is made" (*ad* 98). Dawe suggests that this can mean either "without curing it" or can be taken predicatively, to mean "to that it becomes incurable" (*ad* 98). While the translation I have chosen is not the most elegant, I hope that it preserves the ambiguity of the line and leaves the different interpretive paths open to the reader.

<sup>209</sup> ποῖα καθαρμῶ; could also be understood as "purification for what?" here, since ποῖος can be used to ask a speaker to elaborate further on a point, when the interlocutor thinks that they have missed some critical piece of information.

<p>τοὺς αὐτοέντας χειρὶ τιμωρεῖν τινας.<sup>207</sup>  Οἰδίπους  οἳ δ' εἰσὶ ποῦ γῆς; ποῦ τόδ' εὐρεθήσεται  ἵχνος παλαιᾶς δυστέκμαρτον αἰτίας;  Κρέων  ἐν τῇδ' ἔφασκε γῆ· τὸ δὲ ζητούμενον  ἄλωτόν, ἐκφεύγει δὲ τὰμελούμενον.  OT95-III</p>	<p>can be caught, but the thing that's neglected can escape.</p>
--	--

Apollo is described as having bid them *clearly* (ἐμφανῶς), which is true, at least to a point. There will be no sudden “trick” meaning that emerges from this prophecy, as we saw in the *Trachiniae*. The meaning is clear: the pollution (μίᾱσμα) must be driven out of the land. The issue here is that it is unclear what (or who) the pollution actually is, which is precisely what Oedipus tries to uncover next. Here, things begin to be somewhat less clear. Creon’s account blends his own words with those of Apollo and the words of the god become lost within Creon’s own words.<sup>210</sup> This would not be such a critical issue, if the meaning were clearly transmitted, but we see in the ensuing conversation that Creon and Oedipus are not communicating very effectively. Approaching this exchange with Gricean maxims in mind, we can readily identify the problem: given the context here, this ought certainly to be a cooperative conversation—that is, both parties have an interest in effectively communicating—and yet it does not seem to operate that way. The ways that this conversation both challenges and breaks many pragmatic principles shed a great deal of light onto the problems of communication in this play, especially in the context of transmitting and understanding the language of the divine.

Were Creon, in a normal context, to relate that Apollo “clearly bade us drive pollution out of the land—pollution that he says is being nourished in this land—and not to nourish it, incurable,” in a normal context, he would implicate<sup>211</sup> that this “pollution” was something that would (or should) be known to everyone. His words also suggest that this was *all* that Apollo said,

<sup>207</sup> Jebb finds no problem with the text as printed here and suggests that the “τοὺς implies that the death *had* human authors; τινας, that they are *unknown*” and points to *OC* 288-9 as a parallel (ἔταν δ' ὁ κύριος / παρῆ τις), which he translates as “the master—whoever he be.” Dawe, however, thinks that the indefinite pronoun cannot be used in this way and argues that the usage is unknown. Instead, he thinks that τινας must be corrupt and suggests that it is a corruption from an adjective meant to modify χειρὶ. He has suggested τίται, for a reading of “to punish them with an avenging hand,” but acknowledges that it is a rare enough word that we cannot feel confident about the conjecture. Kassel also cites K.-G. i. 662 ff. to support the manuscript reading, and I am convinced that this line does not need emendation.

<sup>210</sup> This is, of course, an inescapable problem with prophecies and is something that we saw in the *Trachiniae*, most strikingly in the case of Deianeira’s accounts. The gods are mediated through oracular prophecies and then these prophecies are mediated again through the people who heard the oracle and recount it to other characters on stage.

<sup>211</sup> See the Introduction or Appendix B for a brief overview of these terms.

or at least that this is the extent of the relevant information that Oedipus might need (drawing, respectively, on the maxims of relation and quantity). Further, the miscommunications which run throughout this scene begin here, since Creon does not specify the *type* of pollution, so Oedipus does not know that this is pollution that resulted from a murder. The issue which causes Schmidt to emend the next line from τρόπος (as the manuscripts read) to πόρος is, as Dawe notes, “Oedipus can hardly be asking for the characteristics of the misfortune, since everyone present knows them already” (*ad* 99). This question makes a great deal more sense, and the manuscript reading can be preserved, in light of the fact that Creon has not specified the nature of the pollution in any detail. Everyone in Thebes knows about the plague, but no one else besides Creon knows the origin of the miasma which is causing the plague.

With that in mind, when Oedipus asks what sort of purification is necessary (ποιῶ καθαριῶ; 99) and what the nature of the misfortune is (τίς ὁ τρόπος τῆς συμφορᾶς; 99), he is requesting more information, even though Creon has just implicated that Apollo did not say any more than what Oedipus has already heard. This would make sense if he were asking Creon to help him determine what Apollo means by μίασμα, but Creon seems to have more information from Delphi. Creon tells him that the two available options are banishment (ἀνδρηλατοῦντας) or retributive murder (φόνω φόνον πάλιν λύοντας). The distinction here is subtle, but Creon does not exactly answer the questions that Oedipus has asked (he focuses almost entirely on the question ποιῶ καθαριῶ; and generally ignores the question about the nature of their misfortune<sup>212</sup>), responding as though Oedipus had simply asked what *action* they should take (τί ποιοῦντας;).<sup>213</sup> While his response is not entirely tailored to the questions he is asked, Creon’s response suggests

---

<sup>212</sup> Jebb understands συμφορᾶς as a euphemism for guilt, citing parallels at Pl. *Lg.* 934B (τοῦ δ’ εἰς τὸν αὔθις ἔνεκα χρόνον ἢ τὸ παράπαν μισῆσαι τὴν ἀδικίαν αὐτόν τε καὶ τοὺς ἰδόντας αὐτόν δικαιούμενον, ἢ λωφῆσαι μέρη πολλὰ τῆς τοιαύτης συμφορᾶς) and 854D (“Ὅς δ’ ἂν ἱεροσυλῶν ληφθῆ, ἐὰν μὲν ἦ δοῦλος ἢ ξένος, ἐν τῷ προσώπῳ καὶ ταῖς χερσὶ γραφεῖς τὴν συμφορᾶν), though I am not persuaded by this interpretation. In both of the passages he cites, the συμφορᾶ is closely connected with a crime and the guilt for that crime, but the meaning is still “misfortune” and the idea of guilt is implied, but it is not part of the semantic meaning and I do not feel that these examples necessarily suggest guilt here. Nonetheless, I do not feel that this merits emendation (as Dawe does), since the text here (printed by Lloyd-Jones and Wilson) is perfectly legible, if challenging to interpret.

<sup>213</sup> Jebb comments upon this (*ad* 100 ff.), drawing upon the fact that he keeps τρόπος at 99, which increases the disconnect between Oedipus’ question and Creon’s answer. On Jebb’s reading, Oedipus has asked about what sort of purification is necessary and what the nature of the misfortune is, and Creon has answered neither of those questions. His point is still relevant, however, on either reading of the line. However, though Jebb notes the odd form that the conversation takes, and the way that the two men seem to be “talking past” one another, he seems to suggest that the disconnect in this conversation begins with Creon (of Creon, at line 100, he says that it is “[a]s if, instead of ποιῶ καθαριῶ, the question had been τί ποιοῦντας;”). I would suggest instead that it begins with Oedipus, one line earlier, and that Creon is simply continuing the conversation as though Oedipus had not asked a somewhat off-topic question.

that he has anticipated Oedipus' question and has assumed that he will want to take action above all else, something very much in keeping with the overall characterization of Oedipus as a man of relentless action.<sup>214</sup> To push this point farther, however, I would suggest that what Creon answers is the question that we might have *expected* Oedipus to ask after being told that Apollo demands that they drive out the pollution from the land: "What is the pollution and how can we drive it out?" Banishment and execution are the only options for how to drive it out, because the pollution is *this* blood (τόδ' αἷμα). Blood has not yet been mentioned in the conversation though, despite Creon's use of a deictic, suggesting that *this* blood is known to his interlocutor, though there is no reason why it would be.

At this point, following the abrupt introduction of τόδ' αἷμα, the natural question for Oedipus to ask is "What blood?" Creon has used the demonstrative pronoun, τόδε, which could refer obliquely to the φόνος mentioned in the previous line (*this blood* being the blood of the unavenged murder), but Oedipus still does not know whose murder needs avenging. Instead of asking about the blood (and, by extension, the source of the pollution), he instead asks whose fate Apollo disclosed—a question which could well be interpreted to mean "Whose blood?" (i.e. "Who was the victim of a murder?") or "Who needs to be banished or killed?" I incline toward the latter, in part on etymological grounds<sup>215</sup> and in part on pragmatic grounds, since Creon has been talking about the process of purifying the city, via banishment or execution, and both of those necessitate an object. It seems more likely to me that τύχη is intended to be forward-looking here, and

---

<sup>214</sup> This characterization has been well noted in the scholarship. As a few illustrative examples, Winnington-Ingram comments on "the keen energies and the thrusting intelligence which made him great" (Winnington-Ingram 1980: 204). Knox is far more extensive in his descriptions, describing his "independence of action" and "vigorous action" and calling him "a self-made ruler . . . a man of action." He goes on to say that "[t]here is nothing passive in his make-up; his natural tendency is always to act, and he scorns inactivity," "[h]is action is lightning swift: once conceived it is not hampered by fear or hesitation; it anticipates advice, approval, or dissent. The characteristic Oedipean action is the fait accompli," and "[s]wift, *tachys*, is his word" (Knox 1957: 11, 14, 15). Though other scholars have taken a somewhat less elaborate approach to this theme, the characterization of Oedipus as a man of action is pervasive. Knox 1964 has also been quite influential in this line of thinking, and his influence can be felt in many of the studies of Sophoclean heroes, as he draws out a conception of the hero that hinges on intransigence, resolve, and strength and unity of will, and who is an active agent, rather than a tragic victim as in Euripides.

<sup>215</sup> It seems as though he has picked up on the discreet etymological elements of ἀνδρηλατοῦντας. ἀνδρηλατέω is derived from the combination of ἀνήρ and ἐλαύνω (cf. βοηλατέω/βοηλάτης from βοῦς and ἐλαύνω). The lengthened η is to be expected, per Sihler: "When neither vowel is high (sc. when the first element of a compound ends in a vowel and the second starts with one) the first vowel is without effect and the second is replaced by its long counterpart." (cf. ὠμηστής, from ὠμός and ἔδω). The true etymology (as coming from ἐλαύνω rather than, for example, something like ἀλητεύω) seems to have been felt in antiquity. Scholiasts on this passage gloss ἀνδρηλατοῦντας as ἄνδρας ἀπελαύνοντας and τὸν πράξαντα τοῦτο ἄνδρα ἐλαύνοντας and discuss πρὸς τὸ ἐλαύνειν τὴν δύναμιν. Later grammarians and lexicographers certainly knew the correct derivation, and Phrynichus, Photius, Timaeus, and the Suda all define it as ἄνδρας ἐλαύνειν.




referring to a fate that is as yet unrealized. However, as in so many places throughout this conversation, Creon answers a different question, and describes whose blood is causing pollution.

Thus far, Creon's account *can* be understood as a reenactment of his own experience with the oracle at Delphi. This is quite illuminating, in fact, when attempting to make sense of the strange question-answer pattern that we see here. Creon's account, as noted above, *ought* to include all the relevant information that he knows, per Grice's maxims of conversation. This assumes that he is primarily concerned with informativity, but it is clear that stringing out these oracular instructions is not going to convey his meaning in the most efficient fashion. Often, this sort of prolonged conversation is attributed to "dramatic suspense" or other generic conventions, as a sort of catch-all, but we need not resort to that interpretation for this scene when there is a more illuminating option available, and one which subtly highlights the different linguistic and narrative mechanisms at play here.<sup>216</sup> Creon's actions make sense if we understand him to be giving a faithful account of what he heard at Delphi, as it occurred—that is, if he is actually reenacting the words that Apollo spoke to him.<sup>217</sup> Creon, then, is recounting Apollo's words with his concern being primarily for the fidelity of the reenactment (not *what* was communicated, but *how* it was communicated). We can then understand the beginning of this scene as Creon recounting what he was told in the order and fashion that he was told. We might think of the translation in the following way:

---

<sup>216</sup> This is, of course, not to suggest that dramatic suspense or other conventions of the genre are not responsible for many choices by playwrights. These causes very often are the determining factor in the way a scene is constructed and a great deal of this entire play is concerned with postponing understanding to an extreme and perhaps implausible extent. Dawe 2006 suggests that this play does not actually hold up under close scrutiny. Many of the elements simply are not plausible when examined too closely and skeptically, he argues, and it does a great injustice to the play as a whole to take such an approach. I am generally sympathetic to his views, but I also think that we must be cautious about attributing too much to "dramatic convention" and using that as a reason to avoid looking for other factors that may be at work as well. Sophocles does need to work within the generic conventions of tragedy, but he is a skilled enough author that we should be cautious about attributing his word choices to the demands of meter, or the constraints of stichomythia.

<sup>217</sup> Presumably, we are to understand this as a conversation with the priestess of Apollo, as was the actual practice at Delphi, but the text presents Delphi as the voice of Apollo and it will be useful to elide the priestess out of the transmission process for the moment, for simplicity's sake, while keeping in mind that there is yet another layer to all of this which only further complicates this process.

<p>Apollo Drive the pollution out of the land—pollution that is being nourished in your land—and do not nourish it, incurable.</p> <p>Creon What pollution? How can we drive it out?</p> <p>Apollo Banishment or paying back murder with murder, since this blood is storm-tossing the city.</p> <p>Creon What blood?</p> <p>Apollo Laius’</p>		<p>Creon I will tell you the things I heard from the god. Lord Phoebus clearly bid us to drive the pollution out of the land—pollution that he says is being nourished in this land—and not to nourish it, incurable.</p> <p>Oedipus With what sort of purification? What is the manner of misfortune?</p> <p>Creon Banishment or paying back murder with murder, since this blood is storm-tossing the city.</p> <p>Oedipus And whose is this fate that he reveals?</p> <p>Creon Lord, Laius was our leader in this land, before you restored this city.</p>
--	---	---

I should note here that Delphic oracles are not generally conveyed in a conversational form. We have both historical and literary examples to suggest that someone could ask a follow-up question at Delphi, at least in some situations (see the Introduction for these), but there are no parallels for an actual conversation of this sort. We can nonetheless remove the conversational element and Apollo’s words are perfectly intelligible without Creon’s words inserted:

Drive the pollution out of the land—pollution that is being nourished in your land—and do not nourish it, incurable. [Drive it out by means of] banishment or paying back murder with murder, since this [understood as a forward-looking deictic] blood is storm-tossing the city: Laius’ blood.

We have no way of knowing how closely Creon’s words parallel those delivered by Apollo, but Apollo is clearly identified (at line 96) as the source of at least some of Creon’s words. At lines 100-1, the “author” of these ideas is unclear, but we are certainly inclined to think that these also come from Apollo. Oedipus certainly has, since we must supply Apollo as the subject of *μηρύει* at line 102—whose fate does *Apollo* reveal? Oedipus at least understands the sentence of banishment or death to come from Apollo, in an unadulterated fashion. By lines 103-4, however, Creon undoubtedly speaks with his own voice, and not that of Apollo. At this point, Oedipus has asked who needs to be banished or killed, and Creon instead speaks about Laius and his fate. Looking again at the proposed conversation above, we can make sense of Creon’s mention of Laius here—he is the answer to the natural question that ought to have been asked at this point, though

Oedipus instead focuses on who ought to be punished. We might imagine Creon's account of Apollo's words—like Deianeira's account of Zeus' oracle—to be filtered through his own perceptions and agenda, but everything up to this point can be plausibly attributed to Apollo. At lines 103-4, this changes significantly.

Once Creon hears that Laius' (unavenged) blood is causing the plague on the city, he has all of the information from the god that he needs. Creon is, after all, aware of the relevant history—that Laius was killed many years ago, and his killer or killers were never found and punished. At this point, Creon's primary purpose shifts away from recounting the oracular instructions *as he received them* and he instead focuses on providing the relevant information to Oedipus. In more pragmatic terms, now that informativity and advancing shared understanding are his primary concerns, his speech should again be governed by Grice's maxims. His speech shifts from reenactment to explanation and interpretation and the conversation becomes a great deal smoother and more effective.

The objections I raised earlier—that Creon is not as informative as he could and should be—are now resolved. Once he speaks in his own voice, and not that of the god, he conveys as much information as he has in the most lucid way possible. He tells Oedipus that Laius was murdered<sup>218</sup> and Apollo demands some sort of forcible punishment of the murderers. Oedipus now asks (perfectly reasonably) “Where are they?” and Creon responds that Apollo said they are in Thebes. This is essentially the same content that Creon conveyed earlier, but in a far more effective form this time. However, as this part of their conversation ends, the god is again invoked: *Apollo* said that the guilt is in the land. Here again, the voices blur. How much of this final sentiment is Apollo's and how much is Creon's own? Jebb here notes that “[t]he γνώμη, though uttered in an oracular tone, is not part of the god's message,” but perhaps we should question his assertion. The lines between the god's words and those of Creon have been blurred persistently and this final rhyming couplet is stylistically unusual. As the god is reinserted into this conversation, the language itself becomes less clear and less informative, as it was at the start of this passage.<sup>219</sup> The language and the meaning are cryptic and Oedipus essentially ignores the entire couplet and follows this

---

<sup>218</sup> Strictly speaking, he says that Laius died and that they need to kill his murderers. In strict pragmatics terms, he does not say that Laius was murdered, but he does implicate it.

<sup>219</sup> The “oracular tone” is pronounced and while his meaning is intelligible, the style of the couplet is markedly different from Creon's surrounding lines. With ἔφασκε at line 110 appealing to Apollo's authority to support this claim, we should understand these lines as coming directly from Apollo.

passage by asking Creon where the murder occurred (πότερα δ' ἐν οἴκοις ἢ 'ν ἀγροῖς ὁ Λαῖος / ἢ γῆς ἐπ' ἄλλης τῶδε συμπίπτει φόνος; 112-13).

In the course of this short scene, we can draw out two different “voices” at work in the transmission of this oracle. One is the voice of the god and the other is Creon’s own voice; the god’s words are not readily intelligible, though their meaning does emerge eventually, with the help of Creon’s own interpretive voice. This oracle does not present a riddle, and it does not cover some secret, hidden meaning that will only emerge later, as we saw in the *Trachiniae*. In fact, this oracle is shockingly straightforward, by oracular standards, and there will not be any misunderstanding about what it means, in a strict sense.

However, before leaving this passage, I would like to highlight two important elements that illustrate the difficulties of understanding prophecy in the play. One is the ways in which Apollo’s presence (in the form of his words, relayed to Oedipus through Creon) serves to derail effective communication. Oedipus and Creon speak at cross-purposes and it is only when Creon discards the voice of Apollo and speaks with his own, mortal voice that he is able to convey his meaning to Oedipus effectively. This will be a recurrent motif surrounding Apollo in this play. His presence (or even simply the mention of him, in some instances) obfuscates meaning. However, this need not be the result of malice on Apollo’s part, and Apollo need not be *trying* to mislead Oedipus, as many have claimed.<sup>220</sup> Instead, these failures to interpret Apollo’s words point to a fundamental incompatibility between divine communication and mortal communication. Just by his very nature, as a god, Apollo cannot help but confuse and mislead. Because, as we will see, Apollo does not communicate in accordance with human pragmatic conventions, he will inevitably be misunderstood by the humans who try to interpret his speech.

---

<sup>220</sup> This is a common and almost unavoidable approach to this play, and listing all the scholars who have taken it would be a long and pointless exercise. Kovacs 2009 is worth mentioning though, since he suggests that we ought to look at the play as a sort of chess game, in which Oedipus plays against a grand master, in Apollo. This approach offers an easily-intelligible way to preserve Oedipus’ free will, since Apollo can easily outmaneuver Oedipus and is confident that he will prevail in this competition, even though he does not know Oedipus’ individual moves in advance. This is a particularly clever analogy and this approach maintains Oedipus’ responsibility and agency in the face of divine prophecy in a way that avoids the messy and unproductive question of fate versus free will. That said, the chess game analogy also hinges on the idea of an antagonistic (or, at the very least, simply competitive) relationship between Oedipus and Apollo, since Apollo wants Oedipus to lose the game and his superior skill ensures that this will be the outcome. Kovacs (among many other scholars) rests his interpretation on the premise that Apollo is interested in bringing about Oedipus’ fall. This then raises the question of why Apollo is so intent on punishing Oedipus (on the difficulty of this question and the nature of Apollo’s active involvement or interest in destroying Oedipus, see Winnington-Ingram 1980: 319 and Lawrence 2008), and it is hard to find a truly satisfactory answer. The interpretation that I suggest in this chapter does not require (though, it also does not preclude) a malicious Apollo, which has the added benefit of obviating any need to understand why Apollo should be so invested in Oedipus’ fall.

The second important element is that we can already see issues of interpretation and transmission emerge in this short scene. Apollo told Creon that they needed to drive the pollution, which stems from the blood, out of the land—either by banishment or by paying back murder with murder. This imprecise instruction becomes “Apollo clearly orders us to punish the murderers” in Creon’s own words. In this plural form, *murderers*, we see that Creon, though he is certainly acting in good faith here, has added information that Apollo did not give him. In an attempt to make Apollo’s words conform to the Maxim of Manner (which requires speakers to avoid obscurity of expression and ambiguity), Creon has had to supply something more concrete—an object for their punishment. Since, as we later learn at lines 122-3, the sole witness of Laius’ murder described multiple robbers (ληστάς), τοὺς αὐτοέντας would seem to be accurate. However, it will turn out to be the case that there was only *one* killer and that only *one* man, Oedipus, needs to be punished.<sup>221</sup>

## 2. Prophecies about Laius and Jocasta

While the play begins with a desire to rid Thebes of the plague, the central oracle and the one that dominates the story of Oedipus is the prophecy about his killing his father and sleeping with his mother. It is difficult to speak about the precise prophecy, though, since this oracle was delivered at least two distinct times and it is only ever related in paraphrases or incomplete accounts that are woven throughout the play and invoked before, during, and after Oedipus’ tragic realization about his own identity and fate. Nonetheless, it is useful to at least attempt to isolate these oracular utterances in order to study them more closely.

To start, I will examine this prophecy as it is presented by both Oedipus and Jocasta, leaving aside any references made by Tiresias. Tiresias, as a seer, occupies a liminal space between gods and mortals, and he is the only one who has any accurate knowledge about the meaning of the oracles. For these reasons, I will examine Tiresias and his interactions with these oracles separately, at the end of this section, even though his presence is woven throughout the play.

As I noted earlier, there are several different types of conversation and conversational principles invoked in this play; we can think of these almost as different genres of speech. These

---

<sup>221</sup> Oedipus does not actually adopt this false information, however. When he pledges to the people his commitment to ridding the city of plague, he promises that he will ally himself with Creon to take vengeance on behalf of Thebes and Apollo (ὥστ’ ἐνδίκως ὄψεσθε καὶ ἐ σύμμαχον / γῆ τῆδε τιμωροῦντα τῶ θεῶ θ’ ἅμα, 135-6) and that he will dispel the defilement (ὑπὲρ γὰρ οὐχὶ τῶν ἀπωτέρω φίλων, / ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ τοῦτ’ ἀποσκεδῶ μύσος, 137-8). The errant plurals do not creep into Oedipus’ own pronouncement and he returns to the vagueness that Apollo used.

different codes of conversation require entirely different approaches toward extracting meaning in their different respective contexts. In standard conversational contexts, where both members of the conversation are aiming at a mutual understanding, certain maxims shape those conversations. When speakers depart from those maxims, they have an identifiable motive for doing so; when mortal characters lie, they have something to gain from those lies.<sup>222</sup> Playfully ambiguous or misleading language *does* have an appropriate context, but that context is riddling games and competitions—the exact situation that forms the backdrop of this play, in the Sphinx’ riddle. Cooperative conversations, lies, and riddles all have their own underlying principles that shape the way language works in these contexts; violations of these principles should, according to pragmatic linguistic theory, have a motivation of some sort. Critically, we see these different violations of conversational rules in the language of the oracles in this play, but without a clear reason. As I concluded in Chapter 1, divine language does not recognize the role that context plays in human communication. Instead, by conspicuously misapplying linguistic rules in situations to which they do not apply, or by failing to effectively signal which genre of speech and which communicative rules ought to be employed, oracles are constantly misunderstood while never lying outright.

### 707-725: Jocasta’s “Unrealized” Oracle about her Son’s Killing Laius

The first direct account of this oracle (about Oedipus and his parents) in the play<sup>223</sup> occurs when Jocasta reassures Oedipus that he need not worry about Tiresias’ accusations (which he suspects come from Creon) that Oedipus is the cause of the plague. She offers him a concise demonstration (σημεῖα σύντομα) of her claim that “there is no mortal thing that has a part of the prophetic craft” (βρότειον οὐδὲν μαντικῆς ἔχον τέχνης, 709):

710	Ἰοκάστη σύ νυν ἀφεις σεαυτὸν ὧν λέγεις πέρι ἐμοῦ ἴακουσον, καὶ μάθ’ οὐνεκ’ ἐστὶ σοι βρότειον οὐδὲν μαντικῆς ἔχον τέχνης. φανῶ δέ σοι σημεῖα τῶνδε σύντομα.	Jocasta Release yourself from the things you are speaking of. Listen to me and learn that there is no mortal thing that has a part of the prophetic craft. I will show you concise evidence of these
-----	--	--

<sup>222</sup> Scodel 2005:246-7 looks at the ways in which lying is central to Sophoclean drama—the plots of both *Philoctetes* and *Electra* hinge on deception, and some sort of lying plays a major role in all the extant plays except *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, though there are still accusations of lying (e.g., *OC* 229-33). However, particularly in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, characters’ motives for lying are discernable. In general, characters lie because they are afraid to tell the truth (as the herdsman in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*) or to advance a ruse (as in the *Electra*, or the *Philoctetes*). Human characters do not lie needlessly or without some explanation, however.

<sup>223</sup> 366-7 alludes to this, when Tiresias says “I say that you have not recognized that you are, and you do not see how bad things are for you” (λεληθέναι σε φημί σὺν τοῖς φιλάτοις / αἴσχισθ’ ὀμιλοῦντ’, οὐδ’ ὄραν ἴν’ εἶ κακοῦ), but I will be looking at Tiresias’ speech separately and this reference is vague enough that it does not cause Oedipus to comment upon it.

715	<p>χρησμός γὰρ ἦλθε Λαίῳ ποτ', οὐκ ἐρῶ  Φοίβου γ' ἅπ' αὐτοῦ, τῶν δ' ὑπηρετῶν ἄπο,  ὡς αὐτὸν ἦξι μοῖρα πρὸς παιδὸς θανεῖν,  ὅστις γένοιτ' ἐμοῦ τε κάκεινου πάρα.  καὶ τὸν μὲν, ὡσπερ γ' ἡ φάτις, ξένοι ποτὲ  λησταὶ φονεύουσ' ἐν τριπλαῖς ἀμαξιτοῖς·  παιδὸς δὲ βλάστας οὐ διέσχον ἡμέραι  τρεῖς, καὶ νιν ἄρθρα κείνος ἐνζεύξας ποδοῖν  ἔρριπεν ἄλλων χερσὶν ἄβατον εἰς ὄρος.</p>	<p>things. For a prophecy came to Laius once—I will not say it was from Phoebus himself, but from his attendants—that the fate of dying at the hands of his child would come upon him, whatever child should come forth from him and me. And he, well, foreign bandits killed him at the place where three roads meet, as the story goes. And not three days passed from the birth of the child, and Laius yoked the joints of his feet together and threw him—though by the hands of others—onto a desolate mountain. And so then Apollo did not bring it about that he become the murderer of his father, nor that terrible thing which Laius feared, that he die at the hands of his child. The mantic reports delineated these things—do not pay them any mind! The things that the god pursues with need, he himself easily reveals.</p>
720	<p>κάνταῦθ' Ἀπόλλων οὔτ' ἐκείνον ἦνυσεν  φονέα γενέσθαι πατρός οὔτε Λαῖον  τὸ δεινὸν οὐφοβεῖτο πρὸς παιδὸς θανεῖν.</p>	
725	<p>τοιαῦτα φῆμαι μαντικά διώρισαν,  ὣν ἐντρέπου σὺ μηδέν· ἦν<sup>224</sup> γὰρ ἂν θεὸς  χρεῖαν ἐρευνᾷ, ῥαδίως αὐτὸς φανεῖ.  707-725</p>	

There are three significant things that can be teased out of this passage. The first two are closely connected—Jocasta’s description of the oracle as well as her interpretation of the events surrounding it. The third, to which I will turn in a moment, is her overall characterization in this scene. The content of the oracle here seems to be contained in only a few lines: that the fate of dying at the hands of his child would come upon him, whatever child should come forth from him and Jocasta (ὡς αὐτὸν ἦξι μοῖρα πρὸς παιδὸς θανεῖν, / ὅστις γένοιτ' ἐμοῦ τε κάκεινου πάρα, 713-4). The oracle occurs again in a similar form, though it is presented as an impossible and unfulfilled prophecy: “And so, Apollo did not accomplish that thing, that [the child] should become the murderer of his father nor that Laius should die at the hands of his child—the thing he was dreading terribly” (κάνταῦθ' Ἀπόλλων οὔτ' ἐκείνον ἦνυσεν / φονέα γενέσθαι πατρός οὔτε Λαῖον / τὸ δεινὸν οὐφοβεῖτο πρὸς παιδὸς θανεῖν, 720-2).

Layered almost seamlessly into her transmission of the oracle is her interpretation of it. In lines 720-2, we can already see some of this interpretation, since she has determined that the oracle was not fulfilled, but she also maps events from the past onto the words of the prophecy, in the process of showing how it was not fulfilled. On the most basic level, this involves her describing the actual cause of Laius’ death—foreign bandits, ξένοι λησταὶ—as well as the child’s fate, which she

<sup>224</sup> The manuscripts all read ὣν instead of ἦν, though I have adopted the emendation of Brunck and Musgrave here. Lloyd-Jones prints ὣν, and Jebb commends this line (as it reads in the manuscripts, with ὣν) as a “bold line,” but Dawe *et al.* prefer ἦν and suspect that the ὣν at the start of the line caused the ἦν to get copied as ὣν in the transmission process. The reading of ὣν is sound, but the arguments for corruption by duplication are compelling and I have tentatively printed ἦν here.

insinuates was death. From these two facts, which certainly seem to contradict the prophecy she and Laius received, she infers that the prophecy was not fulfilled.

This inference leads us to the final element that I would like to highlight in this speech: Jocasta's carefully calibrated relationship with Apollo. This scene is often viewed as an example of hubris or impiety,<sup>225</sup> but Jocasta is very careful *not* to claim that Apollo failed to foretell the future. In fact, her justification for her skepticism hinges on the very fact that Apollo is infallible, and her argument is not unreasonable. Simplified, her argument seems quite logical:

1. Apollo's priests speak for Apollo
2. Apollo's priests said that Laius' child would kill him
  - Ergo, Apollo said that Laius' child would kill him
3. Laius' child was exposed with pierced feet
4. Exposed children die, especially when their feet are pierced
5. Laius was killed by a band of robbers
  - Ergo, Apollo's priests were wrong
6. Apollo cannot not be wrong

At this point, the only way to reconcile this apparent paradox is to figure out which premise cannot be right, since Jocasta has reasoned herself into a corner, so to speak. All her initial premises (1-6) seem to be solid, and none of them are impious or hubristic. In fact, Jocasta is firmly committed to premise 6, that Apollo is infallible, and her only failing is that instead of realizing that premises 4 and 5 were incorrect, she assumes that 1 is incorrect. From an external perspective, we know that tragic prophecies are never wrong, but we only know this because of the literary convention—characters within this literary work cannot access that.<sup>226</sup> Similarly, it is a trope in this type of scene that the seer will be accused of conspiring and acting out of a desire for money or

---

<sup>225</sup> For various approaches to this question, usually centered on the second stasimon, and whether the Chorus is responding to Oedipus' behavior, Jocasta's behavior, some combination of the two, or something entirely different. For two more nuanced approaches to this question, see Winnington-Ingram 1971 and Scodel 1982 (which include bibliography of those who see the Chorus as "simply" responding to Jocasta's rejection of oracles).

<sup>226</sup> This is not categorically true, and there are certainly instances of metatheatricality in both ancient and modern theater in which a character acknowledges and plays with theatrical conventions. However, the only hint of this sort of clear and overt metatheatricality is, to my mind, when the Chorus asks why they should dance, if at lines 895-6 (εἰ γὰρ αἱ τοιαῖδε πράξεις τίμιαι, / τί δεῖ με χορεύειν;). I see no evidence that we should impute a recognition of their own generic conventions to the characters within this play (or, in fact, in the extant corpus of Sophocles). For a different stance on the question of metatheatricality in Sophocles, see Ringer 2000.



influence when they are in fact giving an accurate prophecy.<sup>227</sup> Again, this is a trope that only the audience can access, and the fulfillment of prophecy is not guaranteed by anything other than genre here.

Returning to Jocasta, then, we can see that she does not act irrationally.<sup>228</sup> When faced with a paradox, she reevaluates all the ways in which she could have reached this apparent paradox in error, and then she adjusts the only one that seems adjustable. Her evaluation of which premises could be wrong is flawed, but the process by which she concludes this is neither impious nor irrational. Her fault, from a certain perspective, is in taking the simplest approach to solving this paradox.<sup>229</sup>

Here, it is useful to recall the types of riddles I outlined earlier. In a normal situation, it is entirely reasonable to try to “solve” a paradox or a contradiction by the simplest and most likely explanation (i.e. Occam's razor). However, as we saw, this is exactly the wrong approach to take when trying to solve a riddle. Jocasta does not recognize that this oracle has far more in common with a riddle than with a straightforward statement of facts, and, as a result, she approaches it with a flawed methodology.

### 775-797: Oedipus' Oracle from Delphi

775	ἠγόμην δ' ἀνὴρ ἀστῶν μέγιστος τῶν ἐκεῖ, πρὶν μοι τύχη τοιᾶδ' ἐπέστη, θαυμάσαι μὲν ἀξία, σπουδῆς γε μέντοι τῆς ἐμῆς οὐκ ἀξία.	I was considered to be the greatest among the citizens there, until this chance event came suddenly upon me, worthy to be marveled at, but not worthy of the eager haste I applied to it. For a man at a banquet, intoxicated by drinking, said—over his wine—that I was not the true son of my father. I was greatly distressed that whole day and I scarcely restrained myself, but on the following day, going up to my mother and father I questioned them closely. They were very upset with the person who had hurled this disgraceful charge. I was gladdened in relation to the two of them, but all the
780	ἀνὴρ γὰρ ἐν δείπνοις μ' ὑπερπλησθεὶς μέθη καλεῖ παρ' οἴνω, πλαστός ὡς εἶην πατρί. κἀγὼ βαρυνθεὶς τὴν μὲν οὔσαν ἡμέραν μόλις κατέσχον, θάτέρα δ' ἰὼν πέλας μητρὸς πατρός τ' ἤλεγχον· οἱ δὲ δυσφόρως τοῦνεῖδος ἤγον τῶ μεθέντι τὸν λόγον.	
785	κἀγὼ τὰ μὲν κείνοιον ἕτερπόμην, ὅμως δ' ἔκνιζέ μ' ἀεὶ τοῦθ'· ὑφεῖρπε γὰρ πολὺ.	

<sup>227</sup> E.g., both Calchas and Tiresias are elsewhere accused of acting out of a desire for personal gain (*Ant.* 1033-55; *Bacch.* 255-60; *IA* 520). This is a motif common in the historians as well (see *Hdt* 7.141-3, in connection with *Plut. Vit. Them.* 10.1-2).

<sup>228</sup> Winnington-Ingram offers a similar, sympathetic reading of both Jocasta's and Oedipus' skepticism about Apollo's oracles. He suggests that Jocasta argues from *σημεία*, rather than feelings (as the Chorus does) and that Jocasta may be impious, but that she is a victim of circumstance who behaves rationally, in light of the available evidence (Winnington-Ingram 1980: 183-4). He concludes that they “are hardly to be blamed, though they were dreadfully wrong” (184).

<sup>229</sup> As elsewhere in this play, we should not discount the effect of Jocasta's desire for the oracles to be wrong. Her emotional and psychological state certainly influence her interpretive choices, though they are far from the only forces shaping interpretation and comprehension in this play.

	same I remained upset about these things, for it ate deeply at me. <sup>230</sup>
--	---

Immediately after Jocasta’s account, we hear Oedipus’ account of a startlingly similar prophecy that he received from Apollo. Here, the way that he frames his account is particularly striking. As he describes why he went to Delphi in the first place, he describes a drunken man who claimed that Oedipus was not the true son of his father (πλαστός ὡς εἶην πατρί, 780).<sup>231</sup> The way that Oedipus describes this account is significant, though: “a chance event . . . worthy to be marveled at, but not worthy of the eager haste I applied to it” (πρίν μοι τύχη / τοιάδ’ ἐπέστη, θαυμάσαι μὲν ἀξία, / σπουδῆς γε μέντοι τῆς ἐμῆς οὐκ ἀξία. 776-8). Kamerbeek is quite right to suggest that Oedipus has no questions about his parentage at this point and that it would be perverse to read any ambiguity into his words here (*ad* 777)—as much as our knowledge of the outcome of this play might incline us to read some latent awareness into his earlier words, there is no evidence to suggest this. In fact, his entire presentation of this story is entirely dismissive. It was not worthy of his urgency (σπουδή), Oedipus mentions, and then he goes on to describe the story, with a heavy emphasis on how the man had been drinking (ὑπερπλησθεις μέθη, παρ’ οἴνω), presumably meant to undermine his legitimacy as a source.<sup>232</sup>

<sup>230</sup> I draw on a translation here, which Campbell suggests but then ultimately rejects, of “for it rankled deeply” (for ὑφεῖρπε γὰρ πολύ). Jebb and Campbell both understand this as a reference to a rumor spreading about Oedipus (“it still crept abroad with strong rumour”). Jebb notes that this corresponds nicely with 775’s implication that this event altered Oedipus’ popular repute and says that we “might render: ‘it was ever recurring to my mind with force’: but this (a) is a repetition: is less suited to πολύ, which implies diffusion” (*ad* 786). I tend to think that “it rankled deeply” is a better translation here. We might look to parallels for insight, and as Kamerbeek notes, Aesch. *Ag.* 450 is an extremely striking parallel to this line: φθονερὸν δ’ ὑπ’ ἄλγος ἔρπει προδίκους Ἀτρείδαις. He also offers *Ag.* 270 and *Cho.* 463 (quoted by Fraenkel *ad Ag.* 450) as evidence for this reading and notes that “[t]he uneasiness of [Oedipus’] soul is like the soreness of spreading pain” (*ad* 786). I find the repetition to be acceptable, given the significance that this moment had on Oedipus’ life. Emphatic repetition is an entirely appropriate choice at this moment and I find no issue with πολύ here. Jebb’s and Kamerbeek’s observations are entirely compatible if we understand the “diffusion” implies by πολύ to be a diffusion into Oedipus’ own mind or psyche. At the same time, the parallels in *Ag.* 270 and *Cho.* 463 both invite an interpretation of a slow, spreading pain (the two passages refer to joy, χαρά, and a shudder, τρόμος, respectively), but *Ag.* 450 juxtaposes spreading rumors with spreading resentment and pain. I am inclined to see both of these aspects in *OT* 786, though I do not have an adequate English translation which can effectively capture both aspects.

<sup>231</sup> Not that he does not, as Oedipus tells this story, call his entire parentage into question. Instead, he claims that Oedipus is πλαστός. Jebb renders πλαστός ὡς εἶην πατρί this as “falsely called a son to my father (i.e. to deceive him)” and Dawe points to Eur. *Phoen.* 28-31, which gives a fuller account of Polybus being tricked by his wife into thinking that Oedipus was his true son (*ad loc.*). Oedipus only recounts the challenge to his paternity, however, and the thrust of this accusation is directed at his father, Polybus. The way that he recounts this story suggests that he was not worried that he was supposititious, but rather that he was a bastard—the story Oedipus tells is that of a drunk man calling his mother adulterous.

<sup>232</sup> From the audience’s perspective, however, we may be inclined to give extra credence to the man’s drunken claim, on the assumption that he was more inclined to speak the truth while his inhibitions (and fears of repercussion) were lowered due to alcohol (cf. *in vino veritas*).

Here, the particles are particularly illuminating in terms of Oedipus' own train of thought. The explanatory γάρ at 779 draws a strong causal connection between the two sentences. This chance event was not worthy of Oedipus' σπουδή *because* the man was at a banquet and quite drunk—if this γάρ is meant to truly explain Oedipus' lack of concern, then his underlying assumption must be that the man's drunkenness caused him to speak foolishly or nonsensically or maliciously, all of which provide grounds for Oedipus to discount his words. As he finishes this opening part of his speech, Oedipus justifies why he went to Delphi and what he asked Apollo, and it is worth pausing here to carefully dissect these last few lines: κάγω τὰ μὲν κείνοιν ἔτερπόμεν, ὅμως δ' / ἔκνιζέ μ' αἰ τοῦθ'· ὑφείρπε γὰρ πολὺ (I was gladdened at the reaction of the two of them, but all the same I remained upset about these things, for it ate deeply at me). On the surface, these final lines are difficult to interpret—if Oedipus was truly reassured at the reaction of his parents in response to his questions, why would he still be upset about these claims? Why would he need to go to Delphi to follow up on this issue?

In this passage, there are two discrete elements in tension. We have the events that occurred in the past, whose major elements are set: Oedipus *did* go to Delphi and receive an oracle. However, Oedipus does not, at the present moment, believe any of the things that drove his actions in the past. In this scene, Oedipus tries to rewrite the past with his convictions from the present. The only plausible way to explain his dismissal of the accusation about his paternity and his decision to visit Delphi anyway is to recognize that at the time, he must have given these claims far more credence than he does now.<sup>233</sup> If the accusations continued to eat at him in the past, they must have held more sway over him, and the incongruities in this account stem from his *current* disregard (hence, the dismissive attitude toward the drunken man) layered on top of underlying events that were dictated by an actual concern that he might not be the son of Polybus.

On this reading, Oedipus must have believed the man at the banquet, which is certainly supported by his subsequent actions and it even permeates his description of the events. He may no longer think that man was credible, but he acknowledges that, at the time, he was upset and barely able to control himself (βαρυνθείς, μόλις κατέσχον) at these accusations. Knowing as we do that

---

<sup>233</sup> This could be because he is worried, on some level, about his parentage. This could also—if we understand ὑφείρπε (786) as alluding to rumors which are creeping throughout Corinth—be a political concern about his status and his claim to be the heir to Polybus. On this reading (suggested to me by Ruth Scodel), he is hoping to receive Delphic confirmation of his parentage which would then solidify his claim to the Corinthian throne. On either reading, Oedipus is concerned enough about the rumor(s) that he departs for Delphi to resolve the question definitively.

this man at the banquet was correct about Oedipus' father, we can discern an initial moment when Oedipus *does* in fact suspect something of the truth about his parentage. It is only once Oedipus arrives at Delphi that his concern about the identity of his father is diverted onto something much more pressing—and, simultaneously, much less intelligible to him. Put another way, Oedipus takes all the necessary steps to effectively learn about his identity *when he interacts with mortals*; it is only once Oedipus comes into contact with Apollo that his ability to judge and interpret and understand his circumstances is hopelessly compromised.

As we move into Oedipus' actual account of the prophecy he received, we have a scene that is very similar to Jocasta's account, in that we can see both the content of the prophecy—which differs somewhat from the one Jocasta recounts—as well as Oedipus' approach to that prophecy. We can also see an overall shift away from the questions which brought Oedipus to Delphi. At this point, Oedipus' attention is now focused on averting this new prophecy he has received, and in the process, as he comes into linguistic contact with Apollo, he moves farther away from an accurate understanding of himself and his situation.

787	λάθρα δὲ μητρός καὶ πατρός πορεύομαι Πυθῶδε, καὶ μ' ὁ Φοῖβος ὧν μὲν ἰκόμη ἄτιμον ἐξέπεμψεν, ἄλλα δ' ἄθλιῶ	Without the knowledge of my mother and father, I made my way to Pytho, and Phoebus sent me forth, deemed unworthy of the things about which I'd come, but he <i>did</i> blaze forth suddenly, telling terrible and disastrous things to wretched me, that I was fated to sleep with my mother, and I would bring forth a race, unendurable for men to look upon, and that I would be the murder of my father who begat me. And I, when I heard these things, I fled the Corinthian land—which I henceforth measure only from afar, by the
790	καὶ δεινὰ καὶ δύστηνα <sup>234</sup> προυφάνη λέγων, ὡς μητρί μὲν χρεῖή με μιχθῆναι, γένος δ' ἄτλητον ἀνθρώποισι δηλώσοιμ' ὄραν, φονεὺς δ' ἐσοίμην τοῦ φυτεύσαντος πατρός. κάγῳ 'πακούσας ταῦτα τὴν Κορινθίαν,	
795	ἄστροις τὸ λοιπὸν τεκμαρούμενος, <sup>235</sup> χθόνα ἔφευγον, ἔνθα μήποτ' ὀψοίμην κακῶν	

<sup>234</sup> The manuscripts read ἄθλια here, but the text has been emended in different ways; I print what I think is the strongest reading in light of the various manuscripts and attempts to improve the Greek. With Lloyd-Jones and Wilson, I read ἄθλιῶ here. Though its manuscript support is tenuous at best (one manuscript, L<sup>ac</sup>, may have had this reading) Kamerbeek's point (*ad* 789) that a reading of ἄθλιῶ means that we are left with an emphatic καὶ . . . καὶ construction in 790 that "makes one pause" is well taken, but it does not make me pause so much that I feel we must reject that reading. An emphatic construction seems entirely appropriate in this context. With most editors of this text, I find that ἄθλιῶ is the *lectio difficilior* and worth printing. I reject Heimsoeth's conjecture of δύσφημα for δύστηνα as clever and elegant but also unnecessary. The manuscripts all read προυφάνη, though Jebb finds this reading indefensible and strongly favors Hermann's conjecture of προύφηνην, writing that "the difficulty of conceiving Sophocles to have written thus is to me so great that the special appropriateness of προύφηνην turns the scale" (*ad* 790). The strength of the manuscripts as well as Campbell's justification for προυφάνη ("He came forth with; προυφάνη expresses the suddenness of the revelation," *ad loc.*) inclines me to prefer προυφάνη.

<sup>235</sup> I am not convinced that the reading ἐκμετρούμενος, found in all the manuscripts, is not viable, contra Lloyd-Jones and Wilson who describe it as "nonsense" (1990: *ad loc.*). However, Nauck's emendation of τεκμαρούμενος is very clever and works nicely with the ἄστροις. Kamerbeek and Nauck offer many parallels to support a reading of τεκμαρούμενος, and Housman 1972 offers the strongest parallel, in Libanius v. 540 Foerster (τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ τὸ βῆμα καὶ τοὺς ἐνταυθοῖ θορύβους ἄστροις, τοῦτο δὴ τὸ τοῦ λόγου, τὸ λοιπὸν τεκμαιρόμενος) and I am convinced that this is the stronger reading here.

χρησμών ὀνειδίη τῶν ἐμῶν τελούμενα. OT 787-97	stars—to where I would never see the shameful things in my vile prophecy come to fulfillment.
--	--

The actual content of the oracle, as Oedipus recounts it at least, seems to have three discrete elements. The first is that he would sleep with his mother (μητρὶ μὲν χρεΐη με μιχθῆναι, 791), then that he would bring forth a race “unendurable for men to look upon” (γένος δ’ / ἄτλητον ἀνθρώποισι δηλώσοιμ’ ὄρα, 791-2), and finally that he would be the murderer of his biological father (φονεὺς δ’ ἐσοίμην τοῦ φυτεύσαντος πατρός, 793). The way that he structures his own retelling of this prophecy certainly suggests an ordered list. Knowing as we do that this is not the actual order in which these events will occur, we are left with two explanations—either Oedipus has faithfully transmitted the basic content and form of the oracle, which was delivered in a misleading but not incorrect fashion, or he has simply misremembered the oracle. Because, as I will examine in a moment, his actions are consistent with the first of these options, I will focus primarily on that explanation.<sup>236</sup> We know that Oedipus is not transmitting the oracle verbatim, since it is not in hexameters and at least some of the words have been changed (*your* to *my*, for example, to accommodate the shift in speaker from Apollo to Oedipus). However, he does present it as though these are the words of Apollo, and this oracle formulation recalls the oracle(s) of Zeus from the *Trachiniae*, in that both exploit linguistic loopholes to misdirect the listener without actually saying anything that is untrue. Here, the μέν...δέ...δέ... construction suggests but does not necessitate a chronologically ordered list.<sup>237</sup> As such, the same basic pragmatic principles are in

<sup>236</sup> As a further note, this explanation is simply more interesting, though I would like to justify this choice further, so as to not seem to be flippantly discarding a viable explanation. While it seems natural that memories might be somewhat garbled after so many years, the play is not concerned with strict verisimilitude, as Dawe has noted at length in the introduction to his commentary. While it is indeed a possibility the Oedipus misremembered the oracle, that yields a very different reading of Oedipus, depending how much intent we ascribe to this misremembering. In the most mundane version, Oedipus is simply as a man who is the victim of a truly random coincidence, since he has managed to recount an incorrect version of the oracle which happens also to be fulfilled. In another reading, we might see Oedipus as a man whose subconscious has understood his fate well before his conscious mind has and who is now rewriting his own memories, so to speak, in order to retroactively remove any guilt he might bear. On this more psychological reading, Oedipus grasps on some level *what* he has done, but is now scrambling to craft a version of the past in which the oracle bears the majority of the blame, due to its misleading phrasing.

<sup>237</sup> The μέν...δέ...δέ... structure can be used to “connect a series of clauses containing different matter, though with no opposition” (LSJ μέν II.3). However, I would suggest that in a narrative context, a string of events related in list form is assumed to be chronological. As an example, someone might tell a story in the form of “I made coffee and ate breakfast and went for a run”—the events *seem* to be things that occurred in that order, but it would only be a misleading statement, not an inaccurate one, if it turns out that the run came first, *then* coffee, *then* breakfast. In Greek, μέν...δέ...δέ... can join things in a similar fashion. Though there is not, to my knowledge, an extensive study of the way that this operates, I offer the following by way of example:

Πηλείδης μὲν ἐπὶ κλισίας καὶ νῆας εἶσας  
ἦϊε οὖν τε Μενoitιάδη καὶ οἷς ἐτάροισιν:

play here as they were in the previous chapter—Apollo has not lied to Oedipus,<sup>238</sup> but he has spoken in a way that implicates something that is not true. As in Chapter 1, I will leave the broader implications of this as an open question to revisit later in this chapter.

There are several important questions to consider at this point. The first of these is why Oedipus does not suspect that Jocasta’s prophecy might be referring to him, given that both prophecies describe the same event (Oedipus killing Laius). However, on a close reading, the oracle he received does seem markedly different from the one that Jocasta received. Jocasta’s account, if we can assume that she recounted it in its entirety, only mentioned that her child would kill Laius, with no mention of incest. If we can also assume that she has not mentioned this oracle to Oedipus before, there is not a compelling reason that he should see himself in the oracle *she* received, since it only corresponds with one small aspect of his three-part fate. If, as it seems, this is the first time that the two have compared stories of their respective oracles, they both have established narratives of their own histories that do not invite the sort of drastic rewriting that will be required to grasp the truth.<sup>239</sup> In short, we might pause at the unnoticed coincidence between the two oracles, but we ought not to expect such a coincidence to cause two adults to recast their entire histories in light of a partial correspondence between oracles that are presumed to be unfulfilled.

This leads to a broader question, however, about what Oedipus thinks Apollo has told him and why he leaves Delphi at all. Oedipus acknowledges that he left without Apollo deigning to answer the question he had *actually* asked (καί μ’ ὁ Φοῖβος ὦν μὲν ἰκόμην / ἄτιμον ἐξέπεμψεν,

---

Ἀτρείδης δ’ ἄρα νῆα θοὴν ἄλα δὲ προέρυσσεν,  
ἐν δ’ ἐρέτας ἔκρινεν ἐείκοσιν, ἐς δ’ ἑκατόμβην  
βῆσε θεῶν, ἀνά δὲ Χρυσήϊδα καλλιπάρηον  
εἶσεν ἄγων· ἐν δ’ ἀρχὸς ἔβη πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς (II. 1.306-11)

Here, there is not a clear sense of opposition between the elements, but rather a sense of order. First, Achilles retreats to his ships and his men, then (or perhaps while, here) Agamemnon prepares a ship for launch, selects rowers, and prepares a hecatomb, puts Chryseis on the ship, and finally Odysseus takes command of the ship. The time relationships here are not particularly clear, but it seems safe to suggest that these are not out of chronological order—each item seems to be contemporaneous with or subsequent to the earlier item in the list.

<sup>238</sup> It is important that Apollo does not lie. If oracles are *lies*, then communication from the gods is essentially hopeless. As much as he may mislead, Apollo, as the god of light and prophecy, does not lie. Cf. Pindar P. 9.42 καὶ γὰρ σέ, τὸν οὐ θεμιτὸν ψεύδει θιγείν (and you [Apollo], for whom is it not permitted to so much as touch a lie). See also Naerebout and Beerden 2012 (aptly titled “Gods Cannot Tell Lies: Riddling and Ancient Greek Divination”).

<sup>239</sup> In a different context, we might imagine a transition between Jocasta’s and Oedipus’ speeches that alludes to the shared theme of parricide in these two oracles (i.e. “funny you should mention your son killing his father . . . that was actually something *I* was told that I would do, though thankfully that has not happened yet!”), but even in a play so steeped in dramatic irony (on such irony, see Liapis 2012: 91ff, who finds the dramatic irony to be heavy-handed at times), such a transition would not be well suited to the dramatic and generic demands here.

788-9). He is certainly aware that he did not receive any information about his parentage. The only reassurance he has received on that front is that his parents were very upset with the man who questioned his parentage (οἱ δὲ δυσφόρως / τοῦνειδος ἦγον τῷ μεθέντι τὸν λόγον, 783-4). Oedipus says he was comforted even though, as we saw, his parents do not refute the claim and the accusations were nonetheless still gnawing at him (κάγω τὰ μὲν κείνοι ἐτερπόμεν, ὅμως δ' / ἔκνιζέ μ' ἀεὶ τοῦθ'· ὑφεῖρπε γὰρ πολὺ, 785-6). The critical question remains: if he was upset enough to go to Delphi to find out if there was any truth behind the drunken man's claims, why does Oedipus leave Delphi without the answers he was seeking, when the identity of his parents is more critical now than ever before? Or why is he not more alert to the possibility that Polybus and Merope are not his true parents?

There is, of course, no easy answer to this question. A variety of theories have been offered to explain this, attacking the critical issue from different angles and dissecting what we can see about Oedipus' character from his actions after receiving this fateful oracle. For my purposes, it is most useful to focus on what we can glean about his own understanding of his motivations. Put more simply, I will focus on what Oedipus seems to think his own motivations were and leave any external factors aside for the moment. Perhaps Oedipus is a man whose character is defined by his unceasing need to act vigorously and immediately,<sup>240</sup> and he never could have acted any differently. But that is not the story he tells about this moment. Rather, the elements that he highlights in the story of his own past—whether or not he is giving an accurate account of these events—subtly point to his own motivations. The problem with this approach is that his words do not tell a coherent and psychologically plausible story. They do, however, tell two discrete stories—in the past, up until Oedipus goes to Delphi, this account makes perfect sense:

In the past		In the present
1. A man questions Oedipus' paternity		1. A <i>drunk</i> man (not to be given credence) questions Oedipus' parentage
2. Oedipus asks his parents and they do not answer him directly		2. Oedipus asks his parents and is reassured
3. Oedipus goes to Delphi for answers (which he does not directly get)		3. Oedipus goes to Delphi anyway and leaves with an entirely different set of concerns

We are left, then, with the question of what happened between these two accounts. The shifts are subtle, but they serve to undermine the psychological plausibility of this story. If the man at the

<sup>240</sup> See fn. 210 on this characterization.

banquet is drunk, why does Oedipus let the man's drunken insults bother him so deeply? If he is reassured by his parents, why go to Delphi? The string of events no longer has a clear causal relationship, as related in the present. However, the past version I suggest above makes clear sense of how Oedipus behaves. If we understand the present account as this past account retold in light of his current convictions (that the man in the banquet was wrong and his parents are Polybus and Merope), then we can understand the strange version Oedipus tells. He is constrained by the events as they happened in the past, but he can rewrite the motivations and his own impressions to give "past Oedipus" the mindset of "present Oedipus," as much as possible. These two accounts do not blend seamlessly,<sup>241</sup> but blend well enough that no one questions this story's plausibility.

What, then, caused this conviction that reshaped Oedipus' version of this story? This shift occurs when Oedipus arrives at Delphi and comes into contact with Apollo, but the prophecy itself is worth examining in some detail. As I discussed above, the way that Oedipus recounts the prophecy, in the  $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu \dots \delta\grave{\epsilon} \dots \delta\grave{\epsilon} \dots$  format, suggests an ordered series of events in which Oedipus will *first* sleep with his mother, *then* father incestuous children, *then* kill his father. The order cannot have been specified in this way, since that is not the order in which it is fulfilled, but the way that Oedipus presents it suggests that he assumed this was the order. Combined with a heavy emphasis on Oedipus' *father's* identity in his retelling, but no mention of Merope not being his real mother, we can see at the very least that his own focus is on his paternity. Whether we should imagine this as an objective truth (i.e. the man at the banquet only questioned his father's identity) or think that this is a result of Oedipus filtering the story through his own perceptions and memories, they come to much the same thing: in the version of his past that Oedipus tells, the central question that drove him toward Delphi had to do with his paternity.<sup>242</sup>

With all this in mind, let us return to this difficult question: why does Oedipus leave Delphi and head toward Thebes? We have evidence to suggest that Oedipus is not sure about his paternity, but he does feel certain that the first of these wretched and terrible and disastrous events to take place will be that he sleeps with his mother. If his own assumptions and inferences are correct—though, clearly, from our perspective we know that they are not—the best way to avoid

---

<sup>241</sup> This is not unlike the way that Creon blends two different "voices" when he recounts what he heard from Apollo, as I discussed earlier. We can, to some extent, pull these different stories apart and explain some of the seeming inconsistencies or implausibilities in these accounts when we understand Oedipus and Creon to be blending two discrete (and not entirely compatible) accounts into one.

<sup>242</sup> See page 110ff. on this.



setting this oracle in motion is to put as much distance between himself and his mother as possible. My interpretation also sheds some light onto the oft-raised question of why Oedipus recklessly kills a man he does not know at the crossroads if he has just been told that he will kill his father (and some doubt has been cast onto his father's identity). On this interpretation, *even if* he is not convinced that Polybus is his true father (though his initial doubt certainly seems to fade over time, judging from his reaction to news of Polybus' death), Oedipus does not need to be hyper-aware of potential parricide until he sleeps with his mother, whom he thinks he can securely identify as Merope.

As is the case with all the oracles we have seen, Oedipus will be wrong about his assumptions here. However, as was the case with Jocasta, his logical process is sound—it is only because his starting premises are wrong that he comes to the wrong conclusion.<sup>243</sup> If we look back to the riddle framework from earlier in this chapter, we can see that the fundamental problem here can map onto the pun/double meaning category of riddles in a way that is illuminating, even though it is not a perfect correspondence. If my interpretation is correct, Oedipus makes two critical mistakes in his interpretation of the oracle—one is to assume that the three parts of his fate were ordered chronologically and the other is that he knows what “mother” means. The first mistake does not explicitly correspond to any of the types of riddles I examined earlier, so I will begin with the second assumption. This oracle seems straightforward, but there are in fact two different easy opportunities for misinterpretation which present themselves here. First, though Oedipus does not fall into this trap, there is the possibility that “mother” is meant metaphorically and does not refer to his biological mother. Though this might seem implausible at first glance, this is precisely the form that Hippias' prophetic dream takes. Herodotus tells us that he had a dream

---

<sup>243</sup> The philosophical terminology of valid/invalid and sound/unsound is useful here. An argument is valid “when its conclusion follows from its premises (other descriptions are ‘is deducible from’ or ‘is entailed by’),” whereas sound arguments “are valid arguments with true premises.” (Oxford Companion to Philosophy, “argument”). The standard example of this is the syllogism:

All men are mortal.

Socrates is a man.

Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

This argument is sound, since it is valid and the premises are true. If we were to change this to:

All men are purple.

Socrates is a man.

Therefore, Socrates is purple.

Here, the argument is valid, in that the conclusion follows from the premises, but it is not sound, since the premise *All men are purple* is not true. In Oedipus' case, his deductive process is valid but not sound, in that his premises are not true and he arrives at an inaccurate conclusion.

that he slept with his mother (τῆς παροιχομένης νυκτὸς ὄψιν ἰδὼν τοιήνδε· ἐδόκει ὁ Ἰππίης τῆ μητρὶ τῆ ἔωυτοῦ συνευνηθῆναι, 6.107.1), which he interprets to mean that he will regain his homeland of Athens and die there. In this situation, μήτηρ refers to motherland (though his interpretation is not entirely correct), and his dream was not about actual incest, though it appeared to be.<sup>244</sup> Apollo’s words could well have meant that Oedipus would return to his motherland, and not to his mother (though both prove to be true).<sup>245</sup> Alternatively, we can see this as a version of the sort of riddle in which κόρη is used to make the hearer assume that it means *young girl* when the solution requires it to be understood as *eyeball*. Here, however, the “riddle” is more subtle: μήτηρ is used to make Oedipus assume it means Merope when the solution requires it to be understood as Jocasta. As with all riddles of this sort, this is a fundamentally semiotic failure to recognize the proper signified that corresponds with the signifier.

The first assumption is of a slightly different type. Like riddles which hinge on puns and double meanings, this too exploits Oedipus’ natural assumptions to misdirect his interpretation. This is not as directly anchored to one word, but it is an underlying feature common to many types of riddles as well as ambiguous communication in general. As such, it is worth recalling the pragmatic principles that were discussed in the Introduction. Standard conversational conventions dictate that a speaker will present information as clearly and unambiguously as possible, if they are striving for comprehension. In general, a list of three items structured in the way that this oracle is structured will suggest that they are an ordered list—*more often than not*, μὲν . . . δὲ . . . δὲ . . . will be structured in some way, and not a random list. As with the mis-identification of *mother* described above, these are intuitive assumptions that a listener will make when engaged in a cooperative conversation. However, understanding this oracle requires a very different interpretive move that specifically does not take the most obvious or immediate available meaning, but instead finds a linguistic loophole that is semantically available, though not pragmatically available, as we saw with Zeus’ oracular language in the *Trachiniae*. This is the same move required to solve a

---

<sup>244</sup> Jocasta’s claim that that many men have slept with their mothers in dreams (πολλοὶ γὰρ ἤδη κὰν ὀνειράσιον βροτῶν / μητρὶ ξυνηνάσθησαν, 981-2) may well be a reference to this sort of story, if not to Herodotus’ specific account.

<sup>245</sup> A lesser ambiguity here also centers on the meaning of “kill,” since Greek tragedy is full of characters making claims like ὄλωλα when they are not in fact dead, but simply in distress of some sort. Similarly, at *Aj.* 1126, Menelaus (still very much alive) says, of Ajax, δίκαια γὰρ τόνδ’ εὐτυχεῖν κτείναντά με. We can see, then, that there are several different levels on which “you will kill your mother” is an ambiguous prediction.

riddle and—as was the case with the oracles structured with ῥ . . . ῥ, in Chapter 1—it requires a specific disregard for pragmatic rules of conversation.

In the end, Oedipus' fatal misinterpretation stems from a failure to recognize that standard rules of conversation did not apply to the oracle from Apollo and, more specifically, that the pragmatic rules that he should have applied to the oracle were the very rules that he used to become ruler of Thebes—the rules of riddles. To return to an earlier point, with the prophecy about the plague, these miscommunications only emerge once Apollo is involved in the communication. Creon's speech, we saw, cannot be understood when he is acting as the voice of Apollo, and it is only once he speaks in his own voice that Oedipus can understand the content of the prophecy. Here, we can observe the same phenomenon, but it takes a different form. Oedipus properly understands and investigates the challenges to his paternity *until he reaches Delphi*. Once he comes into contact with Apollo, he still approaches his circumstances with a fundamentally logical, reasoned approach, but he is misdirected by Apollo's speech, which is not “playing by the same rules,” so to speak, as Oedipus expects. Apollo's oracle implies—but, critically, does not explicitly state—things that are not true and Oedipus works from these invalid premises to come to unsound conclusions.

As a final note on this point, there is another aspect of Apollo's prophecy which disregards the pragmatic conventions which govern cooperative human communication. To revisit the basic Gricean maxims, the Maxim of Relation dictates that speakers should be relevant. When Oedipus asks who his parents are, Apollo's response disregards this maxim entirely. The revelation that he Oedipus will kill his father and sleep with his mother is not relevant to the question of who his parents are.<sup>246</sup> Conventions of conversation would suggest that at this point, Oedipus would ask a clarifying question and try to find an interpretation in which Apollo's words are relevant to his question (since he would assume that his interlocutor is participating in a cooperative conversation whose goal is effective communication). However, Apollo's words are traumatic and shocking enough that Oedipus leaves immediately and there is no possibility for Oedipus to attempt to clarify what Apollo meant. Further, nothing we see elsewhere in this play suggests that Apollo is

---

<sup>246</sup> There is, I suppose, a very forced and unintuitive interpretation in which the “answer” to Oedipus' question is actually “your mother is the person you will sleep with and your father is the man you will kill.” This would turn out to be accurate, but in addition to being a forced reading, this seems like an imprecise definition of his parents, since he may well have killed other people in addition to Laius (the Sphinx, say, and possibly others).

abiding by the rules of cooperative conversations,<sup>247</sup> so there is no reason to believe that Oedipus would eventually reach an accurate understanding, no matter how many questions he asked of Apollo. In the end, this serves as yet another example of how Apollo's communication is not governed by the same rules which govern human speech.

### **Tracing the Echoes of the Prophecy**

As we attempt to trace this prophecy throughout the rest of the play, these two accounts of the oracle, from Oedipus and Jocasta, will provide a useful point of reference, since all the other accounts stem from these two instances. Though references to their respective oracles are always paraphrased, all the subsequent versions are consistent with these initial versions. Though they do not provide new information as to the content of the oracle, later accounts are dramatically effective, as both a reminder of the constant presence and effect of this oracle in the lives of the central characters as well as an ominous and foreboding reminder to the audience of the terrible secret that will soon come to light. Beyond these effects, however, the later mentions of the oracle also serve to characterize Oedipus and Jocasta, since the oracle is not always recounted in its entirety or in a neutral way. The details characters choose to include and exclude are significant, as are the contexts in which they mention the oracle and the rhetorical effects they hope to achieve by its mention.

The next clear mention of these oracles about Oedipus' killing his father come when Oedipus is starting to suspect that he might actually be the killer of Laius and that he has brought the plague upon Thebes. At this point, it becomes nearly impossible to keep the two oracles distinct, and although this first mention (813-33) is strictly about the plague, it is worth examining these two passages in tandem, since they are so inextricably linked.

Only slightly later in the speech in which Oedipus describes receiving the oracle from Apollo, he returns to the prophecy from Apollo about the plague. In the interim, he has described coming across Laius at the crossroads and killing him, so he has never truly stopped talking about oracles and their fulfillment, but it will be more useful to look at prophecy from the perspectives of the characters in the play and not from our own position outside the play. As far as Oedipus

---

<sup>247</sup> As I have acknowledged earlier, the obvious reason that this is the case is that oracular consultations are not, strictly speaking, conversations. That does not mean that we cannot apply many of the principles of Gricean conversational maxims to help illuminate how communication goes awry, but it bears repeating that oracular consultations are not conversations. As an analytic framework or a diagnostic tool, however, using these so-called conversation maxims can help us understand precisely what about Apollo's phrasing is so difficult to understand.

understands his own speech, lines 787-97 describe Apollo’s prophecy to him and 798-813 are unrelated, until he revisits the plague prophecy again at line 813:

	εἰ δὲ τῷ ξένῳ	
815	τούτῳ προσήκει Λαίῳ τι συγγενές, τίς τοῦδ’ ἄνδρός νῦν ἂν ἀθλιώτερος; τίς ἐχθροδαίμων μᾶλλον ἂν γένοιτ’ ἀνὴρ; ὄν μὴ ξένων ἔξεστι μῆδ’ ἀστῶν τι δόμοις δέχεσθαι μῆδ’ προσφωνεῖν τινα, ὡθεῖν δ’ ἀπ’ οἴκων. καὶ τὰ δ’ οὔτις ἄλλος ἦν	But if anything akin to Laius pertains to this man, who is a more wretched man than I myself am? What man would be possessed of a more hostile fate? For, this man—it is not permitted for any foreign man or any citizen to welcome him into their homes or to speak to him, but they must push him from their homes. And these things—no other person but my very self laid these curses on me. And I pollute the bed of the dead man with my two hands—the hands by which he perished. Am I not wretched? Am I not entirely unclean? If I must flee, and it is no longer possible for me to see my loved ones or set foot in my fatherland—or I must join with my mother in matrimony and kill my father Polybus who sired and raised me. Then, would not someone who judged that these things came from a savage god, would they not be right about me? Pure reverence of the gods, may I never look on that day! But may I pass out from among the ranks of mortals before I see such a stain of misfortune come upon me!
820	ἢ γὰρ ἔμ’ ἐμαυτῷ τάσδ’ ἀράς ὁ προστιθείς. λέχη δὲ τοῦ θανόντος ἐκ χεροῖν ἐμαῖν χραίνω, δι’ ὧν περ ὦλετ’ ἄρ’ ἔφυν κακός; ἄρ’ οὐχὶ πᾶς ἀναγνος; εἴ με χρὴ φυγεῖν, καὶ μοι φυγόντι μῆστι τοὺς ἐμούς ἰδεῖν	
825	μῆδ’ ἐμβατεύειν πατρίδος, ἢ γάμοις με δεῖ μητρὸς ζυγῆναι καὶ πατέρα κατακτανεῖν Πόλυβον, ὃς ἐξέφυσε κάξέθρεπέ με. ἄρ’ οὐκ ἀπ’ ὧμοῦ ταῦτα δαίμονός τις ἂν κρίνων ἐπ’ ἀνδρὶ τῷδ’ ἂν ὀρθοίῃ λόγον;	
830	μὴ δῆτα, μὴ δῆτ’ ὦ θεῶν ἀγνὸν σέβας, ἴδοιμι ταύτην ἡμέραν, ἀλλ’ ἐκ βροτῶν βαίην ἄφαντος πρόσθεν ἢ τοιάνδ’ ἰδεῖν κηλίδ’ ἐμαυτῷ συμφορᾶς ἀφιγμένην. <i>OT813-33</i>	

The critical piece of evidence that seems to exonerate Oedipus, to Jocasta’s way of thinking, is the fact that Oedipus killed several men at a crossroads by himself, whereas Laius was killed by a band of robbers. She reassures Oedipus with the following argument:

850	ἀλλ’ ὡς φανέν γε τοῦπος ὧδ’ ἐπίστασο, κοῦκ ἔστιν αὐτῷ τοῦτό γ’ ἐκβαλεῖν πάλιν· πόλις γὰρ ἤκουσ’, οὐκ ἐγὼ μόνη, τάδε. εἰ δ’ οὖν τι κάκτρεπιο τοῦ πρόσθεν λόγου, οὔτοι ποτ’ ὦναξ, σὸν γε Λαίου φόνον φανεῖ δικαίως ὀρθόν, ὄν γε Λοξίας διεῖπε χρῆναι παιδὸς ἐξ ἐμοῦ θανεῖν.	But know that the story was at least told this way, and he is not able to take <i>this</i> back, for the city heard these things, and not I alone. But even if he should change something from his earlier account, he will at no time, lord, show that this murder of Laius that you suggest has been truly fulfilled—Loxias declared that it would be necessary for him to die at the hand of my child. And indeed, that wretched thing never killed him, but he himself died earlier. Because of this, I would not—as far as divination is concerned—look to this side or that in the future.
855	καίτοι νιν οὐ κείνός γ’ ὁ δύστηνός ποτε κατέκταν’, ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς πάροιθεν ὦλετο. ὥστ’ οὐχὶ μαντείας γ’ ἂν οὔτε τῆδ’ ἐγὼ βλέψαιμι ἂν εἴνεκ’ οὔτε τῆδ’ ἂν ὕστερον. <i>OT848-58</i>	

Viewed in tandem, we can see how these two scenes display the continued misinterpretive moves that both Oedipus and Jocasta make, continuing the misunderstandings they have held from the start.

Oedipus approaches the new oracle from Apollo with the assumption that it is true, just as

he approached the oracle about his own fate. Therefore, he has already at least entertained his hypothetical guilt as Laius' murderer and laments how terrible his banishment will be, if he does prove to be the murderer. The two oracles begin to close in on Oedipus at this point. However, he places the two oracles into dialogue with one another. If he is guilty, he must be banished, but in banishment from Thebes, he would be doubly cursed, since he could not remain in Thebes (due to the plague oracle) and he could not return to Corinth (due to his familial oracle). As such, he is effectively hemmed in by two oracles of Apollo.

Here, his use of the term ἐχθροδαίμων is interesting, in that it gives us insight into his own perception of his fate at this point. In terms of dramatic irony, this term is highly loaded, and all of its potential meanings absolutely apply to Oedipus. It is a *hapax* and the scholiasts on this passage gloss it alternately as θεοῖς ἐχθρός (“enemy to the gods”), μισητός παρὰ τῶν θεῶν (literally, “hateful, from the gods”), ἐχθρός τοῖς δαίμοσιν (“enemy to the daimones,” which is essentially equated to θεοῖς ἐχθρός here, with ἡγουν τοῖς θεοῖς following after), and δυστυχής (“unfortunate”). Given the bivalent nature of ἐχθρός, though, none of these glosses are particularly helpful and they all leave the possibility open that ἐχθροδαίμων could mean hated *by* the gods or hateful *to* the gods. Either way, Oedipus is an ἐχθρός in relation to the gods, but in one scenario, all this misfortune has befallen him because the gods, who do not like him, want to punish him. In the other scenario, he has committed such a terrible crime that the gods hate him *because* of his crimes.

LSJ opt for the equally ambiguous “hated of the gods” for this word and the consensus seems to be in favor of the “hated by the gods” interpretation, leaving Kamerbeek’s suggestion (*ad* 816) that this word ought to be compared to κακοδαίμων largely overlooked. When viewed in the context of δυσδαίμων, εὐδαίμων, and κακοδαίμων, the natural meaning for ἐχθροδαίμων is not “hated by the gods” but rather something akin to “having a fortune that is inimical (sc. to me).” On this reading, Oedipus sees himself as ill-fated, but not in a way that implies that he is being punished by the gods or that he has necessarily incurred their wrath. Instead, he is here lamenting his misfortune in a way more akin to someone complaining about their terrible luck.<sup>248</sup> This echoes

---

<sup>248</sup> See Winnington-Ingram 1980: 151ff. (esp. 173-8) for a thorough look at the meaning of *daimon* here, as opposed to *moira*, in terms of an impersonal fate. While I am not interested in an examination of how fate and free will interact in this play, I do think Winnington-Ingram’s observation about the distinction between destiny (the realm of *daimones* and *moira*) and gods (*theoi*): “destiny is inexorable, whereas gods, it is hoped, can be moved by prayer and sacrifice” (152). A *daimon* is not the personal, anthropomorphic entity that a *theos* is. As Winnington-Ingram also notes “gods

lines 776-7, in which Oedipus describes the events which drove him from his homeland as *τύχη τοιάδ'*. His inimical fortune has led to him cursing himself, without knowing it, since his unknowing act is the source of the plague.

Here, we see the moment when the reality of what has happened is first truly expressed, though it is still very much a *potential* horror, from Oedipus' perspective: ἄρ' οὐκ ἀπ' ὤμοῦ ταῦτα δαίμονός τις ἂν / κρίνων ἐπ' ἀνδρὶ τῶδ' ἂν ὀρθοίη λόγον; ("Then, would not someone who judged that these things came from a savage god, would they not be right about me?" 828-9). In these lines as well as 816 (τίς ἐχθροδαίμων μᾶλλον ἂν γένοιτ' ἀνήρ;), Oedipus speaks in potential optatives: If this were to possibly prove true, I would be a wretched victim of a cruel δαίμων (ἐχθροδαίμων, ἀπ' ὤμοῦ ... δαίμονός). He will not name the δαίμων, nor will he specify here that he is being tormented by a θεός, though we are aware that he certainly is and this is not the nebulous δαίμων of one's general lot or fortune in life. The bitter irony of this scene rests on the utter accuracy of this statement—Apollo's own prophecy set this in motion (driving Oedipus out of Corinth toward Thebes, where he could kill Laius)—but, more to the point, he presumably sent the plague to Thebes,<sup>249</sup> which is the only reason why Oedipus ever embarks on this quest for self-knowledge. If it were not for the plague from Apollo, Oedipus' fated woes would still have happened, but he would never know. This moment is, in the end, an embodiment of the complex range of Apollo's divine attributes—he is operating through plague and the possibility of healing as well as through oracular obscurity and the possibility of clear comprehension. Paradoxically, he will bring about a forced realization and terrible clarity while simultaneously obscuring any sort of linguistic clarity or comprehension by his mere presence.

Once we get into the actual restatement of the oracle here, we have little new information, but this is nonetheless a useful passage. Not only does Oedipus draw these two oracles together into one passage—though he certainly does not make any thematic or causal connection between the two—but he pointedly refers to Polybus as his father (πατέρα, 826) who sired and raised him (ὄς ἐξέφυσε κάξέθρεπέ με, 827). Whether Polybus is Oedipus' father is not in question, as the characters in the play understand this moment. This identification alone blocks the oracles from

---

are likely to have intelligible motives" (152). Oedipus is not complaining about gods in this moment—instead, he is plagued by an inimical *daimon*.

<sup>249</sup> It bears repeating that we have no evidence to suggest that Apollo actually *did* send the plague to Thebes, aside from his general interest in Oedipus' fate and his association with plague. This evidence is circumstantial, but we (and perhaps Oedipus) may well presume that the plague is Apollo's doing.

blending into one another from an external perspective. If not for that, there would be no significant reason why the two oracles cannot refer to the same murder. After all, if Polybus is not Oedipus' father, any man that he killed could conceivably be his father, and if the only man he has killed since going to Delphi is Laius, events could quickly unravel to the point that the two oracles could be understood as overlapping at the moment when Oedipus kills Laius. This scene functions as a place where the two oracles are so close to merging into each other, in the midst of the gods and daimones, but the firm identification of Polybus as Oedipus' birth father in the middle blocks that possibility.

To return to Jocasta's speech, we see a parallel moment, but from the perspective of characters themselves. As I noted above, all that keeps Oedipus from realizing that he was the murderer of Laius is the lone survivor's story that a band of robbers, and not a single man, killed the king. Yet when she returns to the prophecy, we see a strange approach to reassuring Oedipus by discrediting the oracle. Presumably, given Oedipus' concern that he may be the murderer of Laius and is the cause of the plague, she is attempting to assuage those fears. As before (707-25), Jocasta offers the allegedly unfulfilled oracle that she received from Apollo as an argument against prophecy in general. In this case, though, she has strengthened her stance. Instead of questioning the priests rather than Apollo, as she carefully did before, she now directly criticizes Apollo (invoking Λοξίας directly at 853) and divination (μαντεία, 857). To simplify her argument, it follows this causal chain:

1. Oedipus, do not be worried that you are the cause of the plague *because*
2. The survivor said there was a band of murderers.
3. Even if you did kill Laius, you do not need to exile yourself or worry about returning to Corinth, as you thought, *because*
4. Laius' killer in the city is not the cause of the plague even though the oracle said that, *because*
5. Oracles are wrong—case in point, Laius was not killed by his son, since his son died as a baby

Jocasta's premises are not sound here, but her rhetorical approach does make sense. Really, the "band of murderers" is the only thing that is necessary to prove Oedipus' innocence and save him from exile. Invoking the oracle here is logically unnecessary, but dramatically effective in that we



can see this same process that occurs over and over throughout the play. Jocasta starts off in a logical, rational mode, but once she brings the words of Apollo into play, her argument loses its soundness and we see that—yet again—Apollo has obscured the possibility of effective interpretation. 100 lines before this, Jocasta was drawing a distinction between the priests of Apollo and Apollo himself. A failure on the part of the priests of Apollo is even less evidence for Apollo’s fallibility and the worthlessness of divination as a whole.

However, by this point, both Oedipus and Jocasta have become more committed to their original misunderstandings and more entrenched in those views. Oedipus is firmly convinced that he can accurately identify not only his mother, but also his father. Jocasta, meanwhile, has shifted the fallibility from the priests to Apollo himself and has assumed (incorrectly) that this proves that all prophecy is flawed. Again, we see that the words of Apollo persistently confuse and obscure attempts to effectively pull meaning from them and rather than revisit any of the other assumptions she has made about this prophecy, she reaffirms her commitment to the idea that an exposed child must have died at the expense of her belief that Apollo cannot be wrong.

The next reference to these prophecies comes in the last moments before the full truth is revealed about Oedipus’ parentage in the messenger’s speech. These last few moments are minor, but they nonetheless reinforce the persistent characterization of Jocasta and her approach to these prophecies.<sup>250</sup> When the messenger reports that Polybus has died, Jocasta sends for Oedipus while explicitly challenging the oracles (μαντεύματα) again:

945	ὦ πρόσπολ', οὐχὶ δεσπότη τάδ' ὡς τάχος μολοῦσα λέξεις; ὦ θεῶν μαντεύματα, ἴν' ἐστέ. τοῦτον Οἰδίπους πάλαι τρέμων τὸν ἄνδρ' ἔφευγε μὴ κτάνοι· καὶ νῦν ὄδε πρὸς τῆς τύχης ὄλωλεν οὐδὲ τοῦδ' ὕπο.  945-9	Maid, will you go as quickly as possible and tell these things to your master? Oracles of the gods, you have come to this! This is the man that Oedipus fled, long fearing that he would kill him, and now this man has died by chance and not by Oedipus' hand.
-----	---	--

When Oedipus arrives, she makes a similar claim:

952	ἄκουε τάνδρὸς τοῦδε, καὶ σκόπει κλύων τὰ σέμν' ἴν' ἦκει τοῦ θεοῦ μαντεύματα.  952-3	Hear this man and see, as you listen, what the revered oracles of the god have come to.
-----	--	---

<sup>250</sup> As I noted earlier, I am not suggesting this reading to the exclusion of all others. There is certainly a psychological element here, as Jocasta is very likely bringing her own desires and preconceptions to bear on these prophecies. Though I am not offering a psychological or psychoanalytical reading here, I do think that Jocasta’s own mental state contributes to her misunderstandings here, if we imagine that her subconscious is trying to protect her conscious mind from the realization that this horrific prophecy has in fact come true. However, the careful choices that Sophocles makes suggest other explanations as well, as I have explored in this chapter.

No new information is provided here, but there has not in fact been any new oracular information since the first time that Oedipus and Jocasta recount their respective oracles. Instead, we have seen the references to this oracle deployed in ways that are to the benefit of the speaker. Allusions to the oracles, once the content was conveyed, become mechanisms to explore the psychological motivations of the people making those allusions. Here, Jocasta displays her increasing commitment to the worthlessness of oracles. At each juncture when she discusses divination, she commits herself more deeply to the idea that oracles are not useful or true. When she first introduced the oracle that she and Laius received, she questions the priests' ability to foretell the future. After that, she goes further and says that Loxias and all divination have no bearing on outcomes. Finally, in the last version, which we see here, she goes so far as to directly address the oracles with scorn: ὦ θεῶν μαντεύματα, / ἴν' ἔστέ ("Oracles of the gods, you have come to this!" 946-7).<sup>251</sup> Her skepticism reaches its peak here, making the impending recognition scene all the more dramatic and ironic.

However, for my purposes, it is important to note that this skepticism does not simply reach a crescendo here for dramatic effect. Instead, as I noted earlier, we can trace how and where Jocasta's misinterpretation originates. At each subsequent consideration of the oracle, she becomes more deeply committed to this inaccurate interpretation. This is not a coincidence. At each mention of Apollo or each attempt to convey his words from Delphi, Jocasta slides further into this misunderstanding. This is very much in keeping with the overall pattern of the play: whenever Apollo appears in a conversation, comprehension and rational inquiry are interrupted.

For the moment, I will leave the recognition scenes aside, since they are not a moment where understanding is obscured, but rather a moment where understanding and meaning emerges out of the conversations. Instead, I will move to the final reference to this prophecy, after Oedipus

---

<sup>251</sup> Jebb here draws attention to the use of μαντεύματα as the subject and suggests that her scorn is directed "not at the gods themselves, but at the μάντιες who profess to speak in their name" and concludes that "the gods are wise, but they grant no πρόνοια to men," drawing on lines 978 and 712 as comparanda (*ad* 946). I agree that there is a focus on the μαντεύματα, but she has already directly attacked Apollo before (848-58) and the inclusion of θεῶν (946) and τοῦ θεοῦ (953) suggest a close connection with the gods. Such language could have been left out without fundamentally changing the content of the sentences and this does seem to be a direct attack on the gods—it is an open question whether we should understand that she is saying that the gods do not *know* the future, or simply that they cannot effectively communicate it. Either way, I do not think the repeated use of μαντεύματα is meant to spare the gods themselves from any blame or to avoid an appearance of impiety.

knows everything.<sup>252</sup> Since he is looking back in retrospect, it is unsurprising that he now understands the meaning of the oracle. After all, the riddle has been solved:

1360 1365	οὐκ οὐκ πατρός γ' ἄν φονεὺς ἦλθον οὐδὲ νυμφίος βροτοῖς ἐκλήθη ὦν ἔφυν ἄπο. νῦν δ' ἄθεος μὲν εἰμ', ἀνοσίων δὲ παῖς, ὁμολεχῆς δ' ἀφ' ὧν αὐτὸς ἔφυν τάλας. εἰ δέ τι πρεσβύτερον ἔτι κακοῦ κακόν, τοῦτ' ἔλαχ' Οἰδίπους.	I would not, then, have become the murderer of my father, nor would I have been known to men as the husband of the woman from whom I came. But now, I am godless, child of the profane, sharing a brood with those from whom I—wretch that I am—sprang. If there is some evil that is yet graver than evil, Oedipus has received it as his part.
<i>OT 1357-66</i>		

I would like to point out one particular word that Oedipus uses to describe himself: ἄθεος.<sup>253</sup> The primary meaning here is clearly his wretchedness and the magnitude of his crimes. However, it is also a particularly apt word for this moment, since he can now see everything clearly.<sup>254</sup> For the first time in his life, he is fully aware of his identity and has solved *all* the riddles (even the ones he did not know were riddles that needed solving). The god who has hounded his family, obscuring understanding and offering misleading oracles, is no longer interfering, now that Oedipus has been effectively destroyed. His understanding coincides with his status as ἄθεος because it was that very θεός whose involvement precluded effective interpretation of the words of the oracles.

### 3. Tiresias: Most like the Lord Apollo

Tiresias plays a very liminal role in this play, as both a mortal and a mouthpiece for Apollo, a role that is explicitly ascribed to him by the Chorus:

<sup>252</sup> These lines may be spurious. Dawe (*ad* 1458-60) thinks that interpolation begins at 1422 and that everything from line 1458 to the end of the play is spurious “and the voice of Sophocles is heard no more.” Kamerbeek, contra Dawe, thinks that the bulk of the text through line 1530 is authentic and he even argues against Pearson et al. who consider 1524-30 to be spurious. I tend to side with Pohlenz’ interpretation and think that lines 1524-30 fit better if they are spoken by Oedipus than by the Chorus (contra Kamerbeek’s preference for the Chorus). Regardless, I feel comfortable considering lines 1356ff. to be authentic, as noted before (fn. 18).

<sup>253</sup> For a thorough examination of the loaded term ἄθεος, see Whitmarsh 2015, which provides a useful overview of the historical uses of the term and in a changing cultural context. In particular, on this passage, he notes that Oedipus feels “deliciously free from divine determination,” though his quasi-atheistic stance is reversed in the course of the play. When Oedipus exclaims that he is ἄθεος, Whitmarsh argues that “it will have taken the ancient spectators a few seconds to work out that he means it in the older sense, ‘abandoned by the gods,’ rather than the current ‘atheist’” (106), and that the meaning that would be most readily available to the audience would have been “atheist.” See also 116ff.

<sup>254</sup> Not literally, of course, since he has blinded himself, an irony lost on no one.

285	ἄνακτ' ἄνακτι ταῦθ' ὀρώωντ' ἐπίσταμαι μάλιστα Φοῖβω Τειρεσίαν, παρ' οὗ τις ἂν σκοπῶν τάδ', ὦναξ, ἐκμάθοι σαφέστατα. 284-6	I know that lord Tiresias sees things most like the lord Apollo. From him, lord, someone who is seeking would learn these things most clearly.
-----	--	--

“Lord Tiresias” (ἄνακτ' ... Τειρεσίαν) is ἄνακτι μάλιστα Φοῖβω—the lord most like the lord Apollo. This makes the next lines laden with importance: “From him, lord, someone who is seeking would learn these things most clearly.” Knowing what we know about Apollo’s inability to communicate effectively, this first claim about Tiresias (that he is most like the lord Apollo) is true, but in a complex fashion. Apollo does, after all, *see* things clearly and his perceptions and knowledge are not in doubt. Similarly, Tiresias is fully aware of the outcome of the events of this play, but the second claim, with its future less vivid condition, is far more dubious—Oedipus is undoubtedly seeking, but he does not learn things clearly from Tiresias. This ominous line harks back to Oedipus’ unsuccessful attempts to learn about his parents, at Delphi. Here, it is worth considering how far his characterization as μάλιστα Φοῖβω is meant to extend and how much weight we ought to place on the Chorus’ claims. Tiresias is in fact a great deal like Apollo, from all the evidence available to Oedipus and the Chorus, but most like Apollo simply does not imply any sort of clear revelations in this play, and lines 285-6 are best understood as being heavy with dramatic irony.

Similarly, the Chorus describes Tiresias as “the divine seer” (τὸν θεῖον μάντιν, 298) and the one person with truth inherently in him (ὦ / τάληθές ἐμπέφυκεν ἀνθρώπων μόνω, 298-9). Oedipus too says that he is the one who “observes everything, things that can be taught and things that cannot be spoken, heavenly things and things that walk the earth” (ὦ πάντα νομῶν Τειρεσία, διδακτά τε / ἄρρητά τ', οὐράνιά τε καὶ χθονοστιβῆ, 300-1). Tiresias, we see, is located somewhere between divine and mortal. Access to divine knowledge is attributed to him alone, and he is the only mortal who is assimilated so closely to Apollo. Thus far, I have been drawing a divide between how mortals communicate and how divine communication interrupts these processes of communication. Where, then, does the liminal Tiresias fit within this system?

Tiresias, I will argue here, represents something of a third category within this divine-mortal system. Tiresias does not confound understanding in the same way that Apollo does; however, he also does not live up to the Chorus’ claims of revealing things clearly, as we will see below. Critically, regardless of how we may infer his *motives* throughout this play, we can say

conclusively that he is not engaged in a cooperative conversation. Tiresias—like Apollo—is not observing the Gricean maxims and, as a result, effective transmission of meaning cannot occur.

The nature of Tiresias’ communications reflects the fact that Tiresias, as a mortal agent of Apollo, inhabits both the divine and mortal realms—his words are intelligible, and yet he refuses to reveal the things that he knows. His stated reasons are hard to discern through the complicated and thoroughly debated text, but he seems to say that he does not want to give voice to the truth, since the evils that he knows are currently only his, but if he speaks them, they will become Oedipus’ woes as well: πάντες γὰρ οὐ φρονεῖτ’ ἐγὼ δ’ οὐ μή ποτε / τᾶμ’, ὡς ἂν εἴπω μὴ τὰ σ’, ἐκφήνω κακά (328-29). If we do not emend the passage, there are two main interpretations of this passage, and I side with those who follow Jebb’s translation of “I will never reveal my (not to call them thy) griefs” and understand Tiresias’ reluctance to stem from a desire not to give Oedipus bad news that will inflict κακά on him—not, as the other interpretive approach would suggest, as a reluctance born out of fear at the negative consequences he will suffer as the bearer of bad news.<sup>255</sup> The distinction may seem minor, but his motivations and Oedipus’ perception of his motivations drive their whole exchange from lines 300-462. Looking closely at the ways in which Tiresias interacts with Oedipus will prove critical to a full understanding of this scene.

300	ὧ πάντα νωμῶν Τειρεσία, διδακτά τε ἄρρητά τ’, οὐράνιά τε καὶ χθονοσιβῆ, πόλιν μὲν, εἰ καὶ μὴ βλέπεις, φρονεῖς δ’ ὅμως οἶα νόσω σύνεστιν ἧς σὲ προστάτην σωτήρᾳ τ’, ὦναξ, μούνον ἐξευρίσκομεν.	Tiresias, you who observe everything, both things that can be taught and things unspeakable, things in heaven and things upon the earth—even though you do not actually see, you nonetheless perceive what sort of sickness is besetting the city. We find that you alone, lord, are the guardian and the savior of the city. Phoebus—if you have not heard anything from the messengers—sent back to us who sent to him that release from this disease would only come if we discover the killers of Laius and kill them or send them out of the land as exiles. Now, do not begrudge us either the voice of the birds or some other path of prophecy you may have—save yourself and the city, save me, and save us from all the pollution of the dead man. For we are in your hands it is the finest labor for a man to provide aid, as his resources and his faculties allow.
305	Φοῖβος γάρ, εἴ τι μὴ κλύεις τῶν ἀγγέλων, πέμψασιν ἡμῖν ἀντέπεμψεν, ἔκλυσιν μόνην ἂν ἐλθεῖν τοῦδε τοῦ νοσήματος, εἰ τοὺς κτανόντας Λαῖον μαθόντες εὖ κτείναιμεν ἢ γῆς φυγάδας ἐκπεψαίμεθα.	
310	σύ νυν φθονήσας μήτ’ ἀπ’ οἰωνῶν φάτιν μήτ’ εἴ τιν’ ἄλλην μαντικῆς ἔχεις ὁδόν, ῥῦσαι σεαυτὸν καὶ πόλιν, ῥῦσαι δ’ ἐμέ, ῥῦσαι δὲ πᾶν μίασμα τοῦ τεθηκότος.	
315	ἐν σοὶ γὰρ ἐσμέν· ἄνδρα δ’ ὠφελεῖν ἀφ’ ὧν ἔχοι τε καὶ δύναιτο, κάλλιστος πόνων.	
	300-15	

<sup>255</sup> Jebb and Campbell and Mazon all take essentially this same approach, with τὰ ἐμὰ κακά referring to the weight that the secrets about Oedipus have for Tiresias and τὰ σὰ κακά referring to the same secrets as they apply to Oedipus (Jebb *ad loc.*)—these are the same κακά, but Tiresias seems to be suggesting here that they are only Oedipus’ κακά if he knows about them, and if Tiresias keeps them to himself, they will afflict only him. I side with Kamerbeek in finding this to be a far preferable reading to that suggested by Elmsley, Platt, Pearson, et al., which understands ἐγὼ δ’ οὐ μή ποτε τᾶμ’, ὡς ἂν εἴπω μὴ τὰ σ’, ἐκφήνω κακά to be essentially equivalent to οὐ μή ποτε τὰ σὰ ἐκφήνω κακά ἵνα εἴπω τὰ ἐμὰ (ἔπη or κακά). On this reading, Tiresias refuses to share his knowledge on the grounds that he will suffer some direct (negative) consequences for sharing. Dawe, however, simply emends the second line to τὰ λῶστα γ’ εἴπω μὴ τὰ σ’, ἐκφήνω κακά and avoids the complicated passage.

When approaching these lines, I will do so from the assumption that Tiresias does in fact know everything, as Oedipus and the Chorus have claimed. In this sense, he is very much like Apollo, and his actions come from a place of complete knowledge. Tiresias is the only person who truly knows the meaning of the oracles, a fact which is inextricably linked to his status as the only person who truly knows Oedipus' identity. I would suggest that this knowledge extends beyond simply knowing Oedipus' parentage; Tiresias knows Oedipus' psychology as well. When he provokes Oedipus before telling him (in a limited fashion) the truth, he ensures that Oedipus will not be receptive to that truth. Tiresias is not misunderstood here, as Apollo is. Instead, he orchestrates a situation where he will be understood but not believed.

Tiresias, then, engages in communication in a way that is not fully divine or fully human, which will be an important motif throughout his conversations with Oedipus. He is effectively divine, in terms of knowledge, but his words can be understood, unlike Apollo's. There is nothing about his actual syntax that obscures his meaning, and Oedipus understands his words without any difficulty, once Tiresias actually reveals what he knows. So many of the failures of divine-human communication arise from the interaction between words and the context in which they are delivered—when gods talk, they consistently display a disregard of human pragmatic conventions, and they speak in a language whose meaning can only be understood by stripping away the normal contextual elements that would normally contribute to meaning. This may involve applying a seemingly-inappropriate set of linguistic rules to an oracle (as the riddle-like elements of Apollo's words to Oedipus highlight) or disregarding the normal assumptions that humans apply to language and instead finding something of a linguistic loophole, as we saw in the *Trachiniae*.

With Tiresias, something different happens. Tiresias, as we will see, does not speak in cryptic, riddling phrases, as oracles tend to do. Instead, he functions as something of a mortal inversion of Apollo; instead of communicating in a way that disregards context, he communicates in a way that exploits context's role in generating meaning. Because of this manipulation of contextual elements, Tiresias' speech will not be believed even though it will be understood—that is to say, Tiresias uses language in the way that mortals do, and his meaning is readily understood, but he simultaneously frustrates any chance of comprehension by manipulating the context and Oedipus' own personality.

As I noted above, when Oedipus first speaks to Tiresias, he addresses him as the man “who observe[s] everything, both things that can be taught and things unspeakable, things in heaven and things upon the earth.” He goes on to characterize him as the lone protector and savior of the city (ἦς σὲ προστάτην / σωτῆρά τ’, ὤναξ, μοῦνον ἐξευρίσκομεν, 303-4), a theme that recurs later in this address as well, as Oedipus asks Tiresias to save (ῥῦσαι) himself, the city, and Oedipus, and to remove the pollution from the city. Significantly, he invokes both divination via birds (ἀπ’ οἰωνῶν φάτιν) as well as “some other path of prophecy” (τιν’ ἄλλην μαντικῆς ὁδόν)—even though Oedipus paraphrases the oracle in a way that implies a syntactic comprehension (aside from a small but critical confusion about whether there were one or many murderers), he is still aware that he does not fully understand the oracle. There is a critical piece of information missing—the identity of the person or people who killed Laius—and without knowing that, he cannot act upon the oracle. Here, the different modes of prophecy are juxtaposed: anyone can go to Delphi and receive an oracle, and the oracular form is (seemingly) accessible to anyone who speaks the Greek language. However, there is still need of a very particular set of skills that only Tiresias or other seers have access to, when it comes to questions of facts and information. This brings us back to the fundamental skill set involved in solving a riddle—Oedipus is the riddle solver par excellence, and yet he and others focus on how he knows nothing more than anyone else. Oedipus’ skills focus on his ability to interpret language flexibly and to find the well-known thing hiding beneath obfuscating language.<sup>256</sup> His particular types of knowledge and understanding do not extend to any sort of preternatural access to information. For this, we must depart from the basic premise underlying oracles—that they can be effectively interpreted by anyone—and return to divination and seers to access things that cannot otherwise be discovered by humans.

Before moving on, it is important to note the last argument that Oedipus uses to motivate Tiresias to help him: it is the finest labor (κάλλιστος πόνων) for a man to provide aid, as he is able (from both his resources and his faculties, ἀφ’ ὧν ἔχοι τε καὶ δύναιτο). Directly after asking Tiresias to save himself and the city and Oedipus himself, Oedipus then allies himself with the suppliants and the city as a whole (*we* are in your hands, ἐν σοὶ γὰρ ἐσμέν, 314), something he will continue to do throughout this exchange. Oedipus sets up a clear structure, in which Oedipus is

---

<sup>256</sup> The dramatic irony, as so many others have noted, is thick here, precisely because this oracle is truly at the pinnacle of well-known things hiding under obscuring language. What could (or should) be more well-known to Oedipus than himself?

aligned with the city and the people, and Tiresias is positioned as the sole savior of them all.<sup>257</sup>

Though it is implicit here, Oedipus begins to set up the grounds for his belief that Tiresias ought to help decipher the oracular instructions—patriotism and obligation to Thebes, layered with a sort of human compassion.

Tiresias' first words are something of a soliloquy—they do not directly address any of what Oedipus said and could be seen as more of an aside, except that Oedipus clearly overhears him and responds.

316	φεῦ φεῦ, φρονεῖν ὡς δεινὸν ἔνθα μὴ τέλη λύη φρονούντι· ταῦτα γὰρ καλῶς ἐγὼ εἰδῶς διώλεσ'· οὐ γὰρ ἂν δεῦρ' ἰκόμην.	Ah, how terrible it is to have knowledge when it offers no benefit to the one who has it! And I knew this full well, but I forgot—for otherwise, I would not have come here.
	316-18	

This is not an unusual way for a character to enter a scene and could easily be understood as a standard entrance lament.<sup>258</sup> However, it is worth examining this closely, since it is the opening salvo in a conversation that effectively manipulates Oedipus' psychology. In response to a direct request from the ruler of the city, asking him to nobly help the city and all the people, Tiresias responds with a lament about how terrible it is to know things that are not of profit to the one who knows them. We might, as many have, understand this as the moment when Tiresias (who has shown reluctance in coming and needed to be summoned twice) understands the full horror of what his knowledge entails.<sup>259</sup> However, Sophocles has Tiresias specifically delay sharing his knowledge until revealing it will cause the most damage, and we should at least consider his actions in a less generous (and less humane) light. After all, his long delay in arriving gives Oedipus time to discuss the oracle with Creon and—more importantly—to curse the murderer and thereby curse himself (236-54). This has also given Oedipus time to discuss the actions he will take to uncover the murderer and banish him, and to announce these plans to the city. Perhaps, given how the rest of this scene unfolds, we should not think of Tiresias' delayed arrival as something born out of

<sup>257</sup> This is a stark inversion of the characterization of Oedipus as the savior of Thebes, a claim that was made less explicitly by the priest at the open of the play and one that will be made far more aggressively by Oedipus at the end of this exchange with Tiresias.

<sup>258</sup> For examples of characters entering with an emotional exclamation, see Polymestor at *Hec.* 1056; Cassandra at *Ag.* 1072; Hermione at *And.* 825. For other examples of characters who enter with an outburst of some sort, see Cassandra at *Tro.* 308 ff.; Pentheus at *Bacc.* 642ff.; Hippolytus at *Hipp.* 601-2. See Mastronarde 1979 for more on this.

<sup>259</sup> For example, Jebb suggests this and paraphrases the sentiment here as "(I have to bewail this now), *for*, though I once knew it, I have forgotten it" and suggests that "Tiresias, twice summoned (288), had come reluctantly. Only now, in the presence of Oedipus, does he realise the full horror of the secret which he holds" (*ad*317).



reluctance and horror, but rather as the first in a long string of intentional delays that will allow the terrible revelations of the play to unfold in the most horrific fashion.

Returning to Tiresias' words with this in mind, we can see how his opening lines subtly work to begin this process. To return to the pragmatic terminology of implicatures and inferences,<sup>260</sup> Tiresias opens with a series of statements that implicate that he does in fact have some sort of wisdom. Oedipus can reasonably infer from this lament that Tiresias has some sort of *relevant* knowledge that applies to this oracle. Again, there is no reason why Tiresias needs to open with this sort of a gnomic statement, and I would argue that it is a mistake to assume that we cannot read intentionality into these opening lines, even though they are not particularly marked or unusual.

As the conversation unfolds, we can see Tiresias subtly hinting at his knowledge and bringing this idea to the forefront. His next lines, after Oedipus comments on how ἄθυμος Tiresias is (τί δ' ἔστιν; ὡς ἄθυμος εἰσελήλυθας), refer obliquely to his privileged status as someone possessed of special wisdom or knowledge:

320	ἄφες μ' ἐς οἶκους· ῥᾶστα γὰρ τὸ σὸν τε σὺ κάγῳ διοίσω τοῦμόν, ἦν ἐμοὶ πίθη. <span style="display: block; text-align: right;">320-1</span>	Let me go home! For you will carry on most easily, as will I, if you do what I ask. <sup>261</sup>
-----	---	---

Oedipus is still very much unaware what sort of thing of Tiresias' needs to be “carried on.” All he has heard is that it is δεινόν, because Tiresias' knowledge brings, in Tiresias' own words, “no benefit to the one who has it” (μὴ τέλη / λύη φρονούντι, 316-7). Yet, rather than share this information, as Oedipus has requested, Tiresias asks to be allowed to go home—and, by extension, to take his knowledge with him. Rather than the sort of response that might be expected here—“What is *your* thing you need to carry, Tiresias?” or, for that matter, “What is *my* thing to carry, Tiresias?”—Oedipus picks up on the fact that Tiresias is withholding what he knows:

322	οὔτ' ἔννομ' εἶπας οὔτε προσφιλῆ πόλει τῆδ', ἣ σ' ἔθρεψε, τήνδ' ἀποστερῶν φάτιν <span style="display: block; text-align: right;">322-3</span>	You are saying words which are neither appropriate nor friendly to this city, the one which raised you, since you are withholding this report.
-----	--	--

This is the element he responds to, painting Tiresias' words as neither appropriate (ἔννομα)<sup>262</sup> nor friendly (προσφιλή) to Thebes, since he withholds his report (τήνδ' ἀποστερῶν φάτιν, 323).

<sup>260</sup> These are discussed thoroughly in the Introduction and also in Appendix B.

<sup>261</sup> I have opted for the more colloquial option of “carry on” here, rather than a more literal translation of “bear your/my thing through,” which is a better rendering of the Greek and one which actually expresses the direct objects (τὸ σὸν, τοῦμόν), though it is inelegant English. I am hesitant to use any translation (endure, suffer, bear one's cross/burden etc.) that suggests something necessarily negative, since ῥᾶστα has contrasting implications and it seems best to leave the language as neutral as possible at this point in the exchange.

<sup>262</sup> In the most literal sense, the meaning of ἔννομος reflects its constituent parts: ἐν + νόμος (LSJ: “ordained by law, lawful, legal”). Lloyd-Jones translates this passage as “What you say is neither lawful nor friendly to this city,” but the context here demands that we understand νόμος more as custom or usage, and less as a law, per se. There is (to the

Here, we ought certainly to understand φάτιν as referring to a divine report, as it often does.<sup>263</sup> More than just withholding a report, Tiresias is withholding divine knowledge. Oedipus does not understand this as a choice aimed at him *personally*, but rather an attack on the city as a whole. These are not very strong accusations, however, and Jebb is right to say that “the king’s first remonstrances are gentle” (*ad* 322). Oedipus is still asking nicely, and he is not yet inclined to disregard what Tiresias says completely.

It is at this point that Tiresias begins to turn his responses toward Oedipus directly:

324	ὁρῶ γὰρ οὐδὲ σοὶ τὸ σὸν φώνημι' ἰὸν πρὸς καιρὸν· ὡς οὖν μηδ' ἐγὼ ταῦτόν πάθω— <i>OT</i> 324-5	Yes, I see that, for your part, your speech is not beneficial [or perhaps “does not hit the mark”]. So then, in order that I do not suffer the same fate—
-----	---	---

The Greek here is quite condensed, and there is not a firm consensus about the meaning. I have provided as literal a version as possible above, but in order to understand the sentiment here, additional content must be provided. While there are a variety of ways to make sense of this,<sup>264</sup> I would suggest that the best way to do so is to understand that he was in the process of saying something to the effect of “I see that what you are saying is not helping (οὐδὲ ... πρὸς καιρὸν)—since what you say is accomplishing nothing, why should I speak, since words are not helping?” I have, of course, had to supply my own speculative conjectures here, in order to increase the clarity of this ambiguous statement, and even still, the meaning is not particularly clear.<sup>265</sup> This still leaves open the very salient question of helping (or not helping) *at what*. Helping persuade Tiresias to reveal what he knows? Helping save the city? Helping improve the general situation at hand? The

---

best of my knowledge) no reason to think that Tiresias’ actions would be *illegal*, but it is, as Jebb writes “not in not in conformity with usage, which entitled the State to benefit by the wisdom of its μάντις” (*ad* 322). I have used “appropriate” here as a shorthand for “in accordance with what is customary and expected by the State,” though it is an admittedly imprecise translation.

<sup>263</sup> See, e.g., Eur. *Supp.* 834; Aesch. *Ag.* 1132; A. *Pers.* 227 and 521.

<sup>264</sup> Jebb here suggests “(I do not speak), for I see that *neither* dost *thou* speak opportunely: (I am silent) therefore, lest I too should speak unseasonably” and understands πρὸς καιρὸν to be synonymous with καιρίως. Contra Jebb, Kamerbeek suggests that πρὸς καιρὸν should be understood with more a sense of “advantage” or “profit” rather than “opportunity” or “proper moment.” Dawe, however, suggests “I do so because I see that in your case too (like any remarks that I might make) what you are saying will lead us into an unfortunate situation.” There is likewise a great deal of debate about the context of the ending (ὡς οὖν μηδ' ἐγὼ ταῦτόν πάθω) and Jebb and Campbell both suggest that something to the effect of “I am silent” must be understood before this passage. Jebb suggests “(I do not speak), then, in order that *neither* (μηδέ) may I share your mishap (of speaking amiss)” and expands on that with “If he speaks not, *neither* will he speak wrongly.” I tend to agree with the majority of editors and commentators, however, who understand Tiresias to be interrupted mid-sentence by Oedipus’ impassioned outburst of μὴ πρὸς θεῶν...

<sup>265</sup> Dawe comments (*ad* 324) that “Tiresias’ language is at the moment veiled and restrained, as befits a prophet.” I find it to be more malicious than this, since he is taking the first steps here in the process which I will argue ends with Oedipus infuriated to the point that he will no longer heed the words of Tiresias. Dawe is not wrong, however, to note that Tiresias is restrained in his speech here. In fact, Tiresias will remain restrained and elusive throughout the entire conversation (a calculated choice), which is precisely what will enrage Oedipus, who is looking for actions he can take to rectify the situation in Thebes.

latter seems most likely, but even that is unclear—what *about* his φώνημα is not helping? Is the tactic Oedipus employs (of appealing to Tiresias’ patriotism) not an effective one? Or is there no φώνημα that could remedy the situation?

There is, of course, no clear answer to this, but my interest lies more in this formulation. The intention of this ambiguously worded response is not to mislead the hearer (as oracular ambiguity often does). Instead, it is to further play with Oedipus’ emotional and psychological state. The outcome of this conversation does not critically depend on Oedipus’ proper or improper understanding of this ambiguous line, as is the case with oracles. Instead, Oedipus is so enraged by Tiresias’ suggestion that he will not speak—regardless of the justification that he gives—that he interrupts Tiresias.<sup>266</sup> Whatever *meaning* Tiresias may have intended from his cryptic wording is irrelevant to the subsequent course of the conversation, since Oedipus does not ask Tiresias to clarify why his φώνημα is not πρὸς καιρόν. Instead, the *effect* of Tiresias’ ambiguous words are all that matter.

The immediate effect of Tiresias’ words—Oedipus cutting Tiresias off mid-sentence and both exclaiming and beseeching—allows us a great deal of insight into Oedipus’ perceptions here:

326	μὴ πρὸς θεῶν φρονῶν γ’ ἀποστραφῆς, ἐπεὶ πάντες σε προσκυνοῦμεν οἷδ’ ἰκτῆριοι. <span style="display: block; text-align: right;">326-27</span>	No, by the gods! Having knowledge as you do, do not turn away, since we all desperately beseech you as suppliants.
-----	---	--

Whatever meaning Tiresias may have intended, Oedipus makes it clear how he has interpreted the prophet’s words: as a threat to leave and take his privileged knowledge with him.<sup>267</sup> The terms in which he objects echo the constant element in Oedipus’ lines here—his identification of himself with the city. While Tiresias insists on framing himself and Oedipus as individuals, Oedipus uses first person plural forms: *we* are in your hands (ἐν σοὶ γὰρ ἐσμέν, 314), *we* suppliants here beseech you (πάντες σε προσκυνοῦμεν οἷδ’ ἰκτῆριοι, 327). Tiresias’ intransigence is not a personal affront

<sup>266</sup> I feel confident that these lines are properly attributed to Oedipus, though some editors choose to follow Σ<sup>1</sup> and A, which give these lines to the Chorus. See Kamerbeek *ad* 326, 7 on this question; I am persuaded that these lines do belong to Oedipus and that these were likely misattributed to the Chorus because of the plural forms used here. However, the plural forms are very much in keeping with Oedipus’ rhetoric, though they may well have misled scribes and led to this misattribution.

<sup>267</sup> I suspect that Tiresias delivers these lines while turning away as if to leave, given Oedipus’ response (ἀποστραφῆς), though there is no clear evidence to prove that this language is literal, rather than metaphorical. It does seem likely, however, given Oedipus’ response. If Tiresias does begin to turn away here, then we have yet another example of a way that Tiresias exploits the full range of contextual aspects of communication (including body language) in his manipulation of Oedipus, whereas oracular communication must necessarily be devoid of any sort of body language. Oedipus, meanwhile, also invokes a very physical sort of language, whether he is actually prostrating himself or simply using that language.

to Oedipus, as he presents it, but rather an affront to the community as a whole—Oedipus is merely a representative of the city, investigating on the city’s behalf.

Finally, Tiresias briefly allows this identification, by using second person plural forms to refer to Oedipus and the city as a collective group. However, he only does so in order to disparage the group as a whole, and then to return to his rhetoric of two individuals:

238	πάντες γὰρ οὐ φρονεῖτ'· ἐγὼ δ' οὐ μή ποτε τᾶμ', ὡς ἂν εἴπω μὴ τὰ σ', ἐκφῆνω κακά. 328-9	For you all have no knowledge—but I will not <i>ever</i> reveal my woes, so as not to call them yours.
-----	---	--

These woes and burdens are Tiresias’ and could potentially be Oedipus’, but he pointedly avoids the issue of the state, no matter how frequently and insistently Oedipus returns to it, as he does immediately after this:

330	τί φῆς; ξυνειδῶς οὐ φράσεις, ἀλλ' ἐννοεῖς ἡμᾶς προδοῦναι καὶ καταφθεῖραι πόλιν; 330-1	What are you saying? You know the truth full well and you will not speak it, but instead you intend to betray us and destroy the city?
-----	---	--

Rather than before, when Tiresias was merely guilty of behaving in a way that was not *ἔννομα* or *προσφιλή* (322), here his refusal to speak is equated to treason. He is betraying and destroying the city by *not* sharing what he knows; rather than the city’s collectively approaching Tiresias as the lone savior figure, Oedipus has now shifted his language to focus on how Tiresias is the sole treacherous figure who is attacking and destroying the city by refusing to speak. Although, of course, Oedipus is the sole figure who is destroying the city, the rhetoric he employs here conflates the idea of *bringing* destruction and that of choosing not to ward off destruction when one is capable of doing so. Tiresias did not infect the city, but he is withholding the cure.

In light of all this, Tiresias’ actions look less like reluctance and more like willful antagonism. Tiresias’ responses are not lies, but they are deft deflections away from the content of what he knows. Instead of addressing the ways in which he might be hurting the *city*, Tiresias maneuvers the argument back toward Oedipus and does not address the fact that he has this knowledge, but instead places the blame for his silence on Oedipus himself:

332	ἐγὼ οὐτ' ἐμαυτὸν οὔτε σ' ἀλγυνῶ. τί ταῦτ' ἄλλως ἐλέγχεις; οὐ γὰρ ἂν πύθοιό μου. 332-3	I will neither pain myself, nor you. Why do you ask these things in vain? You could not learn from me.
-----	---	--

Tiresias has already made it clear that his knowledge pains him, but his repeated inclusion of Oedipus in his refusals (at 320, 324, and 329 before this instance at 332) is calculated. After Oedipus’ next impatient outburst, Tiresias returns to this same argument:

337	ὀργὴν ἐμέμψω τὴν ἐμήν, τὴν σὴν δ' ὁμοῦ ναίουσαν οὐ κατεῖδες, ἀλλ' ἐμέ ψέγεις. OT337-8	You’ve criticized my temper, but you have not recognized the temper inherent in you, but instead you blame me.
-----	---	--

Tiresias refuses to include any details while simultaneously connecting Oedipus to Tiresias’ own silence and blaming Oedipus—who is insistently asking Tiresias to speak and save the city—for why he cannot do what Oedipus is asking. Knowing what we know, Tiresias’ arguments make sense, but from Oedipus’ perspective, this is both nonsensical and infuriating, for obvious reasons.

Over the next rounds of this exchange, we can see exactly what we have seen throughout Oedipus’ engagement with oracles and prophecy. He approaches things logically and rationally and makes valid inferences and interpretive moves, given what he knows. He is firmly committed to his allegiance to the city of Thebes, and even as he grows noticeably frustrated, even acknowledging his own (justified) anger, he returns to the crux of his argument:

339	<p>τίς γὰρ τοιαῦτ’ ἂν οὐκ ἂν ὀργίζοιτ’ ἔπη κλύων, ἃ νῦν σὺ τήνδ’ ἀτιμάζεις πόλιν;</p> <p style="text-align: right;">339-40</p>	<p>Who would not be angry to hear words such as these, with which you are now dishonoring this city?</p>
-----	--	--

Oedipus is upset because Tiresias is doing a grave injustice to the city. We might here question how legitimate Oedipus’ account is, knowing that his anger led him to kill Laius at the crossroads, but his argument is no less valid—Tiresias’ silence is threatening the city, and any reasonable ruler of a city would be angry in that position. The trajectory of the plot will vindicate Tiresias’ words by the end, but that does not change the fact that Oedipus is making consistently valid and reasonable arguments, in the face of an intractable and unhelpful interlocutor. This pattern culminates when Tiresias tells him that the future will happen, whether or not Tiresias shares his knowledge of it, at which point Oedipus objects that there is *no reason Tiresias should not tell him*.

341	<p>Τειρεσίας ἦξει γὰρ αὐτά, κἂν ἐγὼ σιγῇ στέγω. Οἰδίπους οὔκου<sup>268</sup> ἃ γ’ ἦξει καὶ σὲ χρὴ λέγειν ἐμοί;<sup>269</sup></p>	<p>Tiresias For these things will happen of their own accord, even if I conceal them with silence. Oedipus</p>
-----	--	--

<sup>268</sup> The manuscripts read οὔκου here, but Herwerden’s emendation of οὔκου is a better reading and I (with Dawe, Lloyd-Jones and Wilson, and others) print Herwerden’s conjecture.

<sup>269</sup> On line 341, Jebb notes: “‘(the things of which I wot) will come of themselves.’ The seer is communing with his own thought, which dwells darkly on the κάκα of v. 329.” The following lines are quite vexed, and I offer here several interpretations. Kamerbeek: “ἦξει γὰρ αὐτά: vaguely referring to the matter he is unwilling to disclose. γὰρ presupposes the suppressed idea: ‘I need not reveal what I know’ or ‘my silence makes no difference’ (Campbell).” Kamerbeek also comments: “καὶ: In my opinion the stress is equally divided between σὲ and λέγειν; so καὶ has to be taken with the entire phrase σὲ χρὴ λέγειν ἐμοί contrasting it with ἃ γ’ ἦξει.” Jebb differs only slightly: “‘Then, seeing that they will *come*, thou on thy part (καὶ σὲ) shouldst *tell* them to me.’ The stress of καὶ falls primarily on σὲ, but serves at the same time to contrast λέγειν with ἦξει. In ἃ γ’ ἦξει the causal force of the relative is brought out’ by γε: *quippe quae ventura sint*.” Dawe offers: “In that case (οὔκου), if they are going to come anyway (ἃ γ’ either like ἄπερ, the very things we have been talking about, or, more likely, semi-causal, since they are going to come), why don’t you take the complementary step (καὶ) of telling me about them?”

	341-2	Since these things will in fact happen, shouldn't you tell me about them?
--	-------	---

This is, in fact, something of a *non sequitur* on Tiresias' part, as Oedipus notes, and Oedipus makes a valid request for information. However, instead of sharing what he knows, Tiresias exploits the frustration and anger he has provoked in Oedipus. As noted above, Oedipus is not being unreasonable—any ruler would presumably be angry in this situation. But Oedipus is not any ruler, and he has demonstrated both great anger (in killing Laius, though the play has not revealed that yet) and great zeal on behalf of his people. Tiresias specifically manipulates these elements to goad Oedipus to rage by deftly manipulating the argument to frustrate his attempts to learn how to save his city while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge Oedipus as a representative of the city. Oedipus constantly tries to depict himself and Thebes as one side of this conversation, in opposition to Tiresias as a lone figure who can save the city or condemn it through his silence. Tiresias insistently recasts this as Oedipus versus Tiresias and places onto Oedipus the blame for his own refusal to help. In a way, this realigns the city with Tiresias, since Oedipus is the element which, for reasons Tiresias will not share, keeps Tiresias from saving the city. This approach is subtle and carefully designed to anger Oedipus, playing on his particular character.

His final blow, so to speak, is to point out how angry Oedipus has become while refusing yet again to tell him what he wants to know:

343	οὐκ ἄν πέρα φράσαιμι. πρὸς τὰδ', εἰ θέλεις, θυμοῦ δι' ὀργῆς ἥτις ἀγριωτάτη.	I would not speak any further. At this, if you wish, rage on with anger—whatever fiercest anger you please.
	343-4	

His tone is excessively polite<sup>270</sup>—infuriatingly so, particularly for someone who is as frustrated as Oedipus is, as we will see in his response. This is Tiresias' last provocation before Oedipus erupts into accusations, and it is a calculated one. Oedipus has not been unreasonable in his responses thus far, but Tiresias carefully redirects the conversation at every opportunity in order to avoid addressing the substance of anything that Oedipus asks him. Rather than respond to Oedipus' objection that it could not *hurt* for Tiresias to tell him what will happen, even if it cannot be changed, Tiresias instead focuses on Oedipus' emotional state.<sup>271</sup> As he has effectively done so often

<sup>270</sup> Jebb (*ad* 343f.) notes this “courteous formula” but concludes that “just because it is such, here expresses fixed resolve” and draws parallels to similar constructions (of ἄν plus an optative) at lines 95 and 282. In both the parallels he cites, however, this is in fact an overly courteous phrasing used to express polite deference toward Oedipus. As I will argue here, I think that Jebb is not far off, but that there is something far more complex going on in these lines that needs to be examined and unpacked more.

<sup>271</sup> In a modern context, we might describe what Tiresias does here as “tone policing,” a term used to describe when someone shifts an argument away from the content or substance of the debate and instead focuses on their interlocutor's emotional state. Tone policing is generally used to refer to the practice of dismissing the content of an

throughout this argument, Tiresias is again able to shift the focus of the argument to frustrate Oedipus' attempts to figure out how to rid Thebes of the plague. As the culmination of all this, rather than address Oedipus' reasonable point, Tiresias uses excessively (perhaps condescendingly) polite language to tell Oedipus that his anger will not accomplish anything. This statement proves to be self-fulfilling, as it is exactly what will push Oedipus into a very fierce rage.

When Oedipus reacts—predictably—with anger and an accusation that perhaps Tiresias was involved in the murder, since he refuses to help in any way, even though he can, Tiresias is perfectly primed to tell Oedipus the truth and simultaneously guarantee that Oedipus will not be receptive to this message.

345	Οιδίπους καὶ μὴν παρήσω γ' οὐδέν, ὡς ὀργῆς ἔχω, ἄπερ ξυνήμ' ἴσθι γὰρ δοκῶν ἐμοὶ καὶ ξυμφυτεῦσαι τοῦργον εἰργάσθαι θ', ὅσον μὴ χερσὶ καίνων· εἰ δ' ἐτύγχανες βλέπων, καὶ τοῦργον ἂν σοῦ τοῦτ' ἔφην εἶναι μόνου.	Oedipus Angry as I am, I will not pass over any of my thoughts. Know that you seem to me to actually have helped cultivate this deed, and to have done it, except for actually killing with your own hands. If you happened to be able to see, I would say this deed was yours alone!
350	Τειρεσίας ἄληθες; ἐννέπω σὲ τῶ κηρύγματι ᾧπερ προεῖπας ἐμμένειν, κάφ' ἡμέρας τῆς νῦν προσαιδᾶν μήτε τούσδε μήτ' ἐμέ, ὡς ὄντι γῆς τῆσδ' ἀνοσίῳ μιάστορι.	Tiresias Seriously? I bid you to abide by the proclamation you decreed, and from this day onward, do not speak to these men or to me, since you are the impure polluter of this land.

Just as we know that Tiresias is never acting out of a desire for profit, we also know that he is never wrong and never makes idle pronouncements or accusations. But Oedipus shares none of this extra-dramatic knowledge. He has just angrily accused Tiresias of being complicit in Laius' murder, and when he is then accused in turn of the same thing, he is particularly unreceptive to this information. If his interlocutor were anyone else, this would be a natural, defensive reaction to being accused of murder.

Though this is a gross simplification, I have provided the basic outline of this exchange below, to highlight some of Tiresias' subtle manipulations of the conversation. While Oedipus

---

argument based on the manner in which it is presented (we might also describe this as valuing “style over substance”). In more modern contexts, tone policing is often used to delegitimize a person's objections to a perceived slight or injustice by pointing out that that person is being “hysterical” or “hotheaded.” Rhetorically, this allows the person who is doing the tone policing to avoid addressing a legitimate point and to shift the conversation to be about whether their interlocutor's demeanor is appropriate. For a more thorough discussion that situates this practice within the context of internet debates and intersectional feminism, see Geek Feminism Wiki's entry on “tone argument” ([http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Tone\\_argument](http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Tone_argument)). Tiresias here focuses on Oedipus' anger (which is, incidentally, quite reasonable and even justified, given the context) to derail Oedipus' questions. In modern internet parlance, we might describe Tiresias as trolling Oedipus.

repeatedly phrases his requests for information in terms of the city and its well-being, Tiresias insists on withholding that information while simultaneously expressing his rationale in terms of Oedipus' and Tiresias' own well-being (the italicized lines, inset with =>, indicate things that the speaker is implicating at that point in the conversation, and recurrent ideas have been put in bold or underlined for emphasis):

Oedipus (300-15): Tiresias, you have total knowledge, and the city's well-being depends on a critical piece of information—please share that information! It's the humane and patriotic thing to do.

Tiresias (316-8): This knowledge I have is terrible to have.

*=> I do in fact have knowledge*

(320-1): Let me withhold that information for **your sake and mine**.

Oedipus (322-3): Withholding what you know is tantamount to an attack on our city.

Tiresias (324-5): Nothing you say is helping, so why should I speak?

Oedipus (326-7): Don't hold back what you know!

*=> Perhaps my speech isn't helping because I don't have access to any knowledge.*

*You should speak because you know something.*

Tiresias (328-9): You're right. None of you know anything. But for **your sake and mine**, I won't say anything.

Oedipus (330-1): So you do know, but won't say? By not helping when you can, you are attacking the city.

Tiresias (332-3): I will not say anything, for **your sake and mine**.

(337-8): You're calling me angry, but you're the one who's angry

Oedipus (339-40): Who wouldn't be angry on behalf of the city you're attacking?

Tiresias (341): The future will be the same whether or not I tell you what it involves.

Oedipus (342): So how does it hurt to tell me?

Tiresias (343-4): I won't tell you—get as mad as you want.

Oedipus (345-9): I will get mad! You seem like you killed him.

*=> You have shown you don't care about helping the city, which is akin to hurting the city. Maybe you've hurt the city in other ways. Maybe you killed Laius.*

Tiresias (350-3): Me? *You* killed him!



By frustrating Oedipus' attempts to equate himself rhetorically with Thebes, Tiresias manipulates and provokes Oedipus to the point where he is no longer in a psychological or emotional state to consider Tiresias' words at face value.

In the end, Tiresias has orchestrated a situation in which he will be able to tell Oedipus not once, but twice, that he is the source of pollution in the city<sup>272</sup> and ensure that he will not be believed. If we understand the conclusion of this conversation not simply as a dramatically ironic scene to be enjoyed by Sophocles and the audience, but also as a situation that Tiresias has carefully crafted in order to be able to speak truths that Oedipus will angrily disregard, then the ironic foreshadowing is even more striking at the end. First, Tiresias asks Oedipus if he wants to hear more (though perhaps taunts is a better description of this), so that he can get still angrier (εἶπω τι δῆτα κάλλ', ἴν' ὀργίζη πλέον; 364), presumably offering to reveal Oedipus' parentage. Then, Tiresias finishes with this exchange:

370	Τειρεσίας εἶπερ τί γ' ἐστὶ τῆς ἀληθείας σθένος.	Tiresias Yes, since there is a certain strength in truth.
	Οἰδίπους ἀλλ' ἔστι, πλήν σοί· σοὶ δὲ τοῦτ' οὐκ ἔστ' ἐπεὶ τυφλὸς τὰ τ' ὠτὰ τὸν τε νοῦν τὰ τ' ὄμματ' εἶ.	Oedipus There is, but not for you. There is none for you, since you are utterly blind—in your ears and your mind <i>and</i> your eyes.
	Τειρεσίας σὺ δ' ἄθλιός γε ταῦτ' ὀνειδίζων, ἃ σοὶ οὐδεὶς ὅς οὐχὶ τῶνδ' ὀνειδιεῖ τάχα. 369-73	Tiresias You are a wretch indeed to hurl these taunts, which everyone here will soon hurl at you!

Given how skillfully Tiresias has manipulated this conversation and Oedipus himself, I suggest that we should at least consider the possibility that this irony is generated by Tiresias. Knowing the future as he does, and knowing how these events will unfold, we can think of Tiresias as having a hand in crafting this ironic foreshadowing. Rather than craft ambiguous or misleading language in the way that Apollo's oracle does, Tiresias instead manipulates the entire contextual situation to generate this moment in which Oedipus launches all the accusations at Tiresias that will soon be directed back at Oedipus himself. Apollo's words and Tiresias' words operate in different ways, but they work in tandem to misdirect Oedipus toward the same terrible outcome. Tiresias even makes this explicit a few lines later:

376	οὐ γὰρ σε μοῖρα πρὸς γ' ἐμοῦ πεσεῖν, ἐπεὶ ἰκανὸς Ἀπόλλων, ᾧ τὰδ' ἐκπρᾶξαι μέλει. 376-7	For it is not fated for you to fall at my hands, since Apollo is sufficient—Apollo, whose concern it is to accomplish these things.
-----	--	---

<sup>272</sup> First at line 354 (ὡς ὄντι γῆς τῆσδ' ἀνοσίῳ μιάστορι) and again at line 362 (φονέα σε φημι τάνδρος οὐ ζητεῖς κυρεῖν).

As Tiresias understands things, Apollo will accomplish Oedipus' destruction. In one sense, he already has, since Oedipus has already carried out all the terrible acts that Apollo foretold. However, the verb Tiresias uses here is πίπτω, which suggests an actual fall,<sup>273</sup> and Oedipus is still in a position of power and honor in Thebes at this point. Here, we might understand Tiresias to be saying that Apollo is concerned with making sure that Oedipus recognizes what he (Oedipus) has already done, and that Apollo will make sure that this realization occurs. We are left, however, with the question of how accurate a claim this is. Does Apollo play an active role in the tragic outcome of this play?<sup>274</sup>

Whether or not we think that this is the intended effect of Tiresias' words, we can see that his part of their conversation angers Oedipus and sets him on a course of terrible self-discovery. At the time when this play takes place, the underlying horrific events of Oedipus' life have already occurred, and Apollo's original oracle to Oedipus has been fulfilled for many years. Rather, the focus of the play is about the *recognition* of the truth of Apollo's oracle, which coincides with Oedipus' recognition of his own ruin. Tiresias' role (primarily his words, but also his delayed arrival) is critical in bringing about the tragic conclusion of the play. By disclosing the identity of Laius' murderer in the way that he does, he pushes Oedipus toward the full discovery of his guilt. By antagonizing Oedipus so thoroughly and then revealing the truth, Tiresias in fact takes a central role in the destruction of Oedipus by goading him into discovering the entire truth about his past. He may attribute this destruction to Apollo, as suggested by his claim at 376-7,<sup>275</sup> but there is no denying that Tiresias and his uncooperative participation in this conversation play an integral role in Oedipus' fall.

---

<sup>273</sup> A word choice surely not lost on Aristotle, as this certainly calls to mind his formulation of the most tragic sort of plot, which contains a περιπέτεια (as at *Poet.* 1452a22).

<sup>274</sup> This question is far from settled, and there are many compelling arguments arguing for and against Apollo's direct involvement in the events of this play. Cairns 2013 offers a helpful overview of the scholarship on either side of this question, dating back to Dodd's influential "On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*" (1966).

<sup>275</sup> On these lines, Cairns 2013 argues that "an audience cannot be expected to regard [Tiresias] as mistaken in this assertion about his patron's motivation...there are the strongest possible reasons for accepting what he says" (128), regarding Tiresias' description of Apollo and Apollo's role in Oedipus' demise. I am not entirely convinced of this point, and I think that we can plausibly draw some distinction between Apollo and Tiresias, rather than treating Tiresias as Apollo's agent in human form. However, as I have noted earlier, the dominant reading of this play does completely assimilate Tiresias with Apollo, and Cairns offers one of the best discussions of the reasons for such a reading.

## Conclusions

In Chapter 1, I concluded that the main focus of a study of oracles in the *Trachiniae* should not be whether Zeus and his oracles are malicious. Instead, the ways oracles are misunderstood point us toward an examination of how language works and how context combines with language to produce meaning. Oracular language in the *Trachiniae*, I suggest, provides a non-human language that functions without many of the pragmatic, context-driven elements that are present in human speech. Thus, oracles in the play serve to highlight the pragmatic principles that shape human communication and the ways that inferences and assumptions and things that are left unsaid all work together with the syntactic meanings of the words that are said in order to generate meaning.

This simple dichotomy—humans communicate with pragmatic principles in mind, whereas the gods do not—is complicated by the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. In this play, a third type of speaker is introduced in the form of Tiresias. As a liminal figure, he bridges this neat human-god division, and he has access to complete, divine knowledge. More importantly, however, we have a new “language” introduced in this play. In the *Trachiniae*, I looked at communication as something that was either a cooperative conversation, governed by basic Gricean maxims, or not. Put another way, cooperative communication either aims at clarity and shared understanding (the “human” type of communication), or it does not (the “divine” type).<sup>276</sup> In the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the genres of communication are more complex, as playfully and purposefully ambiguous language is added to the simpler picture of language that we see in the *Trachiniae*, and communication is not limited to just cooperative conversations, self-interested lies, or divine communication that is artificially stripped of some of the pragmatic aspects of human speech.<sup>277</sup> Though I hesitate to call it a theory, since it is not formally defined, Sophocles does present a conception of language that accounts for more of the ways in which communication takes place. Because the riddle of the Sphinx looms over all the events of the play, riddles are the most natural lens through which to approach this sort of language, but the pragmatic principles of riddles are broadly similar to those at work in jokes and

---

<sup>276</sup> There are, of course, noncooperative types of communication. As I have detailed in this chapter, riddles and other “playful” language (jokes, etc.) fall into this category, since they do not aim at transmitting information clearly from speaker to listener. Any sort of speech which intentionally disregards the maxims of cooperative conversation falls into the category of noncooperative communication. The other major type of speech that is noncooperative are lies, which flagrantly disregard the Maxim of Quality (“Try to make your contribution one that is true”) and, in particular, the first submaxim (Do not say what you believe to be false).

<sup>277</sup> I make no claims about the relative dating of these plays and I do not necessarily think that this is a linear progression in Sophocles’ thought. The increase in complexity that I examine here is merely a feature of the order in which I have arranged this study. A sort of evolution in Sophocles’ thought would certainly be intriguing, but I would not attempt to date any of these plays, as it is well outside the scope of this project.

puns and other playful modes of conversation. The similarities between proper riddles and the oracles in this play are striking, and the same basic skills are needed to solve a riddle and to properly understand Apollo's oracles about Oedipus and his family. However, the major difference between the two is more significant: a riddle is signaled as a riddle. Once the listener knows that they are hearing a riddle, they know to switch their interpretive approach and to use the principles of riddles rather than the principles of cooperative conversations. In the case of Apollo's oracle, however, the language is not particularly complex or cryptic, and nothing about the oracle itself signals that there is something special about this language. Oedipus and Jocasta have no reason to think that they should approach these oracular pronouncements as anything other than normal speech.

The issue here is not a complete disregard for context, since the interpretive moves that would allow Oedipus and Jocasta to understand these oracles correctly come from a specific context. Instead, oracular speech in this play is governed by the rules of a *different* context. The speaker and the listener are not applying the same principles to their communication, which gives rise to their tragic misunderstandings.

However, Tiresias adds yet another aspect to all this. As I mentioned earlier, he bridges the mortal-divine dichotomy. He is not a passive seer, however, offering unerring insight into the outcome but without any real influence over the events of the play (as is the case with Cassandra, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, for example). Though he claims that the future will turn out the same way, regardless of what he says, the uncooperative nature of his conversation with Oedipus plays a major role in bringing about the tragic ending of the play. In this way, Tiresias communicates in a way that is both human and divine, appropriate for a man who bridges those two realms. He speaks from a place of complete knowledge, like a god, but he also communicates in a way that deftly manipulates context. Whereas direct communication from gods to mortals consistently operates without concern for context or with concern for the wrong context, Tiresias is almost hyper-aware of the role that context and other extra-syntactical elements play in communication. Here, we can see the ironic appropriateness of the Chorus' description of Tiresias as the man who is most like Apollo, as his words combine with Apollo's to manipulate Oedipus without either of them ever speaking falsely. Whereas Apollo's oracle manages to avoid lying (it misleads Oedipus, but the words are not *wrong*, just unlikely to be understood correctly), Tiresias instead manipulates Oedipus and his mental and emotional state in order to speak the truth directly to him without

Oedipus believing what he says. Tiresias is understood but not believed; the oracle is believed but not understood. Together, Tiresias' words and the words of the oracle work in tandem to destroy Oedipus.

I have been very careful to talk about Apollo's oracle here, and not Apollo himself, with good reason. This play invites the conclusion that Apollo is malicious, since his oracle seems to be a clear extension of him, and it is only once Oedipus receives the oracle that he begins to bring about its fulfillment. It would seem that Apollo has some unexplained (or, rather, specifically omitted) grudge against Oedipus or his family and that he orchestrates their elaborate downfall. Perhaps, looking at Apollo alone, we might debate whether he is truly malicious or (like Zeus in the *Trachiniae*) his motivations are inaccessible. However, when we consider the ways in which Tiresias acts, it is tempting to infer a malicious intent. Tiresias' words seem to goad Oedipus to anger, and, since Tiresias is at least a quasi-mortal character, we might reasonably ask why he speaks in this way. On one reading, Tiresias is an extension of Apollo (his is, after all, the lord most like the lord Apollo) and his language is marked by a similar uncooperative element that is indicative of little more than a fundamental divide between mortals and the supernatural. Tiresias is long-lived and possessed of special powers, and he might well be classed as a non-human entity, for the purposes of a human/other dichotomy.

I would like to offer another reading, however, which is made available by the text, though it is far from the only interpretation. On this reading, we might conclude that there is something distinctly willful and sinister about Tiresias' manipulation of language and context. While Apollo may be speaking in a way that simply overlooks the rules by which humans communicate, Tiresias is not a god, and he knows how mortals arrive at meaning. As we hear from Tiresias, Apollo himself will destroy Oedipus and Oedipus' destruction is not in fact Tiresias' doing, because *Oedipus' downfall is important to Apollo* (Ἀπόλλων, ὃ τάδ' ἐκπρᾶξει μέλει, 377). Apollo, we are told, is the mastermind of this entire plot.

It is here where I would like to depart somewhat starkly from much of the previous scholarship and explain all the elaborate hedging I have been doing thus far, when discussing the relationship between Tiresias and Apollo. This play leaves open the option that we cannot know anything about Apollo,<sup>278</sup> since he is always mediated in this play. At Delphi, he is mediated

---

<sup>278</sup> I am not the first to make this argument. Dodds 1966, for instance, argues that this play presents a world in which the gods are inscrutable and cannot be judged by human moral codes.

through language which does not abide by the same pragmatic, contextual principles that govern human speech, and his oracle need not be malicious, but simply unintelligible. Our only other means of accessing anything about Apollo is through Tiresias, and there is no reason to assume that he has infallible access to Apollo's motivations.<sup>279</sup> If, as I have argued, there is an unbridgeable linguistic divide between mortals and gods, then Tiresias might be just as mistaken as other mortals when he thinks he can fully interpret the divine.

On this reading, Tiresias falls into a similar trap as Oedipus. Neither man understands Apollo, though both men think that they do. Just as Oedipus acts to avert what he thinks is his fate, Tiresias acts to further what he thinks is Apollo's will. In the end, though, even Tiresias cannot know the divine, and his willful manipulation of context in his conversation with Oedipus could very well be nothing more than a misguided attempt. Tiresias too may have his own (less disastrous) tragic arc which loosely parallels those of Oedipus and Jocasta. While there is no way to know definitively whether Apollo is malicious or Tiresias' speech simply gives that impression, this reading presents intriguing possibilities and it neatly avoids the question of how a play with a spiteful and cruel god came from a man whose biography tells of his great piety.<sup>280</sup> If my suggestion here is correct, then this play centers on a god whose motivations are not vicious, but fundamentally unknowable.

Why, then, is Apollo's deceptive communication so elaborately constructed, if his specific motivations are not discernible and (since they cannot be known) essentially relevant? As in the *Trachiniae*, oracular language serves as a locus for exploring language more broadly, and the picture that Sophocles presents of language and communication is significantly more nuanced in

---

<sup>279</sup> I am here arguing against the standard approach to this play, which assumes that Tiresias is a proxy for Apollo. For a recent example of this approach, see Beer 2012. Beer suggests that Tiresias speaks directly for Apollo and that Apollo himself speaks, as it were, from behind the mask of Tiresias: "Tiresias' words conceal the actual voice of Apollo" (Beer 2012: 100).

<sup>280</sup> Freud, in his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (transl. J. Riviere, ed. 2 (1929) 278) expresses shock "that Sophocles' tragedy does not call forth indignant remonstrance in its audience . . . For at bottom it is an immoral play." He then elaborates that: "It would be easy to believe that an accusation against destiny and the gods was intended in the story of the myth; in the hands of the critical Euripides, at variance with the gods, it would probably have become such an accusation. But with the reverent Sophocles there is no question of such an intention; the pious subtlety which declares it the highest morality to bow to the will of the gods, even when they ordain a crime, helps him out of the difficulty." This question of the pious and reverent Sophocles has been a contentious one, however. Despite a great many ancient testimonia praising his famous piety (see Scodel 2012 for more on this), scholars have rightly noted that this play does not provide an entirely positive view of the gods. Dawe notes that, while "[o]utright condemnation of fate or the gods is not something to be expected of a playwright competing in a religious festival," nonetheless the characters "are notably silent when it comes to any actual defense, or even explanation . . . of the workings of fate or heaven" and that the "horror and sympathy they express for the human victim must imply a compensatory, if unspoken, verdict against those forces that permit, or cause, such things to happen" (Dawe 2006: 4).

this play. Further developing the linguistic framework detailed in the *Trachiniae* (in Chapter 1),<sup>281</sup> the *Oedipus Tyrannus* provides a broader conception of language that does not reduce communication to merely cooperative and non-cooperative modes. Instead, this play acknowledges other types of communication which have their own pragmatic, linguistic rules. The riddle of the Sphinx, which lurks behind the play as a whole, introduces a modified sort of cooperative conversation in which basic Gricean maxims are selectively subverted, with the full knowledge of the speaker and listener. The conversation, then, becomes a game which is governed by different rules; the challenge is to uncover which cooperative principles are being broken and in which ways. By acknowledging this distinct mode of communication, Sophocles broadens his linguistic theories so that they recognize a much fuller range of communication, since riddles, jokes, puns, and other linguistic play all fall into this para-cooperative sort of speech. The normal principles are still operational, in that they provide the baseline against which linguistic play can occur. The critical element in all of these modes of speech is that both the speaker and the listener are aware of the altered “rules” of communication, because the speech is clearly identified as a riddle or some other sort of non-straightforward communication.

In sharp contrast to the riddle of the Sphinx, however, the plot of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* centers on oracular speech which could be effectively understood if the rules of riddles were applied, but the shift in communicative modes is not signaled. As such, the principles of communication are not modified, and the two parties find themselves playing by very different rules. This oracle formulation creates an artificial variation on the riddle form and allows us to see how riddles and straightforward communication both ought to function, by displaying a situation in which both codes fail.

To return to some of the earlier arguments in this chapter, the effect of Apollo is broader than simply the source of linguistically misleading oracles. As we saw with Creon’s account of what he learned at Delphi, the mere presence of Apollo, in a linguistic sense, serves to hinder understanding. When Apollo is invoked, Creon and Oedipus are unable to communicate effectively. There is nothing inherently wrong with the way either man is speaking (no ambiguous

---

<sup>281</sup> The order in which I am examining these plays is carefully chosen to present an increasingly complex linguistic theory. I recognize that this implies a sort of progression in Sophocles’ thought, which suggests an order to the dates of composition for these plays. I do not, however, mean to suggest that these plays were written in any particular order. Rather, it is a useful order for my examination, since it allows me to slowly introduce more complex pragmatic theories and scholarship. It would certainly complement my argument nicely if the *Trachiniae* did in fact pre-date the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, but I would not suggest an order based on my arguments here.

language, for example), and yet the two cannot effectively communicate information when Apollo's influence is felt, linguistically.

We are left, in the end, with an impression that Apollo is a force of confusion and obfuscation. As the god of (among other things) light and clarity, this is somewhat strange, but not particularly surprising, as we often find gods operating in diametrically opposed spheres.<sup>282</sup> This double nature of Apollo is particularly relevant to the issue of language in 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens. At a time when works like the *Dissoi Logoi* and Gorgias' rhetorical works were becoming far more prevalent in Athens, the potentially deceptive nature of language was a salient topic.<sup>283</sup> Rather than accept a deconstructionist stance and conclude that language is inherently meaningless and conventional, Sophocles uses the opportunities provided by oracles in his plays to suggest that there is some intrinsic meaning in language and communication; language's slippery nature does not prove that there is no stable meaning to language, but simply that the rules that govern meaning are more complex than people often realize. Sophocles constructs these situations at the edge of meaning and understanding (after all, it is the liminal nature of oracular speech that provides him such fertile ground for his investigations) and allows us to see artificially constructed failures of communication in order to see how pervasive and extensive the properly functioning versions of these systems are.

---

<sup>282</sup> For example, in the *Iliad*, Apollo sends a plague, though he is the god of healing. Gods are often able to function almost as a double-edged sword in their areas of influence, wielding (in this instance) both sickness and health, as the situation demands. Similarly, Apollo can act in the sphere of understanding, being either a force of revelation and knowledge or a force of confusion. As a further example, Artemis is associated with young girls and their protection, yet she demands the sacrifice of Iphigenia. See also fn. 36 on this question.

<sup>283</sup> Knox 1957:116-38 likens Oedipus' quest to the "intellectual scientific quest of the age" (116), and draws parallels between the language used by sophists and other intellectuals of the time, including Gorgias talking about riddles (D-K B8), Aristophanes' description of Socrates (*Clouds* 171-2 and 188), and Hippocratic treatises (VM3). Segal 1981 discusses how this play highlights the "shifting, uncertain, 'enigmatic' quality of language" (151) in tandem with a shifting, uncertain world. He takes an almost structuralist approach to communication in this play, placing the Sphinx and Apollo on opposite sides of a binary that collapses as the oracle and the Sphinx' words converge.



## Chapter 3: The Other Plays and What Is Found There

### Introduction

This chapter will further develop the ideas of the previous two, using the remaining five plays of Sophocles to develop a more nuanced understanding of his conception of language. Though it is not a formal theory per se, Sophocles includes and highlights instances in which language seems to fail. His purpose in doing this is not to undermine language and meaning (that is to say, Sophocles is not a proto-deconstructionist) but rather to highlight places where language is governed by a complex yet intuitive set of rules. Native speakers can make sense of language which, at times, should not give rise to a clear meaning. As detailed in Chapters 1 and 2, by highlighting these sorts of scenarios, Sophocles forces the audience to consider how they drew meaning out of syntactic ambiguity. By examining the varied instances of prophetic communication in the other five extant plays of Sophocles, we will see more details of Sophocles' theory of language which address a wider variety of speech than we have seen in the *Trachiniae* or the *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

In this chapter, I will focus on the complicated way in which prophetic messages are transmitted by humans. Though the analogy is somewhat imprecise, I would nonetheless liken this phenomenon to Plato's Theory of Forms—oracles are perfectly true when they are uttered, but with each reproduction of the oracle's message, the imitation is further removed from the true original. We will see that these shifts happen in a variety of ways, but they all demonstrate how messages can be shaped and molded by both speakers and listeners, whether consciously or unconsciously. When Calchas' prophecy is related by the messenger in the *Ajax*, his words pass through men who have a desire for Ajax to remain alive. Therefore, this prophecy is taken to mean that there is a possibility that Ajax might survive the day, and thereby escape Athena's anger, even though there is no real possibility that this will occur. In the *Electra*, Orestes' own intentions color his interpretation of Apollo's words, and he presents Apollo's oracle as a divine sanction of his matricide. As we will see, however, Apollo's words do not necessarily provide this sanction, leaving the audience to suspect possible manipulation of the message by Orestes himself. In the *Antigone*, we see Tiresias once again act as a wielder of prophecy. Though Tiresias starts out simply

recounting what he has learned through ornithomancy, and offering advice based on what the bird signs have shown him, Creon is unreceptive. It is at this point that Tiresias shifts into inspired prophecy (i.e., he prophesies things that he has learned directly from the gods, rather than things he has gleaned from reading natural signs), and his words function more as a curse than as a simple prophecy. As was the case in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Tiresias deploys prophecy at a time and place when it will inflict harm on the recipient (instead of, say, telling Creon earlier that he will bury his son if he condemns Antigone to death, thereby allowing Creon a chance to avert disaster). Finally, in the *Philoctetes*, we see the most complex instance of how context can shape how prophecy is used. Here, Odysseus carefully withholds elements of Helenus' prophecy from Neoptolemus in order to manipulate him. Knowing full well that Neoptolemus will find his plan distasteful, Odysseus slowly reveals more of the details of Helenus' prophecy, but only as necessary. While the other three plays provide examples of divine messages that may be altered by those who convey them, the *Philoctetes* is the only instance where this process is clearly conscious and calculated.

I omitted the *Oedipus at Colonus* from this outline because it involves a very different situation. Here, we see a man who is approaching the liminal space between life and death and who has, as a result, acquired a special status. In many ways, he operates as a prophet throughout this play, and the play explicitly describes him as such at several points. The *Oedipus at Colonus* offers a striking contrast with the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, precisely because Oedipus can understand oracles effectively and can augment them with his own supernatural knowledge. This play fits nicely at the end of this chapter, not only because it is the last play that Sophocles wrote, but because it provides an example of effective communication between gods and mortals. After six plays in which communication fails or is ambiguous or obscured, this play offers a corrective of sorts, in which communication succeeds.

Finally, this chapter includes a much wider range of prophecy than I have examined in previous chapters. Only the *Electra* and the *Oedipus at Colonus* feature actual oracles; the rest of the plays involve prophecies given by prophets (Calchas, Tiresias, and Helenus), and the *Oedipus at Colonus* features both types of prophecy. I consider these two categories of prophetic speech to be closely connected, though not identical. Both are ways in which communication from the gods can be given to humans, and both involve a linguistic mediation of divine knowledge. The critical difference is where and how that mediation occurs. When someone consults an oracle, as we saw in

the previous two chapters, the god's message is transmitted in language that comes directly from the god. This is why, I have argued, oracles are so often misunderstood, because the Sophoclean gods communicate in a way that does not share all the pragmatic considerations which shape human speech. When the words come directly from the gods, they tend to mislead humans precisely for these context-based reasons. Humans mistake the language of the divine for their own language (not surprising, since oracles are conveyed in Greek) and interpret it as they would interpret any other sort of speech, not realizing that different rules govern divine speech.

When a prophet conveys a message, there is not this same pragmatically driven misunderstanding, since prophets understand how pragmatic rules shape language. Instead, prophets introduce a very different sort of obstacle to effective communication. Their words are influenced by their own predispositions, and when a prophet is hostile (as Tiresias seems to be in the *Antigone*), he can control the time and place when he reveals his supernatural knowledge in order to make sure that it has the desired effect. When a prophet or those who transmit his message has a vested interest in the outcome of events, as in the *Ajax*, words may be shifted to accommodate a desired outcome. Overall, prophets do not lie, but their access to the divine is colored by all the same elements that affect regular human communication, so prophecies pass through one additional stage of human transmission and introduce one additional stage at which the message can be corrupted or compromised.

### **The Transmission of Fate: Calchas' Words in the *Ajax***

As mentioned above, there is no actual oracle in the *Ajax*; the only prophetic utterance that occurs in the play is the reported prophecy of the seer Calchas, which details how the anger of Athena will pursue Ajax for one day. There is a degree of ambiguity here, and it is unclear exactly what we should make of this prophecy. Does this mean that Athena's anger will cease after one day, and Ajax need only survive until the end of the day, at which point Athena will no longer angrily pursue him? We have no other examples of a Greek divinity whose anger simply expires at the end of a period of time; anger of this sort (described as μῆνις at line 757, so this is no small anger<sup>284</sup>) would be unprecedented. Nonetheless, this is clearly what the characters in the play understand it to mean. A more fatalistic reading, however, might understand this to mean that Athena's anger

---

<sup>284</sup> For more on the force of μῆνις, see Slatkin 1992 as well as Kim 2000, Cairns 2001, and Muellner 2004. In addition to several other relevant chapters in Braun and Most 2004, Cairns 2004 critiques Muellner, to which Muellner responded in turn (Muellner 2011).

will last only a day because she will succeed in destroying Ajax in that time. Her *wrath* does not have a time limit on it, on this reading, but her anger at Ajax will not last beyond his death, since her anger will be deprived of its object at that point.

This ambiguity is something that I will return to later in this section. Before looking at the actual content of the prophecy, however, I would like to examine its delivery and the complexities introduced in the Messenger’s speech. To begin with, the Messenger stakes the authority of his account on his status as an eyewitness to the events he describes. I know this, he says, *because I was there* (τοσοῦτον οἶδα καὶ παρῶν ἐτύγχανον, 748). This is a common rhetorical move in messenger speeches,<sup>285</sup> but the content of his speech gives us reason to wonder how much of this he witnessed directly, as opposed to hearing second-hand.<sup>286</sup>

As he begins his speech, we have a fairly standard account of events. Calchas goes to speak to Teucer:

751	Ἄγγελος εἰς χεῖρα Τεύκρου δεξιὰν φιλοφρόνως θεῖς εἶπε κάπέσκηψε, παντοῖα τέχνη εἶρξαι κατ’ ἡμᾶρ τούμφανές τὸ νῦν τόδε 755 Αἴανθ’ ὑπὸ σκηναῖσι μηδ’ ἀφέντ’ ἔαν, εἰ ζῶντ’ ἐκείνον εἰσιδεῖν θέλοι ποτέ.	Messenger [Calchas] placed his right hand into Teucer’s hand in a good-natured way, and then spoke and commanded him to use every possible means to keep Ajax inside his camp throughout this present day that is upon us, and not to let him go out, if he wished to ever see him alive.
-----	---	--

I pause on this passage only to establish the contrast with what follows. Here, the Messenger is simply relating facts. He narrates the events leading up to the prophecy, and then conveys the prophecy itself:

756	ἔλᾱ γὰρ αὐτὸν τῆδε θῆμέρα μόνη δίας Ἀθάνας μῆνις, ὡς ἔφη λέγων.	The μῆνις of the goddess Athena will pursue him for this day alone, as Calchas said.
-----	--	--

This is often thought to be the crux of the “prophecy” in this play, and it is directly attributed to Calchas (ὡς ἔφη λέγων). We might question how verbatim this account is, but the Messenger would have his audience believe that this is precisely what Calchas said. For the moment, at least, let us accept at face value that Calchas says “The μῆνις of Athena will pursue him for this day alone” (τῆδε θῆμέρα μόνη).

<sup>285</sup> Barrett 2002 examines messengers’ claims to be eyewitnesses, in addition to exploring the tension inherent in their presentation as both an eyewitness and a detached and omniscient observer, drawing on Cahen’s formulation of “un spectateur idéal” (Cahen 1924: 305). For more on the objective, omniscient messenger, see Bremer 1976, Rosenmeyer 1982, and Michellini 1982. For a counter argument, see Heath 1987, Goldhill 1986, and de Jong 1991.

<sup>286</sup> I will elaborate on this point later, but the Messenger recounts conversations that he is unlikely to have been a part of. Though Sophocles is not bound by strict verisimilitude, Sophocles is interested elsewhere in how knowledge and the truth can be found. We should not be too quick to overlook the question of where the Messenger got his information and how precisely he transmits what he heard.

From this point onward, however, things get less clear. Although the attribution is somewhat delayed (ἔφρασχ' ὁ μάντις, 760), Calchas is marked as the speaker of this gnomic statement that follows:

760	τὰ γὰρ περισσὰ κἀνόνητα <sup>287</sup> σώματα πίπτειν βαρείαις πρὸς θεῶν δυσπραξίαις ἔφρασχ' ὁ μάντις, ὅστις ἀνθρώπου φύσιν βλαστῶν ἔπειτα μὴ κατ' ἀνθρώπων φρονῆ. 758-761	For, when people reach such a point of excess that they are not useful, they fall under the grievous misfortunes sent by the gods, the prophet said, whoever has a human nature but does not think in a way that is appropriate for a human.
-----	--	--

Are we to understand this as prophetic speech? Is something a prophecy solely because it has been spoken by a prophet? This is an open question, and we certainly see prophets elsewhere in tragedy who speak conversationally,<sup>288</sup> but there are not, to the best of my knowledge, examples of prophets ever speaking falsely. What, then, is the distinction between a prophet's speech in general and a prophet's speech *qua* prophet? Are there multiple modes of speech available to prophets (unmarked speech as opposed to prophetic speech), or do they always speak as a prophet? I have no satisfying answer to this question, but it is a relevant question to keep in mind as we approach the rest of the Messenger's speech, because the speaker of the next lines is somewhat ambiguous on a close reading. Picking up on the final lines of this gnomic utterance, μὴ κατ' ἀνθρώπων φρονῆ, the speech goes on to explain how Ajax fits into that paradigm, and why cruel misfortunes will destroy him:

762	κεῖνος δ' ἀπ' οἴκων εὐθύς ἐξορμώμενος ἄνους καλῶς λέγοντος ἠϋρέθη πατρός. ὁ μὲν γὰρ αὐτὸν ἐννέπει, “τέκνον, δορὶ βούλου κρατεῖν μὲν, σὺν θεῶ δ' αἰεὶ κρατεῖν.”	But he, right from when he set out from home, he was shown to be foolish, when his father was speaking well. For his father spoke to him: “Child, wish to conquer in battle, but wish always to conquer with a god's assistance.”
765	ὁ δ' ὑψικόμπως κάφρόνως ἡμείψατο, “πάτερ, θεοῖς μὲν κἂν ὁ μηδὲν ὦν ὁμοῦ κράτος κατακτήσῃ· ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ δίχα κείνων πέποιθα τοῦτ' ἐπισπάσειν κλέος.”	
770	τοσόνδ' ἐκόμπει μῦθον. εἶτα δεῦτερον δίας Ἀθάνας, ἠνίκ' ὀτρύνουσά νιν ἠύδατ' ἐπ' ἐχθροῖς χεῖρα φοινίαν τρέπειν, τότ' ἀντιφωνεῖ δεινὸν ἄρρητόν τ' ἔπος· “ἄνασσα, τοῖς ἄλλοισιν Ἀργείων πέλας ἴστω, καθ' ἡμᾶς δ' οὔποτ' ἐνρήξει μάχη.”	But he replied, arrogantly and senselessly: “Father, even the man who is nothing could achieve victory together with the gods. But I believe that I can lay hold of glory even without them.” This was the boast that he made. And then a second time, when goddess Athena was urging him on, she told him to turn his gory hand against his enemies, he then spoke back to her, a terrible and unspeakable speech:
775	τοιοῖσδέ τοι λόγοισιν ἀστεργῆ θεᾶς ἐκτήσατ' ὄργην, οὐ κατ' ἀνθρώπων φρονῶν. 762-777	

<sup>287</sup> Though κἀνόνητα has often been printed (since Ajax is elsewhere characterized as foolish, as ἄνους at 763), the manuscript tradition almost entirely supports the *lectio difficilior* of κἀνόνητα, with the exception of the rarely cited Vat.gr.1333 manuscript, *ante correctionem*.

<sup>288</sup> For example, Tiresias in the *Bacchae*.

		With such words, he won for himself the implacable anger of the goddess, having thoughts that are not appropriate for a mortal.
--	--	---

The story itself provides the relevant mythological background for Athena’s anger,<sup>289</sup> so this passage is certainly helpful in advancing the plot. The only explanation that she gives during the prologue, at lines 51ff., is an implicit suggestion that she drove Ajax mad to protect Odysseus and the other Greek leaders, but her actions are far more vicious than necessary to simply prevent Ajax from murdering them (“But I goaded the man on, as he roamed in his diseased madness, and I hurled him into evil snares,” ἐγὼ δὲ φοιτῶντ’ ἄνδρα μανιάσιν νόσοις / ὤτρυνον, εἰσέβαλλον εἰς ἔρκη κακά, 59–60). The fact that Ajax has caused prior offense to Athena makes her anger justified, rather than an instance of irrational and unintelligible divine punishment.<sup>290</sup> However, this passage also blurs the lines between speakers. Are we to understand this entire passage as part of the prophecy, as Calchas delivered it? Prophets do not usually provide so much narrative backstory when they are offering actual prophecies. Instead, if we take the full passage from 762–777 as a sort of interpolation which seeks to explain why Calchas’ words apply to Ajax, we are left with a far more typical prophetic utterance:

752	Ἄγγελος εἶπε κάπεσκηψε, παντοῖα τέχνη εἶρξαι κατ’ ἡμαρ τοῦμφανές τὸ νῦν τόδε	Messenger [Calchas] spoke and commanded him to use every possible means to keep Ajax inside his camp throughout this present day that is upon us, and not to let him go out, if he wished to ever see him alive.
755	Αἴανθ’ ὑπὸ σκηναῖσι μηδ’ ἀφέντ’ ἔαν, εἰ ζῶντ’ ἐκεῖνον εἰσιδεῖν θέλοι ποτέ. ἐλᾶ γὰρ αὐτὸν τῆδε θῆμέρα μόνη δίας Ἀθάνας μῆνις, ὡς ἔφη λέγων. τὰ γὰρ περισσὰ κἀνόνητα σώματα	For the μῆνις of the goddess Athena will pursue him for this day alone, as Calchas said.

<sup>289</sup> The madness and suicide of Ajax is not a Sophoclean innovation, but there is no extant version which details Athena’s anger and attributes Ajax’ madness to Athena’s desire for revenge. Ajax’ madness appears in the *Little Iliad*; its presence there is alluded to in Porphyry (*Paralip.* fr. 4 Schrader, ap. Eust. 285.34) and detailed more fully in Proclus (*Chrestomathia*, suppleta ex Apollod. epit. 5.6–16). Homer (*Odyssey* 11) and Pindar (*Nemean* 7 and 8) also allude to the judgment of Achilles’ arms as the source of Ajax’ anger, which in turn accounts for his madness (some accounts elide the distinction and suggest that the judgment of the arms led directly to Ajax’ madness. The mythological account seems to say that Athena’s involvement was purely to help Odysseus, and she harmed Ajax only because he was opposed to Odysseus. There are not, to my knowledge, any earlier accounts in which Athena has any particular animus toward Ajax. I am struck by the possibility (raised to me by Newman, *per litt.*) that there is a sort of latent animus that we can see even in the *Iliad*, even though she seems simply to ignore Ajax. Athena is largely concerned with Achilles throughout the *Iliad*, but Ajax presents the most significant threat to Achilles’ *kleos*, both because he is the next greatest warrior after Achilles and because Ajax wounds Hector before Achilles kills him, thereby lessening the glory involved in killing Hector (since it is more impressive to kill a man whom no one else has been able to challenge).

<sup>290</sup> Athena’s behavior here contrasts with the picture of the divine in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* and the *Trachiniae*, in that Athena appears onstage and expresses her own intentions. We need not guess at the nature and will of the gods, as we must in other plays (as, for instance, in the *Antigone*, where the extent of the gods’ involvement is unclear). By placing a god on stage as a character, the *Ajax* is unique among Sophocles’ extant plays, as it offers the only unmediated access to a god (with the partial exception of Heracles in the *Philoctetes*).

760	πίπτειν βαρείαις πρὸς θεῶν δυσπραξίαις ἔφασχ' ὁ μάντις, ὅστις ἀνθρώπου φύσιν βλαστῶν ἔπειτα μὴ κατ' ἀνθρώπον φρονῆ. [intervening lines omitted]	For, when people reach such a point of excess that they are not useful, they fall under the grievous misfortunes sent by the gods, the prophet said, whoever has a human nature but does not think in a way that is appropriate for a human.
778	ἀλλ' εἴπερ ἔστι τῆδε θῆμέρα, τάχ' ἂν γενοίμεθ' αὐτοῦ σὺν θεῶ σωτήριοι. [intervening lines omitted]	But if he still lives on this day, perhaps we could—
780	τοσαῦθ' ὁ μάντις εἶφ'· 752-61, 778-80	with the help of a god—be his salvation. The seer said so much.

The intervening lines would come, on this reading as an interpolation provided either by Calchas or the Messenger to explain the import of this prophecy. This, then, explains the echo of μὴ κατ' ἀνθρώπον φρονῆ (761) with οὐ κατ' ἀνθρώπον φρονῶν (777). μὴ κατ' ἀνθρώπον φρονῆ, as Calchas utters it, may not convince anyone that Ajax is at risk, since this observation does not immediately seem to apply to him. Then, to emphasize the urgency of the situation, we have an explanation that maps this prophecy onto Ajax' behavior. It makes sense that this mythological aside ends with οὐ κατ' ἀνθρώπον φρονῶν at 777, because this story has now come full circle and fulfilled its purpose. We now see precisely how Ajax' situation corresponds to Calchas' words. Now, with this understanding, we are prepared for the rest of what Calchas has to say, and Calchas is again conspicuously marked as the speaker.

I do not mean to suggest that this is precisely how Sophocles intended this scene to be read, but rather that the text allows it and that the structure of this messenger speech leaves a great deal of ambiguity about who has spoken which words. This ambiguity is present in any sort of messenger speech, but Calchas' involvement raises the stakes here. What Calchas said, and how he said it (as prophecy or as normal speech), are very important, since dramatic convention dictates that prophets are always correct, as the Messenger reminds us at the end of this speech (εἰ Κάλχας σοφός, 783). Though he phrases this as a conditional, the audience understands this as a surety. Calchas *is* σοφός, so Ajax' fate is determined.

Looking at the context of this prophecy in comparison with the prophecies examined in my previous two chapters is useful for two reasons. First, the *Ajax* presents a prophecy which is unquestioned as to its accuracy. However, as I argued at the start of this section, we do have some ambiguity. Unlike in the *Trachiniae* or the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, however, that ambiguity is never noted. The characters think that they can save Ajax if they keep him in his tent, and the fact that he leaves the tent means that we will never know how accurate their understanding of the prophecy is. They have no reason to think that he would not have escaped Athena's wrath if they could have kept him in the tent until the end of the day.

However, this brings us to the far more difficult question about this prophecy: what should we understand “Athena’s wrath” to be? Athena certainly seems to have already done all that she intends to do by the start of the play. Ajax’ suicide is not, in any discernible way, the result of Athena’s *still-pursuing* wrath. Her actions certainly drive Ajax to kill himself, but she is not constantly harassing him.<sup>291</sup> She set these events in motion and then simply allowed them to unfold toward their inevitable conclusion. What about nightfall would change this? Ajax’ character would be unchanged, and his shame would remain. It seems patently unlikely that any of the situations that culminate in Ajax’ suicide would end after this one day. We are left, then, with a different, better interpretation of Calchas’ words. Athena’s wrath will pursue him for one day because he will be dead by the end of the day.<sup>292</sup> We might here recall the prophecies in the *Trachiniae*, in which Heracles’ “end of toils” was his own death. There was never a chance of averting this outcome, because the wheels were in unstoppable motion from the opening scene of the play.

If that is the case, however, we must revisit lines 752-755 and 778-9 of the Messenger’s speech. If we assume that Calchas is infallible, these lines present a problem, since I have just suggested that there never was a chance of saving Ajax, but these lines both suggest that Calchas is charging Teucer with the impossible task of saving someone who cannot be saved:

<p>εἶπε κάπεσκηψε, παντοῖα τέχνη εἶρξαι κατ’ ἡμαρ τοῦμφανές τὸ νῦν τόδε Αἴανθ’ ὑπὸ σκηναῖσι μηδ’ ἀφέντ’ ἔαν, εἰ ζῶντ’ ἐκείνον εἰσιδεῖν θέλοι ποτέ.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">752-5</p>	<p>[Calchas] spoke and commanded him to use every possible means to keep Ajax inside his camp throughout this present day that is upon us, and not to let him go out, if he wished to ever see him alive.</p>
<p>ἀλλ’ εἴπερ ἔστι τῆδε θῆμέρα, τάχ’ ἂν γενοίμεθ’ αὐτοῦ σὺν θεῶ σωτήριοι.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">778-9</p>	<p>But if he still lives on this day, <b>perhaps we could</b>—with the help of a god—<b>be</b> his salvation.</p>

Both εἰ θέλοι (for ἔαν θέλη, since it is in secondary sequence) and τάχ’ ἂν γενοίμεθ’ suggest a sort of uncertainty that would be unusual from a prophet. This means that either my interpretation of Calchas’ prophecy is wrong, Calchas himself is wrong, or that Calchas is not the speaker of these lines. For the moment, I would like to explore the third option. As with the description of Ajax’

<sup>291</sup> Though we might think of this as being a simple example of “double motivation” (see Lesky 1966 for more on this, building on Schadewaldt’s 1958 work on the *Odyssey*), double motivation in tragedy is often not a simple, unified phenomenon in the way it is in Homer (see esp. Lesky 1966: 261, 392 on how double motivation often causes tragic conflict). Even though we may identify this as an instance of double motivation, that does not remove the very real question about the nature of Athena’s wrath.

<sup>292</sup> As was the case with the *Trachiniae*, the *Ajax* only hints at a better fate awaiting the hero after his death, without ever making this explicit. We might understand the honor that Ajax’ memory will receive as another meaning of Calchas’ words, since Athena’s anger will cease with his death, and her people (the Athenians) will offer cult worship to Ajax. On the allusions to Ajax’ hero cult and the extent to which Sophocles is here invoking that cult, see Scodel 2006 and Henrichs 1993.



history, these lines are not particularly characteristic of a prophet. This is a degree of uncertainty that we do not see elsewhere in prophetic speech. This makes perfect sense, though, if we are seeing the words of Calchas (and in particular, his use of τῆδε θῆμέρα μόνη) filtered through the interpretive processes of the Messenger. This would look something like the following:

- Calchas says: Athena’s anger will pursue Ajax for this one day [sc. because then he will be dead and cannot be a viable object of anger]
- Messenger interprets: “This one day” means that Ajax will be safe once this day ends and he only needs to survive the day
- Messenger conveys: Either Ajax dies today or he survives—both are equally viable options. So, if he is still alive now, then we still have a chance at keeping him alive for the rest of the day.

Alternatively (though, I think, less likely), if Calchas has misunderstood the prophecy that he is transmitting, then he may well be conveying the sort of oracular language we have seen elsewhere, and his pragmatic inferences are incorrect, even though his words are semantically true. On this interpretation:

- Calchas says: Athena’s anger will pursue Ajax for this one day
- Calchas *thinks* he means: Athena’s anger will end—regardless of anything else—at the end of this day
- Calchas’ words actually mean: Athena’s anger will end because there will be no object for her anger once Ajax has died

This recasts Calchas with less agency than he has in other interpretations, since this relegates him to a role of a mere mouthpiece or conduit for the words of a god (presumably Apollo). This contrasts sharply with the relationship Tiresias has with Apollo in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Even though I argued that Tiresias may be incorrect in his assumptions about Apollo’s motivations, Tiresias nonetheless has full knowledge of past, present, and future events. He is not confused about what his words mean in any way. On the interpretation that I have just suggested though, Calchas speaks words that he does not understand fully.

Regardless of which explanation we prefer for how and why Athena’s anger will not last beyond the day, we are still left with the troublesome question of why Ajax cannot be let out of the house. I am not aware of any interpretations which adequately explain this in a way that fits neatly into the plot of the play, but there is a potential reading of the second part of Calchas’ words which provides an interpretation, though not an entirely satisfying one. We know that Calchas “spoke and commanded him to use every possible means to keep Ajax inside his camp throughout this present

day that is upon us, and not to let him go out, if he wished to ever see him alive” (752-5). In *oratio recta*, this would produce something along these lines:

*Keep Ajax inside all day. Do not let him go out, if you want to ever see him alive again.*

If we phrase this in logical terms, we could say that *keeping Ajax inside* is a necessary but not sufficient condition for his survival.<sup>293</sup> Put another way, *If you want Ajax to live, then you will keep him inside*. However, the inverse of this (*If you keep Ajax inside, then he will live*) does not necessarily hold. Returning to Gricean maxims again, it is not intuitive to interpret a conditional statement as describing something that is necessary but not sufficient. If something additional was required, a cooperative speaker would say “If you want Ajax to live, you will keep him inside *and* offer a sacrifice to appease Athena,” for example. What Calchas says implicates that this is both a necessary and sufficient condition for Ajax’ survival, when that may in fact not be the case.

Of course, all these questions are obviated by Ajax’ departure from his tent and the reality that, while his loved ones may want him to live, Ajax does not wish to live any more. If my proposed interpretations are correct (and while I recognize that my necessary but not sufficient argument is unconventional at best), this play introduces a complex linguistic construction which is mediated by the Messenger, whose own inferences may shape elements of the prophecy as he recounts it. As with all the other instances of prophecies and oracles, Calchas’ prophecy here is a place where communication is at its most complex. The layers of speech and interpretation I have laid out here do account for the way that the characters within the play approach Calchas’ words while preserving Calchas’ prophetic authority as well as Athena’s characterization (from the opening scene). This allows us to identify all of the different layers of mediation between Calchas’ prophecy and the audience. We cannot examine how Calchas’ syntactic choices function in this play, since we cannot truly peel back all of the intervening steps that have reshaped his words. We are left, in the

---

<sup>293</sup> The following are all equivalent, in logical terms/notation:

- P is necessary and sufficient for Q
- P if and only if Q
- $P \Leftrightarrow Q$
- P is necessary for Q and Q is necessary for P
- $P \Rightarrow Q \wedge Q \Rightarrow P$

If something is necessary but not sufficient, it means that P implies Q but that Q does not imply P. A common example is that being a mammal is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being a dog. Being a dog implies being a mammal (all dogs are mammals) but being a mammal does not imply being a dog (something could be a mammal and be a cat instead, for instance).

end, with an unexpectedly ambiguous prophecy—not because Calchas cannot or will not communicate more clearly, but because his words have been altered in the transmission from one man to another.

What I hope to have shown here is not that there is any correct reading of the Messenger's speech in this play, but instead that the Messenger's speech leaves a great deal *un*explained. We cannot tell where he inserts his own interpretive voice into the account that he received, and we do not know how much his own intermediate inferences color the account he conveys. Stepping back a bit from a close textual reading, it is also worth reflecting on why and how these misinterpretations could occur. Calchas' words undergo very subtle shifts, once they are relayed by the Messenger, but these are shifts that potentially add the potential for hope to what may have been a straightforward prediction of Ajax' death. In one of the possible interpretations I outlined, Calchas' words are shifted to introduce an element of control or agency to an incontrovertible outcome. Rather than hearing that Ajax will die and there is nothing that can be done to save him, these men choose instead to hear a version in which that fate might be averted, even though they must make some significant interpretive and linguistic compromises in order to do so. I do not think that this is the result of an irrational attachment to free will. In fact, very little in Greek literature reveals an irrational attachment to free will, in our modern sense of the term. Instead, I think this stems from the emotional investment of the Messenger. These problems in transmission are a result their desperate hope that there may yet be a way to keep Ajax alive, and their willingness to push Calchas' words to (or perhaps beyond) their linguistic limits. The transmission of Calchas' prophecy is flawed in this play, but for the most human of reasons.

### **The Use and Misuse of Oracles in the *Electra***

Turning now to the *Electra*, we see an oracle from Apollo again. In this instance, however, there is no contrast between an apparent and actual meaning of the oracle (as in the *Trachiniae* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*). Instead, we find an oracle whose form and meaning is obscured by the process of transmission, but whose actual form and meaning is entirely irrelevant to the play's outcome. There does seem to be some ambiguity, but it is impossible for the audience to determine whether the oracle itself is vague and ambiguous or if Orestes has obfuscated the oracle's words, either intentionally or unintentionally. The answers to these questions should all matter a great deal, since they determine whether Apollo sanctions matricide or not. However, the play never highlights this

oracular ambiguity, nor does it address Apollo’s stance on the events of the play. Although this oracle does not feature prominently in the plot of the *Electra*, this unresolved ambiguity threatens to shift the entire moral import of the actions of the play.

To begin, let us examine the first time we hear about the oracle, when Orestes details what he learned when he went to Delphi:

35	<p>ἐγὼ γὰρ ἠνίχ' ἰκόμην τὸ Πυθικὸν μαντεῖον, ὡς μάθοιμ' ὅτ' ἄρα πατρὶ δίκας ἀροίμην τῶν φονευσάντων πάρα, χρῆ μοι τοιαῦθ' ὁ Φοῖβος ὦν πύση τάχα· ἄσκειον αὐτὸν ἀσπίδων τε καὶ στρατοῦ δόλοισι κλέψαι χεῖρὸς ἐνδίκους<sup>294</sup> σφαγᾶς. ὅτ' οὖν τοιόνδε χρησμὸν εἰσηκούσαμεν, 40 σὺ μὲν μολῶν, ὅταν σε καιρὸς εἰσάγῃ, δόμων ἔσω τῶνδ', ἴσθι πᾶν τὸ δρώμενον, ὅπως ἂν εἰδῶς ἡμῖν ἀγγελίης σαφῆ. οὐ γὰρ σε μὴ γήρα τε καὶ χρόνῳ μακρῷ γνώσ', οὐδ' ὑποπτεύουσιν, ᾧδ' ἠνθισμένον. λόγῳ δὲ χρῶ τοιῶδ', ὅτι ξένος μὲν εἶ 45 Φωκέως παρ' ἀνδρὸς Φανοτέως ἦκων· ὁ γὰρ μέγιστος αὐτοῖς τυγχάνει δορυξένων. ἄγγελλε δ' ὄρκον προστιθείς, ὀθούνεκα τέθνηκ' Ὀρέστης ἐξ ἀναγκαίας τύχης, ἄθλοισι Πυθικοῖσιν ἐκ τροχηλάτων 50 δίφρων κυλισθείς· ᾧδ' ὁ μῦθος ἐστάτω.</p>	<p>For when I went to the Pythian oracle, in order to learn in what way I might take vengeance for my father, on his murderers, Phoebus gave me an oracle, the gist of which you will shortly learn: In person,<sup>295</sup> not furnished with shield-bearing men or an army, I should stealthily bring about, through deception, righteous slaughters done by my own hand. Since, then, this is the sort of oracle I heard, you—when the opportune time should lead you in—go inside this house and learn everything that is being done, so that you can announce it to us, knowing everything clearly. They will know you at all, adorned as you are by old age and the length of time, and they will not suspect you. Use this story, that you are a stranger and you have come here from Phanoteus the Phocian man, for he is the greatest of their allies. Having sworn an oath, announce that Orestes is dead, as a result of an accident that could not be avoided at the Pythian games, having been spun out of his wheel-drawn chariot. Let the story be established thus.</p>
	32-50	

Before delving into the oracle itself, I would like to pause on the surrounding text, since we see here what the stakes of this oracle actually are. Orestes follows his account of the oracle with ὅτ' οὖν τοιόνδε χρησμὸν εἰσηκούσαμεν (38). His use of ὅτε here is telling<sup>296</sup>—the Paedagogus’ subsequent actions should be informed by this χρησμός. Does this plan actually follow from what

<sup>294</sup> I depart from Lloyd-Jones and Wilson here and print ἐνδίκους (found in all the manuscripts) rather than the ἐνδίκου suggested by L. Lange. I do not find Lloyd-Jones and Wilson’s justification (“we are able to take χεῖρὸς ἐνδίκου with σφαγᾶς”) to be sufficient justification for emending the text, though one can easily imagine how ἐνδίκου σφαγᾶς could be erroneous transcribed as ἐνδίκους σφαγᾶς, through diplography. ἐνδικος readily modifies either noun, but in the absence of a more compelling reason to emend, I prefer the reading of the manuscript here.

<sup>295</sup> I translate αὐτὸν as “in person,” at the suggestion of Ruth Scodel, rather than “alone,” as Jebb and Kells both suggest, citing *OT* 221 and *OC* 1650. As Scodel rightly noted (*per litt.*), Orestes is saying these words in the presence of his co-conspirators who will be present for his revenge, and it would make little sense for him to talk about how Apollo told him to act alone while so clearly not being alone (and strange too for neither of them to comment on this, if we should in fact understand “alone” here).

<sup>296</sup> As Kells notes (*ad loc.*), likening this ὅτε to Latin *quandoquidem*, this use is “not simply temporal...and gives a *subjective* reason.”

Apollo said, however? The actual oracle seems to consist of these lines only:

ἄσκειον αὐτὸν ἀσπίδων τε καὶ στρατοῦ δόλοισι κλέψαι χεῖρὸς ἐνδίκους σφαγὰς.	In person, not furnished with shield-bearing men or an army, I should stealthily bring about, through deception, righteous slaughters done by my own hand.
--	--

The actual words of Apollo, as transmitted by Orestes, are in fact both vague and minimalist. The course of action that Orestes pursues generally accords with these oracular instructions, but there are many other courses of action that would also do so.

Unlike the oracular prophecies received by Heracles (in the *Trachiniae*) and Jocasta and Laius (in the *OT*), this oracle is not presented as a prophecy given in a vacuum.<sup>297</sup> Rather, this is a response to a question that Orestes asks: how he might take vengeance on his father's killers. In other contexts,<sup>298</sup> we might expect such a short, vague oracle to be misunderstood in light of some misfortune in the phrasing of the question or some circumstance that the listener failed to take into account. In other literary contexts, a man may not fully understand the import of the question he is asking, and through some unrealized imprecision of his language, he might not be able to understand the god's message. Here, however, we have none of that. We hear simply that Orestes went there to learn how to take vengeance, rather than anything precise about what he asked the oracle. We then have a very uncharacteristic oracle in which neither the question nor the answer seems to matter very much. The question, as noted, is not deemed worthy of recounting in any detail and is never revisited. The answer too does not seem to matter much, since Orestes will not have any sort of revelatory moment when he realizes the true meaning of the oracle and suffers the consequences of his misunderstanding (as in other plays I have examined). What, then, is the point of this oracle at all?

The most obvious issue surrounding this oracle is whether Apollo validates the matricide, an issue that has received a great deal of scholarly attention. Unlike the version presented in Aeschylus, we do not have any clear answer to this question, since Apollo never appears on the stage to explain his role. We are not even on very firm ground if we assume that Apollo tacitly approves what transpires, since he does not interfere to stop Orestes, since divine retribution is a

---

<sup>297</sup> This is, of course, another feature of literary oracles that seems to bear little or no resemblance to actual divinatory practice. The sort of oracular consultation that Orestes describes is a much more realistic depiction of how an actual Greek would ask for divine instructions. However, at least in Sophocles, the spontaneous pronouncement of oracles (rather than in response to some question) seems to be a perfectly acceptable element of tragic prophecy.

<sup>298</sup> As in the *Trachiniae*. See also Herodotus 1.53, 55, 91 (the oracles given to Croesus) and 5.92B-C (oracles given to Eetion and the Bacchiadae).

dish often served both cold and late, especially in Sophocles.<sup>299</sup> The stakes of this question are in fact quite high, and yet Sophocles does not provide a definitive answer, which only serves to emphasize the risks of flawed communication, since it leaves the audience with questions that will never receive an answer. Another closely related aspect of this oracle is the way that its presentation sidesteps any question of the role of the questioner in an oracular pronouncement. As noted above, this oracle is given in response to a question, which had been formulated by Orestes. While we do not get the precise wording, we do hear the general form of the question and, as Sheppard has noted,<sup>300</sup> Orestes did not ask *whether* he should take vengeance, but how he should (ὅτῳ τρόπῳ). The importance of Orestes' question forms the basis of a great deal of debate about whether Apollo sanctions this matricide, and the question is far from settled.<sup>301</sup>

For my purposes here, the central issue is not whether Apollo endorses Orestes' actions, but the fact that this oracle raises these questions (even though there is no clear answer, as evidenced by the scholarly ink still being spilled over this question). Sophocles formulates the oracle and the surrounding plot in a way that allows for this question and does not provide an answer. Instead, we see familial violence coated in a veneer of divine decree with no way of knowing the legitimacy of that decree. What we undoubtedly see is a prophecy used for personal gain and, given the status of this family and the implications for rule in Argos, the political is very much personal for Orestes. Here, then, Sophocles introduces the motif, common from the historians and comedians, of a politician coopting or exploiting oracles to advance his own agenda. While Orestes might act, as so many politicians have, with full awareness of how he is manipulating Apollo's language, there is also the possibility that he reshapes these words subconsciously, as I suggested might occur with the Messenger in the previous section. Orestes, motivated by a desire to avenge his father, might well recount a slightly different version of Apollo's words, but one which aligns more closely with what he wanted Apollo to have said. On either reading, Orestes demonstrates a

---

<sup>299</sup> Leaving aside the general motif of late learning, which permeates Greek tragedy as a whole, the *Antigone* provides an example of divine silence indicating the gods' disapproval of Creon's actions, rather than their approval. It would be illogical to think that Apollo's silence can be taken as his approval or disapproval. As so often in Sophocles, the gods remain inscrutable here.

<sup>300</sup> Sheppard 1927a: 2-9 and 1927b: 163-165.

<sup>301</sup> For a selection of scholars who follow Sheppard (1918, 1927a and b) in thinking that Apollo is responding to a leading question and that we cannot see him as validating Orestes' actions, see Perrotta 1963: 299-301; Friis Johansen 1964: 8-32; Kells 1973: 1-12; Markantonatos 1976: 147-150. For those who disagree and think that Apollo's oracle should be taken at face value, as an endorsement of matricide, see Steinweg 1924: 23-24; Turolla 1934: 143-160; Bowra 1944: 215-218; Letters 1953: 246-247; Maddalena 1959: 156-161; Linforth 1963: 91, 120-121; Woodard 1964: 163-205; Torrance 1965: 307-314; Woodard 1966: 215-227; Ronnet 1969: 233; Gellie 1972: 107; Stevens 1978: 111-120; Erbse 1978: 284-300; Hester 1981: 15-25.

very plausible sort of behavior that combines a pious intention (evidenced by his visit to Delphi) with a very human desire for vengeance and political power.

Taken as a whole, the play offers us an easier reading, which is the dominant reading, in which Apollo does tell Orestes to kill Clytemnestra (as he does in the Aeschylean precedent) and in which Orestes is correct to label himself a prophet (ἐγὼ σοι μάντις εἰμὶ τῶνδ' ἄκρος, 1499), because he has accurately understood the words of the god. He is certainly casting himself as a prophet, since he purports to speak (and act) on behalf of the god, but the ambiguity of Apollo's actual meaning undermines Orestes' credibility as a prophet. We know that Orestes wants this to be Apollo's will, but how certain can we be that Orestes is correct? There remains, however, this second, more unsettling interpretation, in which Apollo does not approve of Orestes' actions, and Orestes has instead reshaped and deployed Apollo's words for his own personal gain, whether or not he realizes he has done so.

Before I move onto the next play, however, I would like to note that the overall plot of this play is mostly unconcerned with the question of how faithfully Orestes transmits Apollo's words. There is no moment of revelation when we learn that Orestes misused Apollo's oracle to lend credence to his own plot, and no one within the play raises any sort of objection about how Orestes presents the oracle (a less generous reading might say "co-opts") and uses it to support his own plan. Within the world of the play itself, oracles simply *are* true, and, with no overt reprimand for his impiety, we have no reason to suspect that Orestes has done anything wrong. Any awareness of Apollo's ambiguity (or suspicion that his words might be ambiguous) is limited to the audience members, as is any sort of anxiety or cynicism about how powerful figures tend to manipulate religion for their own personal agendas—these tropes, common elsewhere in literature, are absent from this play in any explicit sense.

It is interesting to note that Sophocles cannot have included this oracle because the plot demands it. After all, the plot is entirely unconcerned with the precise wording of the oracle. As we have seen in the *Trachiniae* and the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, however, Sophocles is concerned with the details of language when he forms these oracles, and we ought to see this as another opportunity for Sophocles to play with the elusive nature of language and the ways that humans are often unable to interpret language without also shaping or manipulating it in some way. In the *Electra*, as in all five of the plays I examine in this chapter, Sophocles fills in more gaps in the theories of language that he has been developing. Though they are outside the scope of this analysis, in

addition to this ambiguous oracle, we also see lies and a prophetic dream (described by Clytemnestra as *δισσῶν ὀνείρων*, 645). All of these are types of communication which require a complex set of linguistic and pragmatic rules in order to analyze the speech. I will return to this point in greater detail, but for now, my main concern is to show that Sophocles is highlighting instances of speech that are difficult to analyze properly. Things like lies and ambiguity and subtle misrepresentations resist simple classification. They are not precisely true or false, and they exist at the heart of sophistic rhetorical techniques.

### **A Prophecy or a Curse? Tiresias' Words in the *Antigone***

Moving to the *Antigone*, we are again faced with a prophecy transmitted not through an oracle, but through a prophet—here, Tiresias. In this play, he starts out practicing inductive divination, in the form of ornithomancy, before moving to inspired divination, when he predicts that Creon will bury his child. As he bursts out in angry prophecy, however, his words are hard to classify and they border on a curse rather than a prophecy. As was the case in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Tiresias is a very human vessel whose knowledge is infallible, but whose communication is colored by his own disposition and his emotional relationships with other mortals. When he communicates, his motivations and his agenda are constantly relevant, since they shape how his words are delivered and how they are received. Though we might be tempted to equate him with Apollo, we should be careful to remember that Tiresias is not a mere conduit for Apollo, but in fact exercises a great deal of discretion of his own.

In the *Antigone*, we have a very different situation. Rather than a prophecy that is only recounted secondhand (or perhaps third-hand), the main instance of prophecy in this play is delivered on stage by Tiresias himself. As with Calchas' words in the *Ajax*, however, this prophecy deserves closer scrutiny. Tiresias' first words to Creon actually describe a failed attempt at augury, rather than the sort of prophecy that Tiresias practices elsewhere, in which he simply “sees” or knows the future.<sup>302</sup> Creon, however, does not draw a distinction between modes of prophecy and refers to Tiresias with such terms as *μαντικῆς* (1034), *τὸν μάντιν* (1053), *τὸ μαντικὸν [γένος]* 1055, and *μάντις* (1059). It is interesting to note the terms in which Tiresias describes this process: *τέχνης σημεῖα τῆς ἐμῆς... εἰς γὰρ παλαιὸν θᾶκον ὀρνιθοσκόπον / ἴζων* (998-1000). His focus

---

<sup>302</sup> For example, in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Delphi is consulted when Thebes is in need of a diagnosis. Tiresias instead possesses a knowledge of the past and future in the *OT*, and Sophocles does not depict him as requiring any natural σημεῖα, as he does here (*Ant.* 998).



is on signs and on watching birds (themselves a type of σημεῖον).<sup>303</sup> This scene establishes a subtle distinction between modes of telling the future.<sup>304</sup> Though Greek prophetic terminology is not always precise, a problem that plagues much of the study of ancient religion,<sup>305</sup> Sophocles does at least seem to be drawing a distinction here between portent-interpretation, which Tiresias practices at the start of this scene, and a different sort of prophecy, which he will practice only once Creon goads him into an angry outburst:

1065	ἀλλ' εὖ γέ τοι κάτισθι μὴ πολλοὺς ἔτι τρόχους ἀμιλλητῆρας ἡλίου τελῶν, <sup>306</sup> ἐν οἷσι τῶν σῶν αὐτὸς ἐκ σπλάγχνων ἕνα νέκυν νεκρῶν ἀμοιβὸν ἀντιδοῦς ἔσει, ἀνθ' ὧν ἔχεις μὲν τῶν ἄνω βαλῶν κάτω	But know full well that you will not complete many more race-circuits of the sun before you yourself will have given one from your own entrails, a corpse in exchange for corpses, in exchange for the fact that you have thrown down below one of those from above, having disenfranchised and displaced a living soul into a tomb, while you simultaneously keep something that belongs to the gods below, a corpse that has not received its due, without funeral rites and without consecration.
1070	ψυχὴν τ' ἀτίμως ἐν τάφῳ κατῴκισας, ἔχεις δὲ τῶν κάτωθεν ἐνθάδ' αὖ θεῶν ἄμοιρον, ἀκτέριστον, ἀνόσιον νέκυν.	
1064-1071		

This is generally understood<sup>307</sup> to be Tiresias' prophecy, and on an initial reading, it certainly seems prophetic. By the end of the play, Tiresias' words will be fulfilled. However, if we understand prophecy to be the process by which a mortal looks into a future that it at least somewhat

<sup>303</sup> Tiresias does refer to himself with θεσπίζειν at line 1054, though to be more precise, he uses θεσπίζειν ψευδῆ to describe how Creon has been characterizing Tiresias. Line 1054 provides a clever etymological play on Tiresias' part, in fact. In response to Creon saying that he does not wish to “speak badly about the seer” (οὐ βούλομαι τὸν μάντιν ἀντειπεῖν κακῶς), Tiresias responds with “you are in fact speaking badly (sc. about me) by saying that I am prophesying false things” (καὶ μὴν λέγεις, ψευδῆ με θεσπίζειν λέγων). Θεσπίζειν, a denominative formed from θέσπισ, is thought to come from \*θέσ-σπ-ις, a combination of \*θεσ- 'god' and -σπ- from the verb \*σπεῖν (ἔπω) (Beekes, Frisk, Chantraine s.v. θεσπέσιος). Θεσπίζειν, etymologically, means something akin to “speak divinely uttered things.” If we understand the ἀντ- of ἀντειπεῖν more literally, ἀντειπεῖν means something more like “to speak contradictorily.” Tiresias' response can then be better understood as “you do in fact speak contradictorily when you say that I'm saying false things when I say divinely-uttered things,” since (to Tiresias, at least) false things simply cannot be the same as divinely-uttered things.

<sup>304</sup> I do not in any way mean to suggest that this is the only (or even the primary) purpose of this initial description of Tiresias' attempts at augury. This scene carries a great deal of weight in the play as a whole, since it establishes that the gods condemn Creon's actions (a fact that the audience would have likely already gleaned from other facets of the play thus far) and it reveals Creon to be the sort of person who would argue with a prophet and accuse him of corruption. I am reading this scene, and this play as a whole, in a very selective way that only focuses on specific aspects of prophecy and the gods.

<sup>305</sup> For an overview of these problems, though in a Roman context, see Schultz 2016.

<sup>306</sup> I agree with Griffith (*ad loc.*) that Winckelmann's emendation ἡλίον τελεῖν is unnecessary, though it is a clever conjecture that provides a more straightforward reading and removes some superficial difficulties with the meaning of the next few lines. As I have printed them here, lines 1064-5 suggest that Creon himself will not survive much longer. However, the parallel Griffith provides (*OC* 618-20, *ad* 1066-7) is convincing and I am forced to conclude that this passage does not require emendation. Either reading forces us to understand ἐν οἷσι as “before” rather than a simple “during.”

<sup>307</sup> See, for instance, Bushnell 1988 (esp. 56ff.) for a reading that considers this passage a prophecy. See also Kirkwood 1994, Knox 1983, and Whitman 1951 for seminal readings which equate Tiresias' words here with the will of the gods. This is far and away the dominant interpretation of Tiresias' words here.

predetermined and describes it to other mortals, this prophecy is more problematic than it seems at first, as we will see. Tiresias ends his speech with these words:

1085	τοιαῦτά σοι, λυπεῖς γάρ, ὥστε τοξότης ἀφῆκα θυμῷ καρδίας τοξεύματα βέβαια, τῶν σὺ θάλπος οὐχ ὑπεκδραμῆ. <span style="display: block; text-align: right;">1084-6</span>	Such arrows at your heart—for you grieve me— I have loosed, like an archer, in anger. Sure arrows, whose heat you will not outrun.
------	---	--

The critical passage I would like to focus on is the one beginning with *λυπεῖς γάρ* (1084). The rest of Tiresias' words are equally true, regardless of anything Creon has said to him. Creon has already cast a living person under the earth and kept a corpse above ground. If the Erinyes are upset about Creon's actions, as it seems that they should be,<sup>308</sup> Tiresias' words should have no bearing on them. Creon's actions alone are an affront to the natural order of things. Until his final lines, Tiresias seems to have delivered an entirely standard sort of prophecy in which he simply alerts Creon to what will happen in the future.

When Tiresias adds *λυπεῖς γάρ*, at line 1084, he complicates a more simplistic view of his prophecy. The easier interpretation here is that Tiresias has only *told* Creon about the future because Creon has offended Tiresias. The outcome will be the same regardless, but Creon must now deal with the knowledge of this fate. Given how quickly this prophecy will be fulfilled, however, one might wonder how much revenge Tiresias is getting by simply adding a very brief period of anticipation and dread to Creon's terrible fate.<sup>309</sup> This requires us to assume that Tiresias

<sup>308</sup> The authority and concerns of the Erinyes are not well-defined (what follows uses Rose, Dietrich, and Peatfield 2012 as a starting point). Throughout Greek literature (*Il.* 9. 571; cf. *Il.* 9. 454, 11. 280, 21. 412; *Od.* 2. 135; Hes. *Theog.* 472; Aesch. *Sept.* 70; *Eum.* 417), they concern themselves with crimes against family members (primarily against a parent), though the details vary. They are occasionally seen as the personification of a parent's curse, though at other times they seem to pursue blood-guilt with or without an explicit curse from the wronged family member. Elsewhere (*Il.* 15. 204), they are concerned with familial rights and order, and on occasion they seem to protect people who are entitled to protection, even if they are not family members (Odysseus in beggar form, at *Od.* 15. 204), and they punish oath-breakers (*Il.* 19. 259; cf. 3. 279). Strangest of all, they remove the voice from the horse Xanthus at *Il.* 19. 409, after Hera has granted him the power to speak. Heraclitus' claim that the Erinyes make sure that the sun stays in its proper course ("Ἥλιος γὰρ οὐχ ὑπερβήσεται μέτρα· εἰ δὲ μή, Ἐρινύες μιν Δίκης ἐπίκουροι ἐξευρήσουσιν, DK 22 B 94) may provide the best clue toward an overarching sense of what the Erinyes concern themselves with, since (if we assume that Heraclitus is only modifying the traditional role of the Erinyes rather than departing entirely from any previous idea of what the Erinyes do) the proper course of the sun suggests a much broader purview than simply intrafamilial violence. We might then think of the Erinyes as protecting the way that things ought to be—a sort of cosmic order. From this perspective, the Erinyes ought certainly to be upset with Creon's behavior, since he has committed an abomination by inverting the natural way of things and keeping the dead above ground while burying a living being. This seems to be precisely the sort of behavior that Erinyes punish.

<sup>309</sup> One might here remember Tiresias' words to Oedipus ("I will not *ever* reveal my woes, so as not to call them yours," *OT* 328-9). The sentiment seems similar on the surface (woes are only properly said to belong to someone when that person is aware of them), but there is a very different set of circumstances behind these two scenarios. In the *OT*, ignorance could have been bliss for Oedipus, in theory, if he never found out that the man he killed was his father and the woman he married was his mother. In this play, however, this is not a similarly available option. I find it hard to imagine a version of events in which Haemon dies but Creon simply does not hear about it ever, and thereby avoids realizing his misfortune. In fact, if we read this scene, in the *Antigone*, against the scene in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, we

was withholding information that he had from the start—he presumably knows that Haemon will die in the course of events set in motion by Creon’s impiety, but he simply chooses not to share this knowledge until he is provoked. A darker alternative is that Creon might well have averted Haemon’s death, but Tiresias waits to tell him about this until it is too late. Tiresias’ delay in telling Creon anything about his son’s death is then twofold—Tiresias waits until Haemon cannot be saved, but then rather than stay silent, he ensures that Creon recognizes that this outcome could have been avoided if not for his impiety. The implicit message here is “I knew all along that if you were impious, you would lose your son, and I could have warned you in advance, but *I chose not to.*” If correct, this reading produces a chillingly cold Tiresias.

There is, however, another reading that can account for Tiresias’ words here, and for the difference between his first and second speeches, though it is a more unexpected reading. Rather than a prophecy, what if Tiresias is instead uttering a curse? On this reading, Tiresias reacts angrily when his integrity and accuracy as a prophet are challenged, and he pronounces something far worse than what he initially shared—not because this was always going to happen, but instead *because Creon has grieved Tiresias* (λυπεῖς γάρ).

At this point, I should acknowledge the evidence against this reading. Leaving aside that this is a very strange way for a prophet to act, and an unprecedented one, Tiresias’ own words argue against this interpretation, at least in part. Before this outburst, he warns Creon “You will provoke me to reveal things unmoved from [lit. through] my mind” (ὄρσεις με τὰκίνητα διὰ φρενῶν<sup>310</sup> φράσαι, 1060). I am here diverting from the suggestion in LSJ for this particular line, which renders τὰκίνητα as “not to be stirred, inviolate... hence, that must be kept secret,”<sup>311</sup> a meaning that has been adopted to some degree by many prominent translators, since I do not think that this sense of necessity is present in other uses of the word, and we unduly bias our reading if we assume there is some sort of obligation expressed here (should or must be kept secret) rather than a

---

see two subtle variations on a similar exchange. Though we do not know which play was written and performed first, that does not mean that we cannot read these two scenes in tandem. Both scenes are conversations with Tiresias and an interlocutor and both scenes become increasingly emotionally charged over the course of the scene. Whereas Oedipus is the one whose emotional reaction drives the scene in the *OT*, and it is only through his increasing anger and agitation that any prophetic revelation emerges, here it is Tiresias who reacts in anger (θυμῶ, 1085).

<sup>310</sup> Lloyd-Jones and Wilson consider διὰ φρενῶν to be suspect, though they do not offer anything else in its stead. Without a plausible and preferable reading, we are obligated to make sense of this line, despite the difficulties it presents.

<sup>311</sup> ἀκίνητος A.II.2. LSJ base this meaning on this passage and *OC* 624, and while I think that this meaning is appropriate in the *OC*, it would be a mistake to rely on that parallel alone to judge the meaning in this context when “unmoved” is perfectly sufficient and does not close off interpretive possibilities the way that “that must be kept secret” does.

more neutral reading of “not (yet) revealed.”<sup>312</sup> This does suggest that lines 1064-1090 are some sort of secret knowledge that Tiresias has been holding within his mind—in other words, Tiresias fairly explicitly suggests that he is providing a prophecy and not a curse.

At the same time, Tiresias does not frame his words as a prophecy. Griffith (*ad* 1064-90) writes that “[a]lthough [Tiresias] is angry, his voice is that of the representative of divine order and retribution (1068-76) rather than of personal retaliation (contrast the shriller tone of *OT* 408-62),” but I am not so convinced. Griffith is right to note the rhetorical and metrical precision of this passage, but the content of Tiresias’ words does in fact suggest a personal element (even if this passage does not match *OT* 408-62 in shrillness). In addition to his use of *λυπεῖς γάρ* at 1084, there are other moments where a personal, vengeful anger shows through in Tiresias’ words. For instance, at lines 1077-8, Tiresias inserts a reference back to the accusations of corruption Creon made previously:

1077	καὶ ταῦτ’ ἄθρησον εἰ κατηργυρωμένος λέγω	Examine whether I say things because I have been bribed
	1077-8	

He continues this bribery motif in the next line, with language that evokes rubbing a coin to reveal if it is real (*φανεῖ, τριβῆ*). It is hard to read these lines without understanding some personal animus beneath the words. After all, Tiresias explicitly invokes the words of Creon that provoked him to this outburst in the first place, and his arrow imagery in lines 1084-6 recalls Creon’s words at 1033-4 (*ὦ πρέσβυ, πάντες ὥστε τοξόται σκοποῦ / τοξεύετ’ ἀνδρὸς τοῦδε*).

More significantly, as Tiresias turns to walk back into the house, he addresses his guide with these words:

1087	ὦ παῖ, σὺ δ’ ἡμᾶς ἄπαγε πρὸς δόμους, ἵνα τὸν θυμὸν οὗτος ἐς νεωτέρους ἀφῆ, καὶ γνῶ τρέφειν τὴν γλῶσσαν ἡσυχαιτέραν	Boy, lead me away, to the house, so that this man may exercise his anger against younger men, and learn to develop a gentler tongue and a better intellect than the mind he currently has.
1090	τὸν νοῦν τ’ ἀμείνω τῶν φρενῶν ὧν <sup>313</sup> νῦν φέρει.	
	1087-90	

While this is ostensibly directed at Tiresias’ guide, the real target here is Creon, who can

<sup>312</sup> For other translations of this, see Jebb’s “You will stir me to utter the dire secret in my soul”; Lloyd-Jones’ “You will provoke me into telling you things that should not be dug up!”

<sup>313</sup> I use Brunck’s emendation here, though I do not find the *ἦ* found in the manuscripts (and printed by Jebb) to be unlikely or “syntactically impossible” (see Griffith on this passage for a reading that accommodates *ἦ*, though he is quite right to prefer the emended text). *ὧν* (for *ἄς*, by attraction) does avoid the awkward *τὸν νοῦν τῶν φρενῶν* however, and gives a better sense than the manuscript.

presumably overhear these words.<sup>314</sup> Tiresias' choice to address his servant rather than Creon, while knowing full well that Creon can hear him, must be a choice calculated to insult. Following directly on the heels of comments made *to* Creon (σὺ ... οὐχ ὑπεκδραμεῖ), this shift into referring to Creon in the third person (οὗτος... ἄφῆ) is both abrupt and pointed. This allows Tiresias to avoid more direct aggression toward Creon, which makes it harder for Creon to respond directly. In a more modern context, we might say that Tiresias is being passive-aggressive. Because he has not been slighted or even really addressed, Creon risks looking petty in a very public setting if he responds to this comment, which was made to the παῖς. The issue here is not *what* Tiresias says as he leaves the stage but instead *how* he says it.

I raise the question of personal animus here, not because it solves anything about this scene, but because it further complicates any reading of this “prophecy” and exactly what power and weight this speech has. There simply is not an entirely satisfying reading that takes all of Tiresias' words and the context in which he says them into account. Though I cannot entirely reconcile these readings, I also do not think that they need reconciling. I would like to end this section with the preliminary conclusion that part of Sophocles' aim here is to complicate the idea of prophecy. The gods are famously silent for much of this play (though they are not entirely uninvolved—the concealing dust storm certainly seems to be their doing, though Creon expresses skepticism), and mortals are left to try to understand their will without much guidance. By the time the gods unambiguously communicate, through Tiresias, the wheels are already in motion and tragedy and death are unavoidable. The two avenues of divine communication in this play (birds and Tiresias) are imperfect, and the results of failed communication are devastating.

As in the *Ajax*, I do not mean to suggest that an alternative reading of Tiresias is necessarily

---

<sup>314</sup> Dynel 2011 attempts to synthesize several disparate works by Goffman (Goffman 1959, 1963, 1964, 1967, 1974, 1981) into one coherent theory, since his works on participation span a number of topics and at times seem to suggest slightly different classifications, and I rely here on her work as well as several of Goffman's own. Goffman approaches interactions with an eye to “footing,” which he considers “participant's alignment, or set, or stance, or projected self” (Goffman 1979: 5). Among the participants in a conversation, Goffman usefully separates them into ratified hearers and unratified hearers. The latter category includes overhearers and eavesdroppers, who are numbered among the bystanders, though bystanders in general are expected (by the demands of etiquette) not to overhear conversations in which they are not a ratified hearer, and “maximally encourage the fiction that they aren't present” (Goffman 1979: 9). It is against this conception of participation that Goffman describes the situation in which a speaker may *intend* to be overheard, thereby potentially turning an unratified hearer into a ratified hearer (see Dynel 2010 on this point, though this change of status is not agreed upon by everyone) As an example, Dynel describes a situation in which a woman in line at a store complains loudly to her partner about the incompetence of the woman working at the checkout (Dynel 2011). Dynel's example maps neatly onto what I suggest is happening in this exchange between Tiresias and his guide, but which is really intended for Creon's ears.

right, or better, than the standard interpretation. My interest is instead in how this play allows for alternate possibilities and presents unanswered questions. Tiresias seems to be drawing distinctions between modes of prophecy, as he avoids all the prophetic words that Creon uses (μόντ- language) and instead highlights his role as a reader of signs and a practitioner of an older mode of divination. It is only later, once provoked, that he engages in what seems to be a more traditional sort of tragic prophecy, but even then, there are aspects of his language that do not fit neatly into a standard, prophetic model. There is no plot-driven reason that Tiresias needs to share his prophetic knowledge about Haemon's death, and it seems clear that Creon would suffer the loss of his son regardless. Tiresias has already revealed that the gods disprove of Creon's action. His inspired prophecy serves no narrative purpose other than to cast the tragic outcome in a more fatalistic light, but what it does do is blur the distinction between a prophecy and a curse, and perhaps also add an additional psychological aspect to Creon's grief. These points direct our attention toward the inherently subjective position that the prophet is in and the ways that even factually accurate communication is still fundamentally shaped by non-syntactic features like context and the motivations and animus of the speaker.

In the end, of course, none of this really matters to the plot. The implications of precisely how Tiresias delivers his words are not a subject of scrutiny within the play, and no one revisits his speeches to reinterpret what he said. As with the *Ajax*, there are ambiguities here, but they remain unexplored. Why include them, then? Though my subsequent case studies in this chapter will help answer this question more fully, we can see from these first two examples that Sophocles has a persistent interest in prophecy, ambiguity, and language, and that this interest permeates plays that are not primarily concerned with misunderstood prophecy. Even so, prophetic language in these plays is carefully crafted and presented in ways that examine questions of meaning and how it arises. Even non-oracular speech still presents an opportunity for Sophocles to explore issues of language, and the gravity and the foreignness of prophetic language makes these prophecies a particularly apt place to look at how language and context interact to generate meaning.

### **Odysseus the Sophist: Rhetoric and a Prophecy in the *Philoctetes***

The *Philoctetes* presents a different sort of prophecy from what we have seen so far, in that

it deals with a magical item.<sup>315</sup> Further, Helenus' prophecy seems to be less of a statement of how things *will* be and more a set of instructions for how to obtain a desired outcome (as in the *Electra*). Helenus seems to have prophesied that Troy will not fall without the bow of Philoctetes, or something to that general effect. I use *seems* here because, as I will explore in this section, our account of this prophecy is filtered through the most unreliable conduit—Odysseus—and Odysseus' account of the prophecy shifts to suit the situation. While none of this should come as a surprise to anyone who is familiar with Odysseus' famously πολύτροπος nature, his behavior and his keen control and manipulation of language has a great deal to offer this examination of prophetic language. Given the intellectual climate in which Sophocles is writing, Odysseus clearly evokes sophistic rhetorical teachings (or at least the claims that were made about sophists by those who opposed their teachings).<sup>316</sup> He makes the weaker argument the stronger, advances a sort of moral relativism, and provides a very persuasive argument, though he is certainly unconcerned with the truth of his words. Here, we have a mortal agent *consciously* manipulating language so as to use ambiguity to his advantage. In pragmatic terms, this is a noncooperative conversation, and Odysseus serves as a useful contrast to ambiguous oracular language. Odysseus disregards pragmatic convention for the purpose of misleading Neoptolemus, whereas (as I have argued) the gods' purposes are inscrutable.

As I noted with the *Electra*, the instances of prophecy in the *Philoctetes* highlight some of the more complex aspects of language. Odysseus provides more information about the prophecy given by Helenus over the course of the play. Though scholars have noted Sophocles' tendency toward the late addition of new prophetic information,<sup>317</sup> I do not think that we can simply dismiss this evolving prophecy as a Sophoclean literary habit. Further, unlike Zeus' shifting and evolving oracle in the *Trachiniae*, Helenus' words here do not demonstrate the seemingly supernatural characteristic of being entirely distinct yet entirely true in all their incarnations. Instead, we see Odysseus carefully choosing his words and including and excluding different details as they advance his overall purpose of persuading Neoptolemus. We have here a distillation of sophism and a sort of

---

<sup>315</sup> On magic and magical items, Tambiah's scholarship has been very useful for conceptualizing how ritual and magical items function from an anthropological perspective. In particular, see Tambiah 1979 and 1990.

<sup>316</sup> For a treatment of the political aspects of this play and Euripides' version, see Scodel 2009, who concludes that this play offers a reflection on the possibilities of leading an ethical public life (something connected to politics, but not in the explicit way that Euripides' version seems to have been).

<sup>317</sup> See Segal 2000: 156 on this (he notes also that both Kranz 1921 and Schwinge 1962 comment on this). See also Lloyd-Jones 1972 (on Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1917), Kraus 1991, and Davies 1991.

sophistic bogeyman; Odysseus' character here provides Sophocles an important opportunity to explore sophistic rhetoric. Sophocles' engagement with sophistic theories has been noted before,<sup>318</sup> and it should come as no surprise that Sophocles is engaging with a wider range of sophistic arguments here. This play is Sophocles' most explicit engagement with sophistic theories of language, but, as I have argued, Sophocles is in fact concerned with these theories throughout his plays.

Though Odysseus' rhetoric within this play deserves its own thorough examination, I will be limiting my focus here to the times when he describes the prophecy of Helenus. As with so many of Sophocles' other plays, issues and anxieties about language crystallize nicely around divine speech, since divine speech is presumed to be infallible (if properly understood), and so issues of meaning, interpretation, and comprehension take on greater weight. There are three major versions of the prophecy that Odysseus relates, the first of which comes very near the start of the play:

66	<p>εἰ δ' ἐργάσει  μη ταῦτα, λύπην πᾶσιν Ἀργείοις βαλεῖς.  εἰ γὰρ τὰ τοῦδε τόξα μὴ ληφθήσεται,  οὐκ ἔστι πέρσαι σοι τὸ Δαρδάνου πέδον.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">66-69</p>	<p>But if you do <i>not</i> do these things, you will heap grief upon all the Argives. For if the bow of this man is not taken, it will not be possible for you to sack the Dardanian plain.</p>
----	---	--

This prophecy is invoked to support Odysseus' initial instructions: "You need to trick his life away by uttering contrivances" (τὴν Φιλοκτῆτου σε δεῖ / ψυχὴν ὅπως δόλοισιν ἐκκλέψεις λέγων, 54-5),<sup>319</sup> which may well be the "something new, which you have not heard before now" (τι καινόν, ὦν πρὶν οὐκ ἀκήκοας, 52) that Odysseus warned Neoptolemus that he might hear. These instructions are, of course, a thoroughly Odyssean plan, but we can see immediately why Odysseus felt the need to provide this preface, with reminders about how Neoptolemus is only there to serve Odysseus (ὡς ὑπηρέτης πάρει, 53). Despite Odysseus' description (γενναῖον, 51), this is not a particularly γενναῖος act for Neoptolemus to undertake, in a literal sense. Odysseus is presumably appealing to Neoptolemus' sense of duty and honor, as γενναῖος often evokes, but it

<sup>318</sup> Rose 1976 is a seminal work on this front, and he revisits many of his arguments in greater detail in Rose 1992. Odysseus' rhetoric in particular invites comparison with sophistic teachings (cf. Blundell 1987, Worman 1999 and 2002). For a specifically political look at the rhetoric in this play, see Scodel 2009.

<sup>319</sup> This line contains something of a pun, since βίος is the word both for a bow and for life. By "tricking away his life," Odysseus alludes both to the bow and to his life and livelihood. This is made far more explicit at line 931 (ἀπεστέρηκας τὸν βίον τὰ τόξα ἔλῳν), but we have a much subtler version of the joke here. See Schein ad 931 for more on this, and Heraclitus fr. 48 for what seems to be a joke (or a bon mot) on the same point: τῶι οὖν τόξῳ ὄνομα βίος, ἔργον δὲ θάνατος. This line also allows Neoptolemus to understand ψυχὴν metaphorically (as in his livelihood) and overlook the fact that stealing Philoctetes' bow while leaving him stranded on Lemnos will absolutely kill him.



more directly suggests “true to one's birth or descent.”<sup>320</sup> If we recall Achilles' famous rebuke of Odysseus at *Il.* 9.312-3 (ἐχθρὸς γὰρ μοι κείνος ὁμῶς Αἴδαο πύλησιν / ὅς χ' ἕτερον μὲν κεύθη ἐνὶ φρεσίν, ἄλλο δὲ εἶπη), we are reminded of exactly how distasteful deception is likely to be to Neoptolemus.

It is in this context that Odysseus first mentions the prophecy, to help persuade Neoptolemus to undertake this deceptive strategy. The terms seem straightforward enough: if the bow is not captured (εἰ γὰρ τὰ τοῦδε τόξα μὴ ληφθήσεται), Neoptolemus will not be able to capture Troy (οὐκ ἔστι πέρσαι σοι τὸ Δαρδάνου πέδον). On a strict, logical reading, this does not imply that the bow is the only thing that needs to be captured. The bow's capture could be a necessary (but not necessarily sufficient) prerequisite for Troy's capture.

At this point, it is worth returning to Chapter 1 and the prophecies in the *Trachiniae*. Those prophecies, I argued, are not malicious, but simply operate in a linguistic realm that is not strictly governed by pragmatic rules. When Zeus phrases an oracle in terms of a disjunctive, he implicates (from the human perspective) that it is an exclusive or and one of two outcomes will happen, but (critically) not both. Zeus is not necessarily malicious, then, but simply communicating in a language devoid of many of these pragmatic principles, and his uses of *or* are just as likely to be inclusive or exclusive, since the tools mortals use to distinguish between those are all contextual, pragmatic cues. With Odysseus, we have a similar situation, except Odysseus is not a god. When he uses misleading syntax, he is aware of what he is doing and how his words will be perceived. We must see his word choice here as a careful avoidance of liability. He is not *technically* lying, though his words will have the effect of a lie.

When Neoptolemus invokes his honest heritage at 88-91, it is clear that Odysseus needs to persuade him more, since Neoptolemus makes the very reasonable suggestion that he would prefer a more honorable option, and he is willing to take the bow by force instead of deception.

88	ἔφυν γὰρ οὐδὲν ἐκ τέχνης πράσσειν κακῆς, οὔτ' αὐτὸς οὔθ', ὥς φασιν, οὐκφύσας ἐμέ.	For I am naturally inclined not to accomplish anything by wicked contrivance, I am inclined that way and, from what they say, so was the one who sired me. But I am ready to take the man by force, and not by treachery.
90	ἀλλ' εἴμ' ἑτοῖμος πρὸς βίαν τὸν ἄνδρ' ἄγειν καὶ μὴ δόλοισιν·	
88-91		

This, it would seem, meets the only criterion of the prophecy that Odysseus has mentioned, since the bow will be captured. In fact, this seems to be a much better interpretation of ληφθήσεται, since Neoptolemus proposes taking the bow by force. Odysseus' scheme, it would seem, would

<sup>320</sup> LSJ s.v. γενναῖος

result in the bow being *given* (δοθήσεται), albeit under false pretenses. Further, Odysseus has already referred to the bow as invincible (τῶν ἀνικήτων ὄπλων, 78), strongly suggesting that the bow itself is the critical element of this prophecy. Neoptolemus’ proposed solution seems as if it should be a viable one.

Here, Odysseus slowly shifts the terms of his plan. Instead of simply deceiving Philoctetes in order to take the bow, now Neoptolemus is told to take Philoctetes himself (λέγω σ’ ἐγὼ δόλω Φιλοκτήτην λαβεῖν, 101). Neoptolemus does not immediately question this shift, as he instead asks why it is better to take him by a trick (ἐν δόλω) than to persuade Philoctetes and take him that way (πείσαντ’ ἄγειν), willingly. As the conversation progresses though, Neoptolemus returns to this shift in the prophecy’s terms:

112	Νεοπτόλεμος κέρδος δ’ ἐμοὶ τί τοῦτον ἐς Τροίαν μολεῖν;	Neoptolemus But what does it profit me that this man comes to Troy?
-----	---	--

Odysseus replies with what Schein calls the “oracular present,” which “authoritatively regards a future event as present.”<sup>321</sup>

113	Ὀδυσσεύς αἶρεῖ τὰ τόξα ταῦτα τὴν Τροίαν μόνα.	Odysseus This bow alone takes Troy
-----	--	---------------------------------------

The ensuing exchange seems somewhat disjointed, when read on the surface, though the eventual outcome of the conversation is clear:

114	Νεοπτόλεμος οὐκ ἄρ’ ὁ πέρσων, ὡς ἐφάσκετ’, εἴμ’ ἐγώ;	Neoptolemus But then am I not the one who—like you said—will capture Troy?
115	Ὀδυσσεύς οὔτ’ ἂν σὺ κείνων χωρὶς οὔτ’ ἐκεῖνα σοῦ.	Odysseus Neither could you without it, or it without you
116	Νεοπτόλεμος θηρατέ’ οὖν γίγνοιτ’ ἂν, εἴπερ ᾧδ’ ἔχει.	Neoptolemus Then it would be worthy of pursuit, if that is indeed the case.

This exchange is best explored in terms of the implications in each line, as the flow of the conversation is not entirely clear, and the role of Philoctetes at this point is convoluted and obfuscated:

Neoptolemus But what does it profit me that this man comes to Troy?	Neoptolemus Whoa, wait a second, why do I care if Philoctetes comes to Troy? Don’t I only need the bow?
Odysseus This bow alone takes Troy	Odysseus This bow taketh Troy, I say unto you.
Neoptolemus But then am I not the one who—like you said—will capture Troy?	Neoptolemus

<sup>321</sup> Schein *ad* 113, citing Smyth §1882

Odysseus Neither could you without it, or it without you	Right, so if I have the bow, I take Troy, yeah? That's what you said earlier...
Neoptolemus Then it would be worthy of pursuit, if that is indeed the case.	Odysseus You cannot capture it without the bow, nor the bow without you. Neoptolemus So I definitely need to get that bow then.

By line 120, we can see that Neoptolemus is eager to follow Odysseus' instructions, as he exclaims "Well then! I will do it, getting rid of all shame! (ἴτω· ποήσω, πᾶσαν αἰσχύνην ἀφείς). His questions about his own role in the prophecy are not entirely answered though. Will Philoctetes need to come with the bow? Odysseus very likely realizes at this point that Neoptolemus likes the idea that this is his heroic moment, and that he alone will receive δύο δωρήματα (117). If Philoctetes is to bring the bow to Troy, then Philoctetes will share in this glory. Odysseus, we see, sidesteps this issue for the time being, and continues to speak in cryptic, oracular-type language (αἰρεῖ τὰ τόξα ταῦτα τὴν Τροίαν μόνα, 113; οὔτ' ἄν σὺ κείνων χωρὶς οὔτ' ἐκείνα σοῦ, 115). Again, nothing he says is a lie, but he is also not conveying the full prophecy at this point. He turns the conversation away from Philoctetes and back to Neoptolemus' own role in this heroic quest, effectively distracting Neoptolemus from any question of Philoctetes without actually answering Neoptolemus' question at line 112.

The next time that this prophecy appears, it is embedded under several layers of deception and presents deep interpretive challenges. The false merchant includes this account in the midst of a complex, metatheatrical scene. Throughout this scene, he weaves truth, known mythological accounts, and clear fabrications together in a way that makes it impossible to separate the different elements. While we cannot get to an underlying "truth" through all the artful rhetoric and the deceptive and manipulative content of this speech, we should certainly understand him as a mouthpiece of Odysseus. Many of the lines that the false merchant delivers are aimed at both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, though the two men are meant to take very different meanings from the same words. With this in mind, the account of the prophecy is particularly hard to interpret. It seems that Neoptolemus is not aware of the full prophecy before this point, and that he knows only what Odysseus has told him. This account will be "news" to both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus:

603	ἐγὼ σε τοῦτ', ἴσως γὰρ οὐκ ἀκήκοας, πᾶν ἐκδιδάξω. μάντις ἦν τις εὐγενής,	I will explain everything to you thoroughly, since perhaps you have not heard. There was a certain noble seer, a son of Priam, named Helenus...
605	Πριάμου μὲν υἱός, ὄνομα δ' ὠνομάζετο Ἕλενος...	He prophesied everything else to them [the Achaeans], and told them that they would never
610	ὅς δὴ τὰ τ' ἄλλ' αὐτοῖσι πάντ' ἐθέσπισεν καὶ τὰπὶ Τροίᾳ πέργαμ' ὥς οὐ μὴ ποτε	sack the towers of Troy unless, after they persuaded

	πέρσοιεν, εἰ μὴ τόνδε πείσαντες λόγῳ ἄγοιντο νήσου τῆσδ' ἐφ' ἧς ναίει τὰ νῦν. 603-6, 610-13	this man with their speech, they led him from this island where he is living now.
--	---	---

Philoctetes, unaware that the merchant is in fact an agent of Odysseus, has no reason not to take this account at face value. Neoptolemus, however, might well question its veracity, since he is aware that both he and the false merchant are playing parts within a broader deceptive stratagem. Much of the rest of what the false merchant has said have been lies up to this point,<sup>322</sup> and there is no reason to trust that this account is not another manipulative tactic originating from Odysseus. Nonetheless, Neoptolemus does not suspect that this might be a lie, or at least he does not let on if he does.

At this point, we have seen a version in which the bow alone is sufficient to take Troy, a version which hints at Philoctetes' presence being necessary, and a version which explicitly states that the Greeks need to *persuade* (πείσαντες λόγῳ) Philoctetes to come to Troy with them,<sup>323</sup> with no actual mention of the bow. Persuasion, it should be noted, is precisely what Odysseus told Neoptolemus would never work—hence, the necessity of deception. Schein (*ad* 603-21) notes that “Helenos’ (reported) words...re-energize the intrigue and challenge an audience or reader to consider (I) whether Od.’s deception, motivated up to this point wholly in human terms, may have divine backing.” He is quite right, but this passage also invites the opposite response, because there are so many levels of deception and the audience is left in as much confusion as Neoptolemus. At this point, we do not know how truthful Odysseus has been and how much of this prophecy is simply Odysseus presenting his own agenda as a divinely ordained one.<sup>324</sup>

Before dissecting this any further, it will be helpful to see what happens to this prophecy in the rest of the play. To begin, I will look at the future versions that come from Odysseus himself. The first time that Odysseus modifies this prophecy at all is at lines 981-3:

981	τοῦτο μὲν, οὐδ' ἦν θέλη, δράσει ποτ'· ἀλλὰ καὶ σὲ δεῖ στείχειν ἄμ' αὐτοῖς, ἢ βία στελοῦσί σε.	He will never do that, not even if he wants to. In addition, you must come with it, or they will send you with violence.
-----	---	---

<sup>322</sup> As Schein (*ad* 542-627) has noted, many of these mythological aspects do not seem to be the traditional accounts of the Greek heroes. From our perspective, at least, a great many of the mythological accounts sound like lies, though there is the possibility that these are mythological variants that are otherwise lost to us. We can confidently say that these are less popular versions of these myths and that the audience would be skeptical, at the very least, about the accuracy of these accounts.

<sup>323</sup> Persuasion is, of course, a vague term and could perhaps be understood euphemistically. I am here thinking of the sort of dialogue given to mafiosi in movies, as in “an offer he can’t refuse,” in which the recipient of that offer is “persuaded” by the threat of violence lurking directly behind those words.

<sup>324</sup> For more on the complexities of this scene and the difficulties it presents to the audience, see (following Schein) Østerud 1973, Greengard 1987, Easterling 1997b, Falkner 1998, Payne 2000, Budelmann 2000.

Here, Odysseus insists that Neoptolemus will not return the bow to Philoctetes, but that it is also critical that Philoctetes accompany the bow. Despite whatever Odysseus may have said earlier—a point to which I will return shortly—his actions suggest that both Philoctetes and the bow are necessary to take Troy. Otherwise, there is no reason Odysseus would need to worry about taking Philoctetes, a man who personally hates him, who smells terribly, and who is prone to loud and painful bouts as a result of his infection.

However, at lines 1054ff., we have a different account that would seem to contradict this:

1055	ἄφετε γὰρ αὐτόν, μηδὲ προσψάυσητ' ἔτι. ἔατε μίμνειν. οὐδὲ σοῦ προσχρήζομεν, τά γ' ὄπλ' ἔχοντες ταῦτ'· ἐπεὶ πάρεστι μὲν Τεῦκρος παρ' ἡμῖν, τήνδ' ἐπιστήμην ἔχων, ἐγὼ θ', ὅς οἶμαι σοῦ κάκιον οὐδὲν ἂν τούτων κρατύνων τῆδ' ἐπιθύνειν χερί.	Release him, and do not take hold of him any longer. Let him stay. We have no need of you, since we have this bow. For Teucer is here with us, and he has this skill, as am I, who think that I would ply it in no way worse than you and direct it [sc. in no way worse than you] with my hand.
1060	τί δῆτα σοῦ δεῖ; χαῖρε τὴν Λῆμνον πατῶν. ἡμεῖς δ' ἴωμεν. καὶ τάχ' ἂν τὸ σὸν γέρας τιμὴν ἐμοὶ νείμειεν, ἣν σὲ χρῆν ἔχειν. 1054-1062	What need have we of you? Enjoy walking around Lemnos! But let us get going, and perhaps your prize will afford honor to me—the honor which you ought to have.

Taken at face value, this would seem to suggest that Philoctetes' physical presence is not required, and that any skilled archer could wield Heracles' bow. This whole passage smacks of a bluff, however, as Odysseus makes a loud and insulting show of how little Philoctetes actually matters and what Philoctetes' future looks like, if he refuses to leave Lemnos with them. The last two lines of this speech emphasize this, as Odysseus suggests that perhaps he will receive Philoctetes' γέρας, rubbing salt in his proverbial wound. Though this bluff feels somewhat transparent, especially after Odysseus' previous statement, Philoctetes clearly does not feel that way, and the thought of Odysseus proudly displaying Philoctetes' cherished bow is clearly too much for him to endure, since he bursts out dramatically:

1063	οἶμοι· τί δράσω δῦσμορος; σὺ τοῖς ἐμοῖς ὄπλοισι κοσμηθεῖς ἐν Ἀργείοις φανῆ; 1063-4	Alas! What am I—wretch—to do? Are you to appear among the Argives, decked out with my weapons?
------	--	--

If we understand this exchange to be little more than an effective bluff, then we are left with the conclusion that Philoctetes must accompany his bow to Troy. This is reaffirmed by Odysseus' later claim that he will forcibly carry Philoctetes (who is now without his bow) to Troy:

1296	σάφ' ἴσθι· καὶ πέλας γ' ὄρᾳς, ὅς σ' ἐς τὰ Τροίας πεδί' ἀποστελῶ βία, ἔάν τ' Ἀχιλλέως παῖς ἐάν τε μὴ θέλη. 1296-8	Know it well! And you see me nearby, me who will send you into the Trojan plain by force, whether the child of Achilles wants me to or not.
------	---	---

Odysseus, it would seem, knows that Philoctetes and his bow must both be present at Troy, and he must also have known this from the start of the play. The different versions that he shares at

different points throughout the plot are simply his own estimations of the most expedient version to share at any given time, which is entirely unsurprising behavior for Odysseus.

Backtracking a bit, we can trace Neoptolemus' own understanding of this prophecy, which seems to be largely informed by what Odysseus has told him. Odysseus rightly understood that Neoptolemus would be much more willing to participate in this scheme if he stood to gain personally from the deception. Though Neoptolemus feels that deception is intrinsically dishonorable, he eventually succumbs to Odysseus' persuasion because he feels that he stands to gain much more honor than he will lose. In terms of net honor, Odysseus succeeds in framing his plot as an overall gain. Neoptolemus' reaction to the suggestion that he might receive a mere *part* of the glory suggests that he will not be receptive to this idea, which leads Odysseus to change the topic and avoid having to mention Philoctetes' role in any greater detail. The suggestion certainly made an impression on Neoptolemus though, since the question of Philoctetes' role informs his next mention of this prophecy, which comes when Neoptolemus is talking to the Chorus and preparing for his first encounter with Philoctetes.

Here, Neoptolemus seems to have inferred a great deal on his own, based on what he has heard so far:

196	οὐκ ἔσθ' ὡς οὐ θεῶν του μελέτη τοῦ μὴ πρότερον τόνδ' ἐπὶ Τροίᾳ τεῖναι τὰ θεῶν ἀμάχητα βέλη, πρὶν ὄδ' ἐξήκοι χρόνος, ᾧ λέγεται 200 χρῆναί σφ' ὑπὸ τῶνδε δαμῆναι.	It is not possible that this is not done by the care of one of the gods, so that he does not aim the unconquerable arrows at Troy earlier than that time arrives, at which is it said that Troy is fated to be conquered by them.
	196-200	

For this conclusion to make sense, Neoptolemus must have reached a series of intermediate conclusions. What he knows for sure up to this point is that the Greeks need to get Philoctetes' bow (66-69) and that both Neoptolemus and the bow (but not necessarily Philoctetes) are needed for the capture of Troy (115). For Neoptolemus' words here to make sense, the logical flow here must be something to the effect of:

- The bow is invincible
- The bow is necessary for Troy to fall
- Philoctetes wields the bow and no one can take it from him in a fight (because it is invincible)
- Philoctetes and the bow are, in effect, one entity
- As long as Philoctetes is on this island, Troy cannot fall (because the bow cannot go to Troy)
- Since Troy is fated to fall by the bow (and, by extension, Philoctetes), then Philoctetes must be a tool of fate and/or the gods and his delay here must be part of some divine plan for when Troy should fall.

This logical chain explains why Neoptolemus infers that Philoctetes' sad plight is part of a divine plan and why he is no longer preoccupied with the question of whether Neoptolemus will be the only man necessary to capture Troy.

As Odysseus realized would be necessary for his continued participation, Neoptolemus can continue to think that he will get all the glory. As noted earlier, Odysseus has conspicuously reiterated Neoptolemus' own role in taking Troy every time that he is forced to share more about Philoctetes' role. Odysseus clearly knows that the only reason Neoptolemus is willing to engage in behavior that he finds morally distasteful is because he thinks that he will gain more glory for himself by taking Troy than he will lose by engaging in deception. Odysseus cannot know how Neoptolemus values each quantity of glory, though, and any significant change to this equation could prove very risky. As such, Odysseus must be careful about asking Neoptolemus to engage in any more elaborate acts of deception and he must also be careful about revealing anything that will lessen how much glory Neoptolemus stands to gain from the Sack of Troy. By carefully managing the context in which Neoptolemus learns about any changes to this plan, Odysseus can make sure that Neoptolemus only learns small pieces of new information at one time. This allows him to control the balance of glory gained and glory lost (i.e., if he suggests that Philoctetes might get a *little* more glory than Neoptolemus initially thought, and Neoptolemus starts to balk at this plan, then Odysseus can adjust his strategy so as not to lose Neoptolemus' cooperation completely). This also ensures that Neoptolemus only learns as much new information as he can rationalize at any one time. Although a severe, abrupt change in plans might be too much for Neoptolemus to rationalize effectively, he demonstrates that he is able to craft a new narrative that accounts for small changes to the facts as he knows them.

It is precisely this process of rationalization that allows Neoptolemus to shift slowly toward accepting that Philoctetes will somehow be necessary.<sup>325</sup> Although the Chorus does not share his opinion, Neoptolemus begins to think about alternatives that account for all the things he thinks he knows about the bow and Helenus' prophecy. At this point, Neoptolemus begins to speak in

---

<sup>325</sup> We should not discount his sympathy and pity for Philoctetes here. Neoptolemus is clearly uncomfortable with the deception and exploitation of Philoctetes, and this must make Neoptolemus more receptive to sharing glory with him. Giving Philoctetes some portion of glory would compensate him, in some sense, for his suffering and alleviate his pain. Neoptolemus' noble character would, it seems, incline him to be more amenable to sharing glory in light of these considerations than he would otherwise be.

hexameters,<sup>326</sup> indicating his own mental state, as he begins thinking about what the prophecy could actually say:

840	<p>ἀλλ' ὅδε μὲν κλύει οὐδέν, ἐγὼ δ' ὄρῳ οὐνεκα θήραν          τήνδ' ἀλίως ἔχομεν τόξων, δίχα τοῦδε πλέοντες.          τοῦδε γὰρ ὁ στέφανος, τοῦτον θεὸς εἶπε κομίζειν.          κομπεῖν δ' ἔργ' ἀτελῆ σὺν ψεύδεσιν αἰσχρὸν          ὄνειδος.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">839-43</p>	<p>Though he doesn't hear anything, I see that we capture the prey that is the bow in vain, if we set sail without this man. For his is the garland, he whom the god said to bring. And it is a shameful reproach to boast about deeds that are not accomplished, with lies.</p>
-----	---	--

Finally, we see the form of the prophecy that Neoptolemus has constructed.

1325	<p>ὅμως δὲ λέξω· Ζῆνα δ' ὄρκιον καλῶ·          καὶ ταῦτ' ἐπίστω, καὶ γράφου φρενῶν ἔσω.          σὺ γὰρ νοσεῖς τόδ' ἄλγος ἐκ θείας τύχης,          Χρύσης πελασθεὶς φύλακος, ὃς τὸν ἀκαλυφῆ          σηκὸν φυλάσσει κρύφιος οἰκουρῶν ὄφιν·          καὶ παῦλαν ἴσθι τῆσδε μὴ ποτ' ἂν τυχεῖν</p>	<p>Nevertheless, I will speak. I call on Zeus of Oaths. Know these things, and write them within your mind. For you suffer from this painful sickness from divine fortune, after you drew near to the guardian of Chryse, who defends the unroofed sanctuary, that hidden snake who keeps guard. And know that relief will never come to this painful disease, not while the same sun rises in this place, and sets again in that, until you come—youself, of your own free will—to the Trojan plain and, when you meet the Asclepiades, who are with us, you are relieved of this disease, and—together with the bow and with me—you are shown to have sacked the towers. How I know these things are this way, I will tell you. For there is a man with us, captured from Troy, Helenus, the best of seers, who clearly says that these things must happen. And in addition to these things, he says that Troy will necessarily be taken completely in this present summer. Otherwise, he willingly gives himself to be killed, if he lied in speaking these words. Since, then, you know all this, concede willingly. Indeed, this further addition will be fine, to be distinguished as the best one of the Greeks! First, to come to healing hands, and then, after you take Troy, the cause of much groaning, to win the highest glory!</p>
1330	<p>νόσου βαρείας, ἕως ἂν αὐτὸς ἥλιος          ταύτη μὲν αἶρη, τῆδε δ' αὖ δύνη πάλιν,          πρὶν ἂν τὰ Τροίας πεδί' ἐκὼν αὐτὸς μόλῃς,          καὶ τῶν παρ' ἡμῖν ἐντυχῶν Ἀσκληπιιδῶν          νόσου μαλαχθῆς τῆσδε, καὶ τὰ πέργαμα</p>	
1335	<p>ξὺν τοῖσδε τόξοις ξὺν τ' ἐμοὶ πέρσας φανῆς.          ὡς δ' οἶδα ταῦτα τῆδ' ἔχοντ' ἐγὼ φράσω.          ἀνὴρ παρ' ἡμῖν ἐστὶν ἐκ Τροίας ἀλούς,          Ἕλενος ἀριστόμαντις, ὃς λέγει σαφῶς          ὡς δεῖ γενέσθαι ταῦτα· καὶ πρὸς τοῖσδ' ἔτι,</p>	
1340	<p>ὡς ἔστ' ἀνάγκη τοῦ παρεστῶτος θέρους          Τροίαν ἀλῶναι πάσαν· ἢ δίδωσ' ἐκὼν          κτείνειν ἑαυτόν, ἢν τάδε ψευσθῆ λέγων.          ταῦτ' οὖν ἐπεὶ κάτοισθα, συγχώρη θέλων.</p>	
1345	<p>καλὴ γὰρ ἢ ἰπίκτησις, Ἕλλήνων ἓνα          κριθέντ' ἄριστον, τοῦτο μὲν παιωνίας          ἐς χεῖρας ἐλθεῖν, εἶτα τὴν πολύστονον          Τροίαν ἐλόντα κλέος ὑπέρτατον λαβεῖν.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1324-47</p>	

All that Neoptolemus has heard about the prophecy up to this point has come from Odysseus and the false merchant. The account that he gives here includes many details whose origins are unclear. Neoptolemus has built on his earlier conclusion that the gods must have caused

<sup>326</sup> Kitto suggests instead that the hexameters are Sophocles' way of signaling the veracity of these lines. We should believe Neoptolemus' argument at lines 839-42, he argues, because hexameters are the meter of oracles, and so the fact that Neoptolemus speaks in hexameters subtly signals to the audience that his words are true (Kitto 1956: 119). He is quite right to associate hexameters with oracles, but I maintain that he comes to the wrong conclusion about what this oracular meter indicates. Rather than conveying a message *from Sophocles* about these lines' veracity, Neoptolemus' use of hexameters here indicates that Neoptolemus is vouching for the prophetic legitimacy of these lines. That is to say, Neoptolemus switches into a weighty, prophetic meter because he thinks that he has determined the actual content of the prophecy (however, see the Introduction for a discussion of actual versus literary metrical conventions for oracles). Neoptolemus conveys his confidence through a metrical shift, but the audience can choose whether to see this as well-founded (or ill-founded) confidence.



Philoctetes to be bitten by a snake, and he has added several more details. Now, Neoptolemus is firmly convinced that Philoctetes' only hope of a cure is to come to Troy, where Asclepius' sons can heal him. This addition is at first unexpected, since the Asclepiades have not been mentioned before now. Further, we hear that Philoctetes must come of his own volition (ἐκῶν), something that did not seem important to Odysseus earlier, when he threatened to take Philoctetes by force. Further, Philoctetes will be considered the best of all the Greeks (Ἑλλήνων ἓνα κριθέντ' ἄριστον, 1344-5) and he will be an integral part of Troy's capture, which will take place in the current summer (τοῦ παρεστῶτος θέρους). All of this is new information which is attributed to Helenus, but which Neoptolemus cannot have learned over the course of this play.

Others have resolved this situation by simply writing it off as being for “dramatic effect” or an effective device for advancing the plot and building suspense. I do mean to deny that this scene does all of these things, but rather to suggest that—particularly given Sophocles' pervasive interest in prophecy and oracles—we can and should scrutinize this speech more closely before concluding that it is *merely* a means to enhance dramatic effect. Further scrutiny leaves us with two possible explanations: either Neoptolemus has cause to believe that what he says here is true, or he has decided to present an argument that is designed to be as appealing and persuasive as possible to Philoctetes. On the latter reading, Neoptolemus has internalized the lessons from Odysseus and, while he has no way of knowing if what he says is true, he knows that Philoctetes will find the promise of this sort of immediate glory appealing, and so he shapes his account accordingly. This is, after all, the best possible outcome of the events in the play, and Philoctetes will get everything he could possibly want: healing, glory, rescue from Lemnos, and on top of everything else, Neoptolemus has upset Odysseus, which would appeal even more to Philoctetes. This explanation is a somewhat more cynical and pessimistic reading, but it is a reading that resonates deeply with the fears and anxieties in 5th century Athens. There are ample similar examples from a wide range of authors that depict a young, noble man being corrupted by an older, rhetorically savvy, morally ambiguous figure.<sup>327</sup> While there is much to suggest that Neoptolemus is in fact virtuous and committed to an ethical approach in the second half of this play, the text does not preclude the possibility that Neoptolemus has carefully crafted his words here with his audience in mind.

The more complicated reading here allows for an entirely virtuous Neoptolemus, as the rest

---

<sup>327</sup> These anxieties were not limited to Socrates, but the charges brought against him, of corrupting the youth, certainly echo these concerns.

of the play would suggest. On that reading, Neoptolemus again reasons his way into an explanation which takes all the facts into account, and also accords with his own beliefs about the gods. On this reading, we begin with the things that Neoptolemus (trusting that Odysseus has not lied to him) knows about Helenus' prophecy at this point in the play:

- 1) The bow must come to Troy in order for Troy to be captured
- 2) Philoctetes also must come to Troy in order for Troy to be captured (though it need not be of his own volition, since Odysseus was willing to take him by force)

To this, we can add the things that Neoptolemus has already concluded on his own:

- 3) The gods are responsible for Philoctetes' infection and abandonment on Lemnos
- 4) The gods have decreed that Troy will fall (at a determined time—this summer)

To these facts, we should now add some fundamental beliefs that Neoptolemus seems to hold:

- 5) Philoctetes' wound is so extreme that an extreme cure (i.e. healers with special healing abilities) is necessary
- 6) The gods are just and powerful
- 7) The only acceptable outcome is one that is achieved through noble and honorable actions

This allows Neoptolemus to draw a set of conclusions that form the basis of the prophecy he relates. The only way to fit all of these facts into one coherent narrative is to infer that if the gods have made Philoctetes into an agent of their own divine judgment of Troy, they ought surely to heal a man whose infection was a part of their divine plan. Though there is no evidence within the text of this play to suggest that the gods behave in the ways that Neoptolemus thinks they do, he nonetheless demonstrates a belief in a divinely-ordained world. The best possible way to make sense of the seven points above is to infer that the gods want Philoctetes to be healed (because they are just, and justice demands ending the pain they inflicted on Philoctetes), which can only happen at Troy (where the Asclepiades are), and that the gods want Troy to fall (because justice demands punishing Troy for Paris' actions). In light of all this, the only morally good way to make all of these things happen is to persuade Philoctetes to come willingly. This leaves the issue of when these things will happen, which cannot be entirely rationalized in this way, but it is not a huge leap to assume that the prophecy will be fulfilled once the terms are met. That is to say, once Philoctetes is healthy and at Troy, with his invincible bow, then all the requisite elements are in place and Troy can be captured. If we understand τοῦ παρεστῶτος θέρους in the sense it occurs in Thucydides, as the campaigning season, we are left with a fairly innocuous assumption on Neoptolemus' part: if you come with me (as I feel sure you will, since it accords with all these divine plans), Troy will fall in this season (i.e. pretty soon).

As I have suggested about the previous plays in this section, I do not think that there is a right or wrong interpretation here. Instead, I would like to focus on the ambiguity itself and suggest that it is purposeful, and that Sophocles is intentionally leaving this an open question. The more palatable reading here (though it requires quite a lot more interpretive work to make it logically coherent) is that Neoptolemus remains true to his straightforward, honest nature and resists the corrupting influence of Odysseus. This reading gains a great deal of support from the end of the play, in which Heracles appears and offers a divine perspective on the events that have transpired.

In the only extant Sophoclean example of a *deus ex machina*, Heracles resolves the play's conflict and in the process, clears up exactly what the future holds. Here, the information is not conveyed through Odysseus, so if we were looking for an accurate version of the prophecy, Heracles might be our best option, though he does not claim to be recounting what Helenus said. Nonetheless, we have an accurate account of the future, and we can assume (at a minimum) that whatever Helenus said does not contradict Heracles' version:

I421	καὶ σοί, σάφ' ἴσθι, τοῦτ' ὀφείλεται παθεῖν, ἐκ τῶν πόνων τῶνδ' εὐκλεᾶ θέσθαι βίον. ἐλθὼν δὲ σὺν τῶνδ' ἀνδρὶ πρὸς τὸ Τρωικὸν πόλισμα πρῶτον μὲν νόσου παύση λυγρᾶς,	And for you, know this well, it is owed to suffer this, and to make your life well-famed, from these sufferings. After you go with this man to the Trojan city, first you will be healed from your mournful disease, distinguished as the first in virtue out of the
I425	ἀρετῇ τε πρῶτος ἐκκριθεὶς στρατεύματος, Πάριν μὲν, ὃς τῶνδ' αἴτιος κακῶν ἔφυ, τόξοισι τοῖς ἐμοῖσι νοσφιεῖς βίου, πέρσεις τε Τροίαν, σκῦλά τ' ἐς μέλαθρα σὰ πέμπεις, ἀριστεῖ' ἐκλαβὼν στρατεύματος,	army, and Paris, who is the cause of these evils, you will rob him of life with my arrows, and you will sack Troy, and having received the best items from the army, you will send home spoils to your home, to the heights of Oeta, your fatherland, to your father
I430	Ποίαντι πατρὶ πρὸς πάτρας Οἴτης πλάκα. ἅ δ' ἂν λάβῃς σὺ σκῦλα τοῦδε τοῦ στρατοῦ, τόξων ἐμῶν μνημεῖα πρὸς πυρὰν ἐμὴν κόμιζε. καὶ σοὶ ταῦτ', Ἀχιλλέως τέκνον, παρήνεο· οὔτε γὰρ σὺ τοῦδ' ἄτερ σθένεις	Poetas. And those things you receive as spoils from that army, bring a remembrance of my bow to my pyre. And these things I counsel are for you also, child of Achilles. For you are not strong enough to take the Trojan plain without this man, nor him without you,
I435	ἐλείν τὸ Τροίας πεδῖον οὔθ' οὔτος σέθεν ἀλλ' ὡς λέοντε συννόμω φυλάσσετον οὔτος σὲ καὶ σὺ τόνδ'. ἐγὼ δ' Ἀσκληπιὸν πανστῆρα πέμπω σῆς νόσου πρὸς Ἴλιον. τὸ δεύτερον γὰρ τοῖς ἐμοῖς αὐτὴν χρεῶν	but as two lions partnered, you must guard him and he must guard you. But I will send Asclepius to Troy for the healing of your sickness, for it is fated to be taken a second time by my arrows. And know this:
I440	τόξοις ἀλῶναι. τοῦτο δ' ἐννοεῖθ', ὅταν πορθῆτε γαῖαν, εὐσεβεῖν τὰ πρὸς θεοῦς· ὡς τᾶλλα πάντα δεύτερ' ἠγεῖται πατήρ Ζεὺς. οὐ γὰρ ἠυσέβεια συνθνήσκει βροτοῖς· κἂν ζῶσι κἂν θάνωσιν, οὐκ ἀπόλλυται.	when you sack the land, be pious toward the things of the gods, since Father Zeus considers all other things to be secondary to them. For piety does not die with mortals. Whether live or die, piety does not pass away.
I421-I444		

If we were not sure about what to make of Neoptolemus' previous speech, he is now vindicated by the words of the divine Heracles. Though we cannot know with any certainty what Helenus did or did not say, since all of his words have been filtered through Odysseus, the best reading here seems to be that Heracles is transmitting a different yet complementary prophecy. On

several different points, Heracles echoes Neoptolemus' words (shown below), suggesting that any inferences that Neoptolemus made on these points were correct, whether or not Helenus included any of them in his original prophecy.

Neoptolemus	Heracles
κλέος (1347)	εὐκλεᾶ (1422)
καὶ τοῖν παρ' ἡμῖν ἐντυχῶν Ἀσκληπίδαιν / νόσου μαλαχθῆς τῆσδε (1333-4)	ἐγὼ δ' Ἀσκληπιὸν / παυστήρα πέμψω σῆς νόσου πρὸς Ἴλιον (1437-8)
καὶ τὰ πέργαμα / ξὺν τοῖσδε τόξοις ξὺν τ' ἐμοὶ πέρσας φανῆς (1334-5) Cf. Odysseus: οὐτ' ἂν σὺ κείνων χωρὶς οὐτ' ἐκεῖνα σοῦ (115)	οὔτε γὰρ σὺ τοῦδ' ἄτερ σθένεις / ἐλεῖν τὸ Τροίας πεδῖον οὔθ' οὔτος σέθεν (1434-5)
Ἑλλήνων ἕνα / κριθέντ' ἄριστον (1344-5)	ἀρετῇ τε πρῶτος ἐκκριθεὶς στρατεύματος (1425)

Neoptolemus' piety is even implicitly included here, since Heracles ends with an admonition for the men to sack Troy while remaining reverent toward the gods (εὐσεβεῖν τὰ πρὸς θεούς, 1441).

Heracles does not confirm all of the elements of Neoptolemus' speech, but he does confirm enough that it makes Neoptolemus seem credible and generally dissuades us from questioning the rest of his account.

To conclude, I take no issue with the dominant interpretation of this play, in which Neoptolemus resists the corrupting influence of Odysseus and instead takes a noble, honest course of action which is sanctioned by Heracles at the end of the play. We must recognize, however, that when closely examined, this reading requires either that we suspend disbelief and overlook some apparently logical gaps in the play or that we impute a great number of logical assumptions to Neoptolemus. I tend to prefer the latter option. However, my particular interest is that by tracing the accounts of Helenus' prophecy, a different interpretation is also available—this alternative version suggests a much more cynical understanding of the play. When an infallible prophecy is entrusted to a rhetorically skilled man with a flexible moral compass, such as Odysseus, tricks of language begin to obscure and corrupt the truth. While all is set right in the end, with the arrival of Heracles, Neoptolemus' speech at 1324ff. hints at a different potential outcome. This alternative (unrealized) account taps into many of the deep social anxieties in Athens at the time when this play would have been performed—anxieties about sophists, moral relativism, rhetoric, and the deceptive power of language. These tensions appear throughout, and deception and language are a pervasive theme of the play as a whole, but the prophecy is a place where these issues intersect and have great import. As I have noted about the other plays in this chapter, the stakes of these sorts of

linguistic questions are simply higher with prophecy, and prophecy is a markedly different sort of speech which attracts particular attention because of that difference. Prophecy in a range of forms turns out to be an ideal place to explore questions of language, precisely because prophetic speech is always true in some sense, but it can nonetheless give a very misleading impression—the inverse of words in the hands of Hesiod’s Muses (*Theog.* 27-8) or a well-trained sophist. Examinations of rhetoric and prophecy pair nicely together.

### **Building a Prophecy in the *Oedipus at Colonus***

I have saved the *Oedipus at Colonus* for last because it is different from the rest of Sophocles’ plays in several ways. This is one of the few extant plays of Sophocles’ which can be said to have a happy ending (a distinction shared only with the *Philoctetes*), and several of the other differences are intrinsically connected to this fact. Oedipus is not at tragic odds with the gods in this play, but instead he is a man who is transitioning toward something more than human. His blindness connects him to Tiresias and to prophecy, but we will see that, at least in some ways, he actually surpasses Tiresias as a prophet over the course of this play, since his transition does not end with his role as a prophet. Instead, he ends this play as a hero who transcends his own mortality. This play, unlike all the other extant Sophoclean tragedies, highlights effective communication from the gods that is not vague, ambiguous, or misleading. As such, it is a fitting play to conclude this chapter, since it features a successful and effective counterexample to the failed divine communication that has occurred in the other plays I have examined here.

Before beginning with literary analysis, it will be worth looking at the historical and biographical details of this play, at least briefly. This play, perhaps more than any other, invites us to make connections between the events of the play and the poet’s life. This may be because this is one of only two plays for which we have a reasonably secure date,<sup>328</sup> but even without a date, the content of the play would allow for a great deal of biographical speculation. I do not intend to engage with the specific details of these arguments, or the overarching issue of how much we can trust the biographical tradition, but these debates necessarily complicate any attempt to make sense

---

<sup>328</sup> Though the performance date of 401 BCE is secure, it should at least be acknowledged that the date of composition is far less secure. Suggested dates range from 411 BCE (Campbell 1891: 209) to his death in 406/5 BCE. Though imprecise, there is nonetheless widespread consensus that the play was composed between 409 and 406 BCE.

of this play.<sup>329</sup> This play is also the last of Sophocles' plays, written late in his life, and it positions itself almost as a sequel to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, though it is not exactly a sequel. These facts, especially when combined with the contemporary resonances for Athenian political and religious life, make for a complicated play that resists a simple interpretation. Further, since prophecies and oracles (and direct divine speech, as well as supernatural events) are woven throughout the entirety of this play, my analysis here will necessarily be longer and more chronological than the other sections of this chapter have been.

### Lines 84-110: A New Oedipus and a New Oracle

A useful starting point will be the presence and impact of Apollo's words throughout this text. Very early on, this play generally situates itself in relation to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Though this play is not properly a sequel to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, this version of Oedipus calls to mind the Oedipus from the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, particularly when he addresses the Eumenides and asks for their cooperation in fulfilling Apollo's oracle—a particularly detailed and elaborate oracle:

85	ὦ πότνια δεινῶπες, εὔτε νῦν ἔδρας πρώτων ἐφ' ὑμῶν τῆσδε γῆς ἔκαμψ' ἐγῶ, Φοῖβω τε κάμοι μὴ γένησθ' ἀγνώμονες, ὅς μοι, τὰ πόλλ' ἐκεῖν' ὅτ' ἐξέχρη κακά, ταύτην ἔλεξε παῦλαν ἐν χρόνῳ μακρῷ, ἐλθόντι χώραν τερμίαν, ὅπου θεῶν	Dread-eyed goddesses, since the first place in this land where I have bent my knee is your seat, do not be unkind to me and Phoebus—who, when he prophesied those many terrible evils, he told me that this would be my resting place, after a long stretch of time, for me when I came to the land that
90	σεμνῶν ἔδραν λάβοιμι καὶ ξενόσταςιν, ἐνταῦθα κάμψειν τὸν ταλαίπωρον βίον, κέρδη μὲν οἰκήσαντα τοῖς δεδεγμένοις, ἄτην δὲ τοῖς πέμψασιν, οἳ μ' ἀπήλασαν· σημεῖα δ' ἤξιεν τῶνδ' ἐμοὶ παρηγγύα, ἢ σεισμόν, ἢ βροντὴν τιν', ἢ Διὸς σέλας.	would be my final home, where I would find a seat of the Semnai Theai, a refuge for foreigners, and there I will round the final bend of my long- suffering life, dwelling as a benefit to those who welcomed me, but destruction for those who sent me off, who drove me away. He shared this with me, that there will be signs of these things, either an earthquake or some sort of thunder, or the lightning of Zeus. Now I recognize that along this
95	ἔγνωκα μὲν νῦν ὡς με τῆνδε τὴν ὁδὸν οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅπως οὐ πιστὸν ἐξ ὑμῶν πτερόν ἐξήγαγ' ἐς τὸδ' ἄλσος. οὐ γὰρ ἂν ποτε πρώταισιν ὑμῖν ἀντέκυσ' ὁδοιπορῶν,	journey, some trusty omen from you has assuredly led me to this grove. For I would never have met you first, otherwise, in my travels—me, sober, and you, who are without wine, and I would never have sat on this sacred seat which is unworked by men.
100	νήφων ἀοίνοις, κάπι σεμνὸν ἐζόμεν βάθρον τόδ' ἀσκέπαρνον. ἀλλὰ μοι, θεαί, βίου κατ' ὀμφᾶς τὰς Ἀπόλλωνος δότε πέρασιν ἤδη καὶ καταστροφὴν τινα, εἰ μὴ δοκῶ τι μειόνως ἔχειν, ἀεὶ	Then, goddesses, in accordance with the words of Apollo, give me some end and some closure to my life. Unless I seem in some way to be of less worth, toiling ever in my woes which are the most extreme of all mortals.
105	μόχθοις λατρεύων τοῖς ὑπερτάτοις βροτῶν. ἴτ', ὦ γλυκεῖται παῖδες ἀρχαίου Σκότου, ἴτ', ὦ μεγίστης Παλλάδος καλούμεναι πασῶν Ἀθῆναι τιμιωτάτη πόλις, οἰκτίρατ' ἀνδρὸς Οἰδίπου τόδ' ἄθλιον	Come, sweet children of ancient darkness! Come, you who are called Athens, after Pallas, the most honored city of all, take pity on this wretched shade
110	εἶδωλον· οὐ γὰρ δὴ τό γ' ἀρχαῖον δέμας.	

84-110

<sup>329</sup> See Markanantos 2007: 1-21 and 30ff. in the context of this play. See also Scodel 2012 on Sophocles' biography more generally.

		of the man Oedipus. For this is indeed not the former body of mine.
--	--	---

The audience, at this point, must determine how closely this play relates to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. On the one hand, Oedipus describes his past woes in a way that certainly suggests a connection, with τὰ πόλλ' ἐκεῖν' ὄτ' ἐξέχρη κακά (87), but this oracle is fundamentally incompatible with the story of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. This oracle is worded in a clear and readily intelligible way, which already distinguishes it from Apollo's oracles in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Further, it would be almost impossibly strange to think that Oedipus received this additional oracular information and yet somehow omitted it completely for the entirety of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

I point these inconsistencies out, not in the interest of pedantically criticizing these lines, but rather to highlight the interpretive decisions that the audience needs to make at the start of this play. How much of this Oedipus' backstory can they supply from the *Oedipus Tyrannus*? How many of Sophocles' mythological innovations should be assumed at the play's open?<sup>330</sup> What sort of relationship should we imagine between *this* Oedipus and *this* Apollo? Does Oedipus still think that Apollo has brought about his terrible fate? Does he feel any sort of antipathy toward the god?

To return to the prophecy, we can see that Apollo seems to have told Oedipus about *this* respite (ταύτην παῦλαν, 88), which will involve “a seat of the Semnai Theai, a refuge for foreigners, and there I will round the final bend of my long-suffering life, dwelling as a benefit to those who welcomed me, but destruction for those who sent me off, who drove me away.” This παῦλαν will be accompanied with some sort of sign from Zeus (earthquake, thunder, lightning). Oedipus concludes that his presence in the grove of the Eumenides, on the prophesied seat, means that he has found his final resting place. He then beseeches the Eumenides to give him some sort of πέρασιν and καταστροφήν of his life, according to Apollo's proclamations (κατ' ὀμφὰς τὰς Ἀπόλλωνος, 102), unless he does not seem worthy of their blessing, since he has been brought low by his trials and misfortunes (εἰ μὴ δοκῶ τι μείονως ἔχειν, ἀεὶ / μόχθοις λατρεύων τοῖς ὑπερτάτοις βροτῶν, 104-5).

We have, then, the basic terms of this oracle, but we must immediately address the tension here between the authority and power of the Eumenides and Apollo. If Apollo says that Oedipus

---

<sup>330</sup> See Markantonatos 2007: 21ff. on the degree of innovation which this play may involve (with bibliography). I tend to think that a great deal of this plot is Sophoclean innovation, though as Scodel 1984: 107 notes, the legend is not entirely unattested, as it is mentioned at Eur. *Phoen.* 1705-7 (though the authenticity of these lines has been questioned).

will reach the final turn of his life (ἔλεξε...ἐνταῦθα κάμψειν τὸν ταλαίπωρον βίον, 88, 91), then perhaps the cooperation of the Eumenides is not necessary. However, it seems that the cooperation of the Eumenides is very much necessary, given how much Oedipus tries to ingratiate himself to them. It is worth noting here that, as in so many other oracles that I have examined in this chapter, the actual terms of this oracle do not prove particularly important. This play serves to establish Oedipus as a cult hero and to provide an aetiology for his connection to the Eumenides—though the details of this connection are not entirely clear,<sup>331</sup> the audience could well have assumed that Oedipus would find favor with the Eumenides throughout the course of this play. The question of the play, then, becomes one of how he would find that favor.

That being said, it is still worth exploring how Oedipus presents Apollo's oracle, since there is no reason why Apollo and the Eumenides need ever have been in tension. Lines 101-5 highlight these competing sources of authority, lest we overlook this potential source of conflict. How, then, to make sense of this strange oracular formulation? A possible solution here is to understand Apollo as offering a sort of oracular conditional: if you are accepted in death in the grove of the Eumenides (as further terms, we might specify “if the Eumenides allow it” and “if the Athenians allow it”), then you will bless that land and curse Thebes. On this reading, we must understand ἐλθόντι (89) and in particular οἰκήσαντα (92) as circumstantial participles with conditional force.<sup>332</sup> This requires moving away from a more temporal reading, as we see in both Jebb's “on reaching my goal in a land...there I should close my weary life, with profit, through my having fixed my abode there, for those who received me” and Lloyd-Jones' “when I came to the land that was my final bourne...I should there reach the goal of my long-suffering life, bringing advantage by my settlement to those who had received me.” Instead, we must understand this to mean something more akin to “*if* I came to my ultimate land . . .there I would cross the finish line of my long-suffering life, a profit to those who accepted me, *if* I made my home there.”

As I noted above, this all proves to be a moot point, since all these things do happen, as

---

<sup>331</sup> See Scodel 2006 on the cult worship at Colonus. The Semnai Theai were undoubtedly worshipped there, though she notes that the religious lore was likely obscure to the audience of this play. She concludes that it “is thus likeliest that Sophocles combined a local legend of Oedipus' death with a local cult of the Semnai, deliberately evoking the more famous cult of the Areopagus” (Scodel 2006: 73).

<sup>332</sup> This reading is not dependent on a conditional sense for ἐλθόντι, but really only οἰκήσαντα, though the χώραν τερμίων does seem at least somewhat contingent on the Eumenides and the Athenians allowing it to be τερμίων for Oedipus. That can be satisfactorily resolved by understanding τερμίων to be proleptic, as Jebb suggests (*ad loc.*), but a conditional reading provides a reading that is at least as good, if not better, and which provides a certain symmetry with a conditional οἰκήσαντα.



Apollo's oracular prediction suggested that they would. Before moving on, however, I would like to note a few things about this presentation of Apollo's oracle. First, we have several terms that are best understood proleptically. The setting of this opening scene is a location that is described as *τερμῖαν* (89) and a *ξενόστασιν* (90). From the very opening scene, this play is oriented toward its inevitable outcome, in which the land will be Oedipus' final resting place.

Second, as scholars have noted,<sup>333</sup> this play is steeped in intertextuality. The most obvious intertext is *Oedipus Tyrannus* (and, to a lesser degree, *Antigone*), to which I will return. It is also worth noting that this play is situated mythologically before Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, though it was staged chronologically after. This means that, although the audience was undoubtedly familiar with the plot of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, in the mythical world of this play, the Eumenides are not yet integrated into the Athenian cult landscape. In light of this, it is curious that they are named as *τὰς πάνθ' ὀρώσας Εὐμενίδας* at line 42, though the Stranger does concede that they go by other names elsewhere (*ἄλλα δ' ἀλλαχοῦ καλά*, 43). As the potential conflict between Apollo and the Eumenides does not ever materialize, we are also reminded of Aeschylus' version. A mythical generation or two before Orestes, Colonus already seems to have domesticated or somehow appeased the Semnai Theai. While Colonus is clearly associated closely with Athens in this play, the role of the Eumenides here raises interesting intertextual questions.<sup>334</sup>

As a final point, we have a very different sort of oracle than we saw in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Returning to the question of intertextuality, I would like to suggest that we may not have a different oracle, per se, but rather a different Oedipus. Oedipus is at the edge of death (a liminal place in which prophetic powers often appear), and due to his imminent apotheosis as well as his characterization as a prophet throughout this play (e.g., 452-4, 1075, 1080, 1425, 1516, *et al.*), Oedipus is no longer fully mortal. As a prophet of sorts, he does not have any trouble interpreting oracles, which is to be expected from a prophet. In this sense, this version of Oedipus is not incompatible with the Oedipus of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, though the differences between the two versions of Oedipus are striking, as they were surely meant to be. For my purposes, the most significant difference between the two Oedipuses is found in an examination of how Oedipus interprets and interacts with the oracles that occur throughout this play.

---

<sup>333</sup> See chiefly Markantonatos 2002 and 2007.

<sup>334</sup> On this point, see Scodel 2006. Sophocles is not overtly challenging Aeschylus' account, but his account does obviate and undermine the events of the *Eumenides*. If the Semnai Theai are already worshipped in Colonus, then the appeasement of the Furies and the establishment of the Areopagus is less significant.

## Lines 335-420: Ismene and the New Oracles

It is with Ismene's arrival that we see a new oracle introduced. She brings τοῖς νῦν μαντεύμασιν (387). The content of these latest oracles is:

389	σὲ τοῖς ἐκεῖ ζητητὸν ἀνθρώποις ποτὲ θανόντ' ἔσεσθαι ζῶντά τ' εὐσείας χάριν...	That you will one day be sought after by the people there, dead and living, for the sake of their safety...
392	ἐν σοὶ τὰ κείνων φασὶ γίγνεσθαι κράτη. 389-90, 392	They say that their power will rest in you.

Here, we start to see the content of these oracles, though we also see the same convoluted transmission process that has occurred with oracles in other plays (in particular, the *Ajax*, where the line between Calchas' prophetic words and the words of the messenger is not at all clear). The subject of φασὶ remains ambiguous, as does the referent of κείνων. Jebb understands φασὶ as an impersonal "it is said," and Lloyd-Jones' "they say that their power will depend on you" retains a great deal of the ambiguity in the English. If there is a specific subject, the options would seem to be the θεωροί who conveyed these prophecies (introduced grammatically only at 413, but already known to Ismene, and perhaps supplied by her), οἱ ἐκεῖ ἄνθρωποι (presumably the Theban people as a whole), or (admittedly, less likely) just Creon and Eteocles or even Eteocles and Polynices. To further complicate the line, the use of κείνων instead of ἑαυτῶν should mean that it refers to a different group of people than the subject of φασὶ, and to complicate it yet further still, οἱ ἐκεῖ ἄνθρωποι holds two different possibilities with it, since it could refer to the Theban people now, or the future Thebans. I do not know of any parallels which would indicate whether "current Thebans" and "future Thebans" are grammatically felt to be different enough that one could be the subject of φασὶ and the other could be the referent of κείνων (in which case, the sentence could read "The current Thebans say that the power of the future Thebans will depend on you"). Context suggests that the only options for a referent here are οἱ ἐκεῖ ἄνθρωποι (present and future) and Creon and Eteocles. This generates ten possible combinations for this single line (I have omitted the groups of Thebans, future and present, but their inclusion would increase the number to fourteen):

Subject of φασὶ	Referent of κείνων
Impersonal	οἱ ἐκεῖ ἄνθρωποι
	Eteocles and Polynices
	Creon and Eteocles

Θεωροί	οἱ ἐκεῖ ἄνθρωποι
	Eteocles and Polynices
	Creon and Eteocles
οἱ ἐκεῖ ἄνθρωποι	<del>οἱ ἐκεῖ ἄνθρωποι</del>
	Eteocles and Polynices
	Creon and Eteocles
Creon and Eteocles	οἱ ἐκεῖ ἄνθρωποι
	Eteocles and Polynices
	<del>Creon and Eteocles</del>

I tend to think that Ismene means that the *μαντεύματα* (or perhaps the *θεωροί* — she does not seem to make a distinction between the two) say that the power of Creon and Eteocles depends on Oedipus, simply based on context. The language allows for many other interpretations though, and we cannot definitively rule any of these out, except for the two that are disqualified on grammatical grounds (they are crossed out above). As with so much of this play, however, the audience might well hear this line and understand it to be about Thebes as a whole, since that would be a far more politically resonant meaning for fifth-century Athenians. However, the linguistic and grammatical details have no bearing on the plot of the play and this complicated line can be glossed over, in large part. The specifics will, in the end, turn out to be somewhat unimportant. It is enough to know that someone said that Thebes' power will depend on Oedipus' grave. On those grounds, it is tempting to conclude that any close scrutiny of the language here is irrelevant, since the play's plot ignores these questions. However, Sophocles' language is precise and careful and, in other contexts, he consciously and carefully deploys verbal ambiguity. It would be foolish to think that this ambiguity is included accidentally or haphazardly, simply because the plot does not hinge on the proper interpretation of these words. As with the other ambiguous prophecies, a part of Sophocles' interest seems to be in exactly how language gives rise to ambiguity and how people then make sense of that ambiguity (a kind of unfolding and refolding of potential meanings that takes place at the intersection of syntactic and pragmatic conventions).

At this point, it is unclear how much of the oracle Oedipus actually understands. Ismene has told him that Thebes will want him *θανόντ' ... ζῶντά τ' εὐσοίας χάριν*. Oedipus seems not to have fully grasped the import of the oracle, since his response (*τίς δ' ἄν τοιοῦδ' ὑπ' ἀνδρὸς εὖ πράξειεν ἄν;*) picks up on the agency suggested by *εὐσοίας χάριν*. To have such agency, he thinks, he must surely be alive. This exchange as a whole does not flow very smoothly unless we supply some additional content to make sense of this exchange, as Oedipus seems to realize that this oracle has more to do with his death than his life. This process begins at line 393 (*ὅτ' οὐκέτ'*

εἰμί, τηνικαῦτ' ἄρ' εἴμ' ἀνήρ;), which must be understood as a concise expression of a much longer mental process. We should understand that line to be expressing something akin to: “Ah, hang on, you mentioned ‘they’ll want you dead...’ (σὲ τοῖς ζητητὸν ἀνθρώποις ποτὲ / θανόντ’). So, all of this is about me, but once I’m dead? I’ll be man indeed, once I no longer exist?” His concern cannot stem from fear or surprise about his death, since he is well aware that his death is imminent. Instead, his concern must stem either from alarm at the possibility of not dying where Apollo foretold or (and this option seems more likely, given the context here and his mention of being an ἀνήρ) that if he only achieves glory *after* he is dead, then it will not actually benefit him in any way. To this, Ismene’s response (νῦν γὰρ θεοὶ σ’ ὀρθοῦσι, πρόσθε δ’ ὥλλυσαν) must be understood as a similarly condensed expression that conveys a more elaborate message of this sort: “Yes, and this doesn’t diminish your role or your honor—you are and will be an honored man. Don’t despair. Things are turning around for you—this is good news!” Oedipus has a better understanding of the prophecy at this point, but there is still a great deal that he does not know about these new prophecies from Apollo.

As Ismene shares more about this prophecy, she blurs the line between the oracle—which, presumably, she transmits verbatim—and her own interpretations and observations. She goes on to tell Oedipus what events are about to transpire and specifies that Creon will arrive *soon*, with the intention of controlling Oedipus’ grave without allowing him back into his homeland. This is not a part of the oracle, but is the proposed Theban response to the content of the oracle (τούτων χάριν):

396	καὶ μὴν Κρέοντά γ' ἴσθι σοι τούτων χάριν ἤξοντα βαιοῦ κοῦχι μυρίου χρόνου.	Know that because of these things, Creon will come to you soon, not after a long time
399	... ὥς σ' ἄγχι γῆς στήσωσι Καδμείας, ὅπως κρατῶσι μὲν σοῦ, γῆς δὲ μὴ ἔμβαίνης ὄρων. 396-7, 399-400	... So they can place you near the Cadmean land, so they can control you, but you will not cross over the boundaries of the land

Here, she provides the Theban solution to the (not yet fully explained) terms of the oracle: the Thebans will attempt to put Oedipus *near* Thebes so they can control him without him actually being *in* Thebes. All that Oedipus has heard so far is that he will be ζητητὸν (both in life and death) and that some sort of power will depend on him (ἐν σοὶ). He has, quite naturally, concluded that Thebes will want to possess his body—what other outcome would result from them seeking him for the power that rests with him? Ismene has to clarify that Thebes has a different plan.

Oedipus here must reconsider what he thinks he knows, which we see playing out in line 401: ἢ δ' ὠφέλησις τίς θύρασι κειμένου; “But what benefit is there from me laying in a foreign land?” is the

culmination of all the assumptions that Oedipus has made.

To clear up this confusion, Ismene needs to elaborate further, and provide some of the details of the oracle that she has not yet shared. She explains that the issue is the safety of his tomb, not its possession. That is to say, his bones do not seem to be some sort of magical talisman that will keep Thebes safe and victorious by their presence in the city. Instead, the tomb needs to be protected from any sort of violation that could occur in the future:

402	Ἴσμήνη κείνοις ὁ τύμβος δυστυχῶν ὁ σὸς βαρύς. Οἰδίπους κἄνευ θεοῦ τις τοῦτό γ' ἂν γνώμη μάθοι. Ἴσμήνη	Ismene Your tomb, if it does not receive honors, will weigh heavy on them. Oedipus Someone might learn that just by using their brain, without the god.
405	τούτου χάριν τοίνυν σε προσθέσθαι πέλας χώρας θέλουσι, μηδ' ἴν' ἂν σαυτοῦ κρατοῖς. Οἰδίπους ἧ καὶ κατασκιῶσι Θηβαία κόνει; Ἴσμήνη ἀλλ' οὐκ ἔα τοῦμφυλον αἰμά γ', ὦ πάτερ. Οἰδίπους οὐκ ἄρ' ἐμοῦ γε μὴ κρατήσωσιν ποτε. Ἴσμήνη	Ismene It is for this reason that they want to place you nearby their land, and not where you would control yourself. Oedipus Will they even cover me over in Theban dust? Ismene Kindred bloodshed does not allow it, father.
410	ἔσται ποτ' ἄρα τοῦτο Καδμείοις βάρος. Οἰδίπους ποίας φανείσης, ὦ τέκνον, συναλλαγῆς; Ἴσμήνη τῆς σῆς ὑπ' ὀργῆς, σοῖς ὅταν στῶσιν τάφοις. 402-411	Oedipus Then they will never control me! Ismene That will weight heavy on the Cadmeans. Oedipus When what conjuncture has come to light, child? Ismene By your anger, when they come up against your tomb!

Ismene has begun by redirecting the attention to his tomb—if his tomb is not honored properly and does not receive due rites (ὁ τύμβος δυστυχῶν), then it will be a serious problem for the Thebans (ὁ σὸς βαρύς). Oedipus here assumes that his body will now be interred in Thebes, as Jebb notes.<sup>335</sup> Oedipus is unconcerned that this conflicts directly with the previous prophecy about finding his final resting place in the grove of the Eumenides, so long as this new oracle has come from Apollo. Apollo, it would seem, can overrule himself without any concerns about impiety. If Oedipus' fate has changed, as Ismene has suggested that it has, then he can hope that perhaps he can return to Thebes after all. This must be the source of his confusion, since he cannot understand

<sup>335</sup> Jebb (*ad loc.*) traces this process nicely: “He is thinking of a restoration to his Theban home (395) ... ‘They will suffer,’ she replies, ‘if your tomb is neglected.’ Oedipus does not see the force of this answer: he still infers (from θανόντα in 390) that, whatever may be his doom in life, he is at least to be *buried* at Thebes...Remark that he was supposing Apollo’s former decree (91) to have been cancelled by this later one (389). He now sees that the new oracle does *not* cancel the former, but merely confirms it in one aspect, viz. in the promise of ἄτην δὲ τοῖς πέμψασιν (93).”

what Thebes would stand to gain from merely burying him *near* Thebes, which would not fulfill the oracle as he understands it. Ismene recognizes his hope that he will return to Thebes, and gently introduces ὁ τύμβος, as a way of segueing into the news that he will never be able to return to the home from which he has been exiled.

After the gentle mention of ὁ τύμβος, Oedipus points out that *of course* Thebes will have problems if his grave is mistreated. For Thebes to neglect the grave of their former king would be impious, but that impiety would only be compounded by Eteocles' and Polynices' failure to honor their father's grave. He does not need a god to tell him what basic religious reverence dictates, he tells Ismene. Built into this rebuke, however, is his persistent assumption that his grave will be in Thebes. If Thebes is responsible for his grave, he reasons, then his grave must surely be *in* Thebes. Ismene must again intervene and point out that this is precisely why they want to bury him nearby, so they can oversee his grave and make sure that it is not defiled and that its rites are not neglected. In death, then, Oedipus would not be able to exact any sort of revenge on Thebes, which must surely be the implication of μηδ' ἴν' ἄν σαυτοῦ κρατοῖς (405). This exchange only properly makes sense if Oedipus' wrath and even agency can be averted if Thebes protects and tends to Oedipus' grave—the grave alone, not Oedipus' shade.

This is when Oedipus realizes that Thebes does not mean to bury him in his native soil (ἧ καὶ κατασκιῶσι Θηβαία κόνει;), which is prohibited by τοῦμφυλον αἵμά.<sup>336</sup> Oedipus now realizes that Thebes is attempting only to control him and not to honor him—he refuses Thebes with the line οὐκ ἄρ' ἐμοῦ γε μὴ κρατήσωσίν ποτε, drawing out the import of all this. Thebes is only concerned about controlling him, which he has now understood. This portion of the conversation comes almost full circle, as Ismene tell him that this will be Καδμείους βάρος (409), which echoes her use of κείνοις...βαρύς at line 402. Finally, this piece of the puzzling oracle is clear.

In this scene, Ismene explains this oracle in a very slow, piecemeal fashion. As traced in this passage, her assumptions and expectations are not the same as those of Oedipus. She knows the oracle and in her haste to share the most important elements of it, she omits relevant details. When

---

<sup>336</sup> One might here note that this firm policy on τοῦμφυλον αἵμά does not get evenly applied to deaths in the Labdacid family, since Eteocles is not denied burial after he kills Polynices. There are, of course, many plausible reasons that might explain Creon's apparent hypocrisy, and many other reasons why one should not treat separate tragedies as though they are part of one overarching, internally consistent mythic plot continuum. Leaving aside all these arguments, I will note only that neither Oedipus nor Ismene sees any problem with this claim about τοῦμφυλον αἵμά.

Oedipus misunderstands, she recognizes his (flawed) inferences and she corrects him, explaining what went wrong with his assumptions and guiding him to the correct interpretation. This is a rare moment when an oracle is accurately and effectively conveyed, and it stands in stark contrast to so many other instances of failed communication that surround oracles in Sophocles. We might think that this is really communication between two mortals, and effective communication is not so noteworthy when it involves two mortals, but in the lines which immediately follow this passage, this oracle is explicitly connected to Apollo and Delphi:

412	Οἰδίπους ἅ δ' ἐννέπεις, κλυοῦσα τοῦ λέγεις, τέκνον; Ἴσμήνη ἀνδρῶν θεωρῶν Δελφικῆς ἀφ' ἐστίας. Οἰδίπους καὶ ταῦτ' ἐφ' ἡμῖν Φοῖβος εἰρηκῶς κυρεῖ; Ἴσμήνη	Oedipus These things you are saying...from whom did you learn what you're saying, child? Ismene From men, <i>theoroí</i> ; from the Delphic hearth. Oedipus And Phoebus really said these things about me? Ismene
415	ὥς φασιν οἱ μολόντες ἐς Θήβης πέδον. 412-5	That's what the men who came back to the Theban land say.

This is precisely the sort of situation which, in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, would complicate and foil effective communication. Oedipus and Apollo have a very different, more cooperative relationship in this play, however, which heightens the contrast between oracular communication in these two plays.

As we move into the rest of this play, I will suggest that the critical difference is that Oedipus—nearing, as he is, the moment of his death—is moving toward a sort of superhuman status, and this is the reason that oracles are no longer so misleading for him. As I will show in the following passages, Oedipus regularly described as a prophet in this play. Unlike in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, when Oedipus was overtly hostile to Tiresias and prophets in general, this Oedipus has become more like a prophet himself, and as a result, he is able to process and understand divine language in a way that only Sophoclean prophets (but not mere Sophoclean mortals) are able to do.

### Oedipus, Prophecy, and Curses

There is ample speculation about what meaning we should take from the end of the play. Was Oedipus apotheosized? Did he die? While I do not intend to stake a firm claim on these questions, it is worth noting a few uncontroversial things about the Oedipus myth. We know that Oedipus received hero cult and that he was closely associated with the Eumenides, though this is

only attested at the Areopagus.<sup>337</sup> It is clear, however, that a superhuman Oedipus is not without precedent.

In the context of this play, Oedipus is more explicitly likened to a prophet. His tomb will have some sort of protective power, but while he lives, he is described as having special interpretive powers. First, Oedipus describes himself as τῆσδέ τε / μαντεῖ' ἀκούων and συνοῶν τε θέσφατα παλαίφαθ' (452-4). Later, Oedipus describes himself with προμῦνάταί (1075) and μάντις εἴμ' ἐσθλῶν ἀγῶνων (1080), in addition to disavowing any accusations that he might be a ψευδόμαντις (1095). Further, Antigone refers to Oedipus' words with μαντεύμαθ' (1425) as well as ἐθέσπισεν (1428). Finally, Oedipus is able to recognize the sign that his death approaches (τοῦ μόρου τεκμηρίω, 1510), which he describes as coming from the gods themselves (αὐτοὶ θεοὶ κήρυκες ἀγγέλλουσί μοι, / ψεύδοντες οὐδὲν σῆμα τῶν προκειμένων, 1511-2), and which consist of thunder and lightning coming directly from Zeus (1514-5). Finally, Theseus describes Oedipus with πολλὰ γάρ σε θεσπίζονθ' ὄρω (1516).

Taken together, we have a picture of Oedipus as both a seer in the older mode, as an interpreter of natural signs (thunder and lightning), as well as an interpreter of oracles and a giver of prophecy. Whatever interpretive failings he may have had earlier in his life, Oedipus now has clear access to a wide range of communications from the gods. We might be tempted to argue that this Oedipus is simply a different Oedipus character from the Oedipus of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and his ability to effectively understand divine communication is not so much a departure from his younger self as simply a feature of an entirely different character. As I noted earlier, questions of continuity and intertextuality are difficult to answer definitively, but I have argued, and will continue to argue, that this new and different Oedipus is the result of his proximity to death. He can understand oracles now because he is at the end of his life, which gives him a prophetic power. To strengthen this reading, I would like to examine another sort of speech which is also common among people nearing their deaths—curses. That Oedipus can not only interpret divine communication but also invoke curses suggests that his relationship to language has transcended that of a normal mortal in a way that is characteristic of people in the liminal space between life and death (*cf.* Heracles at the end of the *Trachiniae*).

At lines 1370-1396, Oedipus curses his sons with the following speech, which provides the

---

<sup>337</sup> For an overview of potential cult associations of Oedipus (though one which supposes a broader cultic range than what I am convinced of), see Edmunds 1981. See also Henrichs 1993.



standard mythological precedent for the story of the Seven against Thebes:

1370	τοιγάρ σ' ὁ δαίμων εισορᾷ μὲν οὐ τί πω ὡς αὐτίκ', εἴπερ οἶδε κινούνται λόχοι πρὸς ἄστν Θήβης. οὐ γὰρ ἔσθ' ὅπως πόλιν κείνην ἐρείψεις, ἀλλὰ πρόσθεν αἵματι πεσῆ μιανθεῖς χῶ ξύναιμος ἐξ ἴσου.	Therefore, the god looks at you, not yet how he will soon, if these troops move toward the Theban city. For it is not possible that you will topple that city, but before that you will fall, stained with bloodshed, and your kindred brother just the same. I hurled these curses at you before, and I call them down to be my allies now...
1375	τοιάσδ' ἄρας σφῶν πρόσθε τ' ἐξανῆκ' ἐγὼ νῦν τ' ἀνακαλοῦμαι ξυμμάχους ἐλθεῖν ἐμοί, ...	Therefore, these [sc. curses] overpower your supplication and your thrones, if in fact justice is seated with Zeus, according to the ancient customs. But you, be gone, spat out by your father, and fatherless now, vilest of the vile, taking these curses with you, which I invoke upon you, that you never conquer your native land with the spear and you never return home to low-lying Argos, but you die by kindred hand and kill the one by whom you were driven out. I pray such things, and I call on the hostile paternal shadows of Tartarus, that it might resettle you there. I call on these goddesses, and I call on Ares, who cast this terrible hatred into you both.
1380	τοιγάρ τὸ σὸν θάκημα καὶ τοὺς σοὺς θρόνους κρατοῦσιν, εἴπερ ἐστὶν ἡ παλαίφατος Δίκη ξύνεδρος Ζηνὸς ἀρχαίοις νόμοις. σὺ δ' ἔρρ' ἀπόπτυστός τε κάπᾶτωρ ἐμοῦ, κακῶν κάκιστε, τάσδε συλλαβῶν ἄρας,	
1385	ἄς σοι καλοῦμαι, μήτε γῆς ἐμφυλίου δόρει κρατῆσαι μήτε νοστήσαι ποτε τὸ κοῖλον Ἄργος, ἀλλὰ συγγενεῖ χερὶ θανεῖν κτανεῖν θ' ὑφ' οὐπὲρ ἐξελήλασαι. τοιαῦτ' ἀρῶμαι, καὶ καλῶ τὸ Ταρτάρου στνγνὸν πατρῶον ἔρεβος, ὡς σ' ἀποικίση, καλῶ δὲ τάσδε δαίμονας, καλῶ δ' Ἄρη τὸν σφῶν τὸ δεινὸν μῖσος ἐμβεβληκότα.	
1390		
1370-92		

This passage walks a fine line between a curse and a prophecy. Oedipus presents it very much as a curse, using ἀραί (1375, 1384) and ἀράομαι (1389) rather than a more neutral word to describe his utterances. To emphasize this vocabulary further, even though Ἄρης is not necessarily etymologically related to ἀραί, the use of Ἄρη at 1391 echoes these curse words and highlights that in this instance, his ἀραί will turn into Ἄρης.

However, what Oedipus calls curses are instead described by Antigone as prophecies (μαντεύμαθ' at 1425), and Polynices' response features another instance of etymological play. Though he refers only to Oedipus' wish or desire (χρήζει, 1426), χρήζω is etymologically related to χράω and at least one ancient thought that χρήζει should be understood as χρησιμωδεῖ here.<sup>338</sup> He does not explicitly call Oedipus' words a prophecy, but there are clear echoes of prophetic language here. Antigone reiterates this language in her response, referring to Oedipus' words as οἳ ἔθέσπισεν (1428).

This distinction persists, with some variation, throughout the rest of Antigone's conversation with Polynices. He maintains that he has no option but to lead an army against Thebes, knowing full well that it will mean his death. Though Antigone attempts to dissuade him, lamenting that he is rushing off to a foreseen death (ὀρμώμενον / εἰς προὔπτον Ἄιδην, 1439-40)

<sup>338</sup> See schol. vet. ad 1426: χρήζει ἐν ἴσῳ τῶ χρησιμωδεῖ. It is also worth noting that χρήζω is used once, by Euripides, as a by-form of χράω, at *Hel.* 516 (of Theonoe).

and at least implying that he might be able to avoid this fate if he acts differently, she cannot prevail upon him. His language here moves from εἰ χρή (1441) to ἄ μὴ δεῖ (1442) to ἐν τῷ δαίμονι (1443)—to Polynices, this is an outcome which he is powerless to avoid.

I have no interest in delving into the always sticky, insoluble question of fate and free will, but I am interested in the two distinct descriptions used for Oedipus' words. Prophecies and curses are both powerful types of language, and the two seem to merge into one in the form of Oedipus, as he approaches death. He utters a curse and then, as the play progresses, is seen to have prophesied the curse's fulfillment. It can be no mere coincidence that this extraordinarily powerful command of language occurs to a character who had so famously been a victim of language. This play offers a sort of redemption for Oedipus' character and it is entirely appropriate that his heroic end features a linguistic heroism that represents an inversion of his linguistically-tragic past.

### 602ff.: Oedipus Triumphant

Before returning to the oracle(s) woven through this play, let us briefly recap which details have already been revealed.

---

Oedipus has been told (by Apollo) that he will

- A. die in a place sacred to the Eumenides, where he will
- B. benefit the people of the land where he dies and
- C. bring ruin to those who exiled him

Further, Apollo told him that

- D. there will be signs of these things (σημεῖα δ' ἦξειν τῶνδέ, 94).

Once Ismene arrives, Oedipus learns that messengers were told (also by Apollo) that

Oedipus will be desired by the Thebans because

- E. The safety of Thebes will depend on him because
- F. Thebes will suffer if they attack the land in which Oedipus' tomb resides (σοῖς ὅταν στῶσιν τάφοις, 411)

---

With that in mind, let us now turn to the conversation between Oedipus and Theseus. Theseus is initially quite sympathetic to Oedipus' plight, since Theseus too lived a great deal of his life in exile from his homeland. It is only when Oedipus explains that he is asking for burial in Attica, but that his request is actually a somewhat bigger request than it initially seems, that Oedipus explains the full significance of the oracles to Theseus. This is not, however, just a recapitulation of what we have already heard. Instead, Oedipus adds more information about the

oracles:

616	καὶ ταῖσι Θήβαις εἰ τανῦν εὐήμερεῖ καλῶς τὰ πρὸς σέ, μυρίας ὁ μυρίος χρόνος τεκνοῦται νύκτας ἡμέρας τ' ἰών,	If things are now friendly and fine between you and Thebes, a great stretch of time brings forth many days and nights, as it passes, in which they will break asunder the harmonious pledges on some minor account. And then, my sleeping and buried corpse, cold by then, will drink their warm blood, if Zeus is yet Zeus and his son Phoebus is unerring.
620	δῶρει διασκεδῶσιν ἐκ σμικροῦ λόγου· ἴν' οὐμός εὐδῶν καὶ κεκρυμμένος νέκυς ψυχρός ποτ' αὐτῶν θερμὸν αἶμα πίεται, εἰ Ζεὺς ἔτι Ζεὺς χῶ Διὸς Φοῖβος σαφής.	
616-23		

Here, we see a synthesis of at least five of the six points laid out above. Though the oracle that the Thebans received suggests that Oedipus could conceivably be buried anywhere, prompting Creon and Polynices to seek him out, the oracle that Oedipus personally received from Apollo limits his options. The logical conclusion that accounts for all these (with the exception of point D) is that there will come a time when Thebes will attack Athens and at that time, Oedipus' grave will protect Athens and ensure their victory over Thebes. This much *could* be inferred from the facts that Oedipus already possesses, but none of the specifics could. There is no reason that this foretold conflict need happen in the distant future, as suggested by *μυρίας ὁ μυρίος / χρόνος τεκνοῦται νύκτας ἡμέρας τ' ἰών* and *οὐμός εὐδῶν καὶ κεκρυμμένος νέκυς / ψυχρός*. However, when Theseus and his men chase after Creon's men, what the Chorus envisions is something very close to a battle between Athens and Thebes, even though Theseus does not confirm the extent of the conflict. Is Oedipus wrong, then, about how these oracles will fit together?

We are left, at this point, with two possibilities: on the most basic level, either Oedipus is wrong or he is right. The implications of Oedipus being mistaken would change the overall tone of this play significantly—if Oedipus is not endowed with special knowledge and vision, and some sort of quasi-divine status, then what are we to make of any of the play? If Oedipus is not reliable in this moment, then does this call other claims of his into question? If the ending is not an endorsement of the actions and decisions of both Theseus and Oedipus, then we are left with a play that approaches deconstructionist nihilism, where there is no message in this play and traditional piety is something of a sham. Such a play would be both absurd and fascinating in a very postmodern way, but it seems fundamentally incompatible with all that we know about Sophocles. I address this possibility first, in the interest of dismissing it quickly.

That leaves us with the more palatable possibility that Oedipus is right. In this case, Thebes will indeed come up against his grave in the distant future, which necessitates that the whole Thebes-Athens conflict in the play must not “count,” in terms of the oracles, since this conflict

certainly does not match the description Oedipus provides.<sup>339</sup> Athens does prevail, but not because of Oedipus (or, not because of the power inherent in his bones and his grave, at any rate). Perhaps it is because Oedipus is not yet dead, and there is no grave against which to make a stand? Or perhaps Creon’s unambiguously villainous choice to kidnap Antigone and Ismene does not properly constitute an act on behalf of Thebes as a whole (thereby not ending the current state of εὐημερεῖ καλῶς). This is, I think, the strongest reading: this conflict within the play can serve to foreshadow future conflict(s) between Athens and Thebes without invalidating the specific details contained in Oedipus’ prediction.

This brings us back to the question of how Oedipus knows what he knows, since the level of detail he includes is more than mere reason and logic could have produced. Although, as noted in the previous section, Oedipus is certainly described as a prophet in many places throughout this play, up until this point, we have seen no evidence of prophecy, per se. Though it is no small task to effectively understand an oracle from Apollo, all of his knowledge about the future has come from oracles and not from his own prophetic vision. It is only in his conversation with Theseus that we finally see such prophetic abilities, as he moves beyond the knowledge that he could have rationally acquired from these two accounts of oracles.

Oedipus acts in this same prophetic role at the end of the play, after he recognizes the thunder (occurring first at 1456), which is the sign that his imminent death is approaching. At this point, Oedipus explains the final culmination of these oracles:

1520	χῶρον μὲν αὐτὸς αὐτίκ’ ἐξηγήσομαι, ἄθικτος ἡγητῆρος, οὐ με χρῆ θανεῖν. τοῦτον δὲ φράζε μήποτ’ ἀνθρώπων τινί, μήθ’ οὐ κέκευθε μήτ’ ἐν οἷς κεῖται τόποις· ὥς σοι πρὸ πολλῶν ἀσπίδων ἀλκὴν ὄδε	I, without the touch of a guide, will now lead you to the place where I must die. Do not ever show this to any person—not where it is hidden nor in which area it lies—so that this, by always being near you, may be a defense, superior to many shields or foreign spears.
1525	δορός τ’ ἐπακτοῦ γειτονῶν αἰεὶ τιθῆ. ...	
1533	χοῦτως ἀδῆον τήνδ’ ἐνοικήσεις πόλιν σπαρτῶν ἀπ’ ἀνδρῶν·	... Thus, you will dwell in this city, which will never be assailed by the sown men.
1520-5, 1533-4		

For a blind man to walk unassisted is remarkable on its own, and the messenger too comments upon this fact (ὕφηγητῆρος οὐδενὸς φίλων, / ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς ἡμῖν πᾶσιν ἐξηγούμενος. 1588-9). He instructs his daughters as they perform final rituals for him and he gives them religiously-tinged

<sup>339</sup> On this point, and how this scene can anticipate the future conflict between Thebes and Athens, see Scodel 1984: “Ironically, the prediction Oedipus gives for a remote future is fulfilled within the play. Oedipus himself is the cause of dispute between Thebes and Athens, and the dispute is settled in a battle which both guarantees the result of the future contest and foreshadows it” (Scodel 1984: 117).

prohibitions (μηδ' ἄ μὴ θέμις / λείσσειν δικαιοῦν μηδὲ φωνούντων κλύειν, 1642-2). Everything about his final moments, from the direct address from a god (1625ff.) to his mysterious death/disappearance (ἀλλ' ἢ τις ἐκ θεῶν πομπὸς ἢ τὸ νερτέρων / εὔνουν διαστὰν γῆς ἀλύπητον βάρθρον, 1661-2), is marked as more than human. He is a priest orchestrating his own rituals and a blind seer with no need of eyes (reminiscent of Tiresias) who has interpreted and augmented the oracle of Apollo (correctly, this time!) and brought about its fulfillment.

### Conclusions at *Colonus*

Several things emerge from this analysis of divine and prophetic language. Though this is not properly a sequel to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, it is impossible to read this play without the *Oedipus Tyrannus* coming to mind. When we juxtapose those two versions of Oedipus, we see that the Oedipus of *Oedipus at Colonus* is a more pious man who no longer comes into conflict with the will of the gods. We can understand this to be the result of years of suffering and aging and learning (i.e. we are dealing essentially with the same man as from the *OT*, but he has matured piously) or we can understand this as an entirely new version of Oedipus who is conspicuously different from the version of Oedipus from the *OT*. Either way, this Oedipus is able to understand oracles from Apollo effectively and to function as a prophet; rather than be in direct conflict with Tiresias over the meaning of oracles, Oedipus has instead taken on many of the attributes of Tiresias.

This play features an oracle that is revealed in a piecemeal fashion, as so many other Sophoclean oracles are. However, in this instance, communication proceeds precisely as it should. Oedipus blends these discrete oracles into one outcome, using his privileged access to the gods in combination with what he has already learned about these oracles. He uses his own logic and intellect to combine these different oracles, but he now does so in a pious and accurate way. When his reason conflicts with what a god has said, as is the case when he talks to Ismene about the new oracles, Oedipus reassesses and corrects his interpretation, but he does so from an assumption that the oracles are undoubtedly accurate. If logic and an oracle seem to be in conflict, he does not discount the oracle-giver or the oracle itself (as the Oedipus of the *OT* does). Instead, he finds an interpretation that accommodates the oracle and its infallibility. On one level, then, this play offers an endorsement of piety and religious reverence, which accords with the picture of Sophocles found in the biographical tradition. However, in revisiting what is (nominally) the same character, but one in which oracular communication results in actual, accurate understanding, Sophocles invites us to reflect on what happened differently this time around. As in nearly all the plays in this

chapter, there are subtle elements surrounding the presentation and comprehension of oracles which direct us to think about language itself and how communication and comprehension function. These linguistic, oracular features are not necessary to the plots of these plays, suggesting that there is some other reason or reasons for their inclusion.

## Overall Conclusions

Unlike the *Trachiniae* and the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the five plays that I have examined in this chapter all feature oracles in ways that are less central to the plot. The plots of these plays do not hinge on a misunderstood oracle, but they nonetheless feature some sort of prophecy or oracle. My purpose in this chapter was to lay out the oracles and prophecies in these other plays and to examine what these plays have to contribute to the linguistic picture that the *Trachiniae* and the *Oedipus Tyrannus* have painted. At times, these plays echo and reinforce linguistic features that we saw in the first two chapters, but in other places, these plays serve to flesh out how other types of language work—types of speech which were not thoroughly explored in the *Trachiniae* or the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. In broad terms, these plays all demonstrate the convoluted process of language transmission. Oracles and prophecies all originate from a place of truth, but as soon as that truth begins to be mediated in language, the language corrupts and alters divine truth. Characters (often unconsciously) bring their own preconceptions, agendas, and aspirations to bear on language and they exploit nodes of ambiguity in order to relate a prophecy in a form that appeals to them (as in the *Ajax* and perhaps also the *Electra*). At other times, prophecies are shaped willfully and used manipulatively (as in the *Philoctetes* and perhaps also the *Electra*). We see prophecy wielded as a weapon, as in the *Antigone* and the *Oedipus at Colonus*, where prophecies are nearly indistinguishable from curses.

As we look at these plays, we can see how Sophocles addresses complications around language. Though the *Trachiniae* addresses language that aims at conveying facts, there are other modes of communication. Two people can intend to engage in a cooperative conversation, but they might still fail, for a variety of reasons. The speaker might intend to connote something, while the listener may apply very different assumptions and come to an entirely different conclusion. Sophocles does address this, however, and we see that good faith attempt at communication will result in a back-and-forth process through which meaning will eventually emerge, as it does when Ismene and Oedipus discuss the new oracles about his death in the *OC*. Beyond more complicated

instances of cooperative communication, there are instances of uncooperative conversation. We play linguistic games, we lie, we manipulate, and we use imprecise language. All these situations are addressed, in some capacity, in the plays of Sophocles. By highlighting these different situations, Sophocles forces his audience to give more thought to the mechanisms that they intuitively understand, as native speakers of Greek.

By looking at prophecy throughout the full extant Sophoclean corpus, we can see the breadth of Sophocles' engagement with language and ambiguity. This breadth complements the depth explored in my first two chapters, and lays a useful foundation for drawing conclusions about Sophocles' overarching interest in prophecy, ambiguity, and linguistics.

## Conclusion

After examining each play individually, it is finally possible to view them collectively. Though our sample size is admittedly woefully limited,<sup>340</sup> it is still striking that oracles or other types of prophecy occur so reliably in the extant corpus. What might explain this, especially in cases where the oracle is not central to the plot?

To answer this question, it is worth briefly revisiting the conclusions of the previous chapters. In looking at the *Trachiniae*, I argued that the oracles from Zeus are not necessarily deceptive. Instead, the oracles are communicated in speech that is syntactically accurate, but which entirely disregards the pragmatic rules that govern human communication. The tragic outcome of the play is a result of humans applying pragmatic conventions to a type of communication which entirely disregards those conventions. Moving to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, I argued that the apparent malice of Apollo need not be understood as malice at all, but could instead be read as another instance of mortals applying the wrong rules to divine communication. Using the genre of riddles as a way to approach this play, I looked at the pragmatic conventions which govern non-straightforward modes of communication, such as riddles, and the importance of realizing which set of linguistic rules to apply to language in order to properly understand that language. In solving the famous Riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus proved that he can effectively employ the “rules” of riddle-solving, but when approaching oracles, he does not know that he needs to apply a specific set of linguistic rules. By failing to do so, he misunderstands the oracle. He is, however, helped in his misunderstanding by Tiresias, whose words frustrate and anger Oedipus until he is not in an emotional or mental state to believe Tiresias when Tiresias tells him the truth about his identity. When viewed in tandem with Apollo’s divine communication, this play provides two different ways in which communication can fail. With Apollo’s words, we see how ambiguous language can be misinterpreted—when ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations, a listener can easily choose the wrong meaning, particularly when they have an emotional reason to prefer one meaning to

---

<sup>340</sup> Using a relatively conservative estimate of 115 plays written by Sophocles, these seven plays constitute approximately 6% of Sophocles’ total output (though it would be a mistake to think that these seven represent a random sampling of Sophocles’ plays).



another. We also see, with Tiresias' words, how context and psychological elements can drive miscommunication—if a listener imputes malice to a speaker, the listener is unlikely to think that the speaker is making a good faith effort at communication and can instead interpret true words as lies. Between these two plays, we see two different, complementary models of how language works. The *Trachiniae* provides a simpler model of how pragmatic principles shape communication, and the *Oedipus Tyrannus* examines more complex types of speech, and types of speech which are not aimed at the straightforward communication of facts.

In Chapter 3, I detailed the ways in which Sophocles provides more instances of prophetic language which highlight other ways language can function. These examples serve to complement and expand upon the linguistic features on display in the *Trachiniae* and the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Whereas the multiform oracle in the *Trachiniae* was equally true in all its forms, rendering questions of transmission moot, the *Ajax* raises these issues and does not properly resolve them (we are never sure what exactly Calchas said and what the messenger or Teucer supplied). The *Philoctetes* goes even further, as Odysseus is entrusted with Helenus' prophecy. As the prophecy shifts throughout the play, the audience is acutely aware of the ways in which Odysseus, the consummate sophist, is manipulating language and the prophecy in order to corrupt Neoptolemus and succeed in bringing Philoctetes and his bow back to Troy. Here, the transmission and use and misuse of language are impossible to ignore, even though no harm actually comes from all this, since Heracles arrives to set things right. For an audience anxious about sophistry, however, Odysseus' persuasive rhetoric would sound familiar and alarming.

The *Electra*, meanwhile, draws our attention to the importance of context. Without knowing *what* Orestes asked Apollo, we cannot know that Apollo condones Orestes' actions. Orestes may well—either consciously or unconsciously—be transmitting Apollo's words faithfully, without transmitting his meaning. Without knowing the full context of the oracular inquiry, we cannot know if Orestes is manipulating Apollo's words, which raises the possibility that Orestes might be using an oracle to advance his own political agenda. Though the play does not dwell on this question, and the answer to the question is entirely irrelevant to the plot of the play, this nonetheless taps into the motif, familiar from the historians, of politicians appropriating oracles for their own gain.

Finally, these plays address a much broader range of language than we saw in either the *Trachiniae* or the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Even in a narrow examination of oracular and prophetic

language, we see willful deception (*Philoctetes*), ambiguity of attribution and the problems inherent in reporting speech (*Ajax*), the ambiguity introduced by imprecise wording (*Electra*), and speech acts and curses (*Antigone*). Further, our attention is drawn at times to the different modes of prophecy; in both the *Antigone* and the *Oedipus at Colonus*, we see a clear distinction between divination from natural signs (birds and thunder, respectively) and the sort of purely linguistic prophecy that oracles dispense. We see failed attempts at communication and a counter-example of how communication can take place effectively (*Oedipus at Colonus*). Although we see verbal ambiguity in the *Ajax*, the *Electra*, and the *Philoctetes*, the ambiguity is never resolved, and the plot is entirely unconcerned with that ambiguity. In a sense, the ambiguity is there precisely to be ambiguous, and the questions it raises are more important than the answers (which are never provided).

We are still left, however, with the question of “why?” Why include ambiguity? Why make oracles such a locus of linguistic exploration? Why provide language which can be understood in multiple different ways if the actual meaning of that language does not actually matter? By raising these questions and examining how language can generate both meaning and ambiguity, Sophocles focuses our attention on language itself. When he was writing, there was a great deal of anxiety about language, rhetoric, and the teachings of sophists and rhetoricians were widespread in Athens. Language itself became an object of study, and as things like “making the weaker argument stronger” were being taught, and there were deconstructionist currents which were gaining strength. Though we have long recognized that Plato challenged these intellectual trends, Sophocles is not often seen to be doing the same thing. However, when we look at these seven plays, Sophocles has some surprisingly sophisticated ideas about how language works, even if he does not present them in treatise form.

I began this examination with the *Trachiniae* because it offers the least complicated presentation of Sophocles’ ideas about language. Though this play has been read as a deconstructionist work, such a reading ignores the fact that Sophocles also reconstructs, so to speak. Although he does point out how syntax can generate misunderstanding, Sophocles does not suggest that there are *no* rules to language, or that there can be *no* effective communication. Rather, he points out that the rules that govern communication are more complex than we immediately recognize. We hear a disjunctive oracle and we all intuitively understand it the same way Deianeira does. When the “twist” is revealed, we also see how it *could* mean something other

than we first thought. Though Sophocles was obviously not aware of Grice's conversational maxims, they do provide a useful formal framework to discuss how and why this phenomenon occurs. Context and other non-syntactic elements fill in the gaps that syntax leaves open. Language is not a paradox, but instead a very complex system.

To conclude, Sophocles is primarily concerned with his dramatic craft, and I do not mean to suggest that the "point" of his plays is to present a linguistic treatise. However, because oracles are a place where gods convey information to mortals, meaning is particularly important in oracular speech. Further, since it is a sort of liminal, non-human speech, Sophocles is afforded a great deal more flexibility when crafting divine communication. Gods are not limited by human speech conventions, so divine speech is an ideal place for Sophocles to create artificial scenarios in which communication fails in some way. By creating scenarios in which communication fails, either because an implicitly understood pragmatic principle is not observed by a god or because a mortal deceptively exploits the pragmatic assumptions of their audience, Sophocles highlights the pragmatic elements of communication. Taken together, these pragmatic principles constitute a theory of language that underlies much of Sophocles' work. In the face of the sophistic challenges to traditional ideas of language, Sophocles puts forth his own defense of language which rests on his nuanced understanding of the non-syntactic facets of language.

A conception of Sophocles as an engaged intellectual is one of the major contributions of this study, to my mind. Sophocles' linguistic innovation has been explored before, but primarily in a somewhat narrow sense. Long 1986, for instance, offers a brilliant study the neologisms found in Sophocles, and he argues convincingly that Sophocles is particularly semantically innovative (and more semantically innovative than Euripides). In a 2006 volume edited by de Jong and Rijksbaron (*Sophocles and the Greek Language: Aspects of Diction, Syntax and Pragmatics*), an impressive array of scholars further advance our understanding of Sophocles' linguistic skill and practice. Though this is hardly an exhaustive selection, it does represent a strain of scholarship which acknowledges that Sophocles not only thought deeply about language, but that he contributed to literary and intellectual history in ways which have not been fully appreciated in the past.

By revisiting the issue of prophecy in Sophocles in light of pragmatic theory, we can understand that Sophocles uses divine communication as an opportunity to explore some of the most nuanced and complex aspects of communication. Rather than acquiesce to sophistic claims about language, Sophocles resists a deconstructionist understanding of language and uses oracular

speech as a place to display his own ideas about language. The artificial linguistic exempla he creates (using the flexibility afforded him by liminal and supernatural speech, which need not conform to any human conventions) draw attention to the different ways that listeners make sense of complex speech. By presenting audience members with linguistic puzzles that they are intuitively able to understand, Sophocles directs the audience's attention to their innate linguistic instincts. These instincts go well beyond semantics, and Sophocles is in fact making a brilliant pragmatic argument, though not in so many words. By using the tools provided by pragmatic linguistic theory, though, we are able to approach a small but consistently present element of Sophocles' plays— oracles and prophecies—and use them to gain a better understanding of these plays as well as of Sophocles' own interests and contributions to the intellectual debates of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

## Next Steps

In the future, this project would benefit from considering the specifics of Sophocles' intellectual context. As I note above, Sophocles is writing in the midst of intense social and intellectual upheaval. His own interventions in these debates can only be fully appreciated when viewed against these contemporary linguistic and philosophical debates. The most useful places to begin such additional study are, to my mind, the Sophists and Presocratics, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plato. Of the numerous of thinkers who are included under the "Sophists and Presocratics" category, Heraclitus, Protagoras, and Democritus seem to be the most relevant to a linguistic discussion, since our evidence suggests that all three were deeply interested in language. Protagoras, of course, cannot be viewed without addressing Plato's depiction of Protagoras—in fact, Plato is also a useful, if problematic, source for the teachings of Heraclitus. In particular, his *Cratylus* engages with philosophies of language as well as Heraclitean ideas concerning flux. In a separate vein, Herodotus and Thucydides are both very concerned with the ways that language can be used, misused, understood, and misunderstood. The themes which occur in both men's works are a reflection of deeper societal concerns which also manifest in Sophocles' own work. Future study will need to treat this complicated web of evidence carefully, but there are a great many points of contact between these thinkers and Sophocles' own linguistic ideas, and such a study would lead to a much better understanding of intellectual debates (and intellectual exchange) in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. It would also enhance our understanding of the extent to which Sophocles was an active and innovative participant in these debates.

## Appendix A: Uses of ἢ . . . ἢ

The vast majority of uses of ἢ . . . ἢ are exclusive uses, as one might expect when thinking pragmatically about how *or* is used and the implicatures that are generally applicable. A great deal of linguistic scholarship has examined the question of *or* and the inclusive and exclusive ways that it can be used and how a speaker can implicate a certain meaning and how a hearer can infer certain meanings.<sup>341</sup> The theoretical linguistic underpinnings of this debate are outside the scope of my project, but by taking an inductive approach, we can see a great deal about how this construction is used in Greek literary sources.

Leaving aside many instances that defy simple classification, in a study of over 400 uses of the disjunction, looking at examples from Homer up through Euripides and Sophocles, exclusive uses represent approximately 80% of the examples that can be neatly classified.<sup>342</sup> Some of these are particularly useful for a discussion of the *Trachiniae*, and I will return to them later. First, however, I will lay out some other uses of ἢ . . . ἢ in Greek. For the purpose of this examination, I am only looking at instances of ἢ . . . ἢ (and not uses of ἢ in isolation or in combination with other particles, such as ἢτοι . . . ἢ or ἢ . . . ἢ καί<sup>343</sup>) and I have attempted to remove instances where ἢ . . .

---

<sup>341</sup> Hurford's Constraint (Hurford 1974) is the starting point for a great deal of work on these topics. It notes that "the joining of two sentences by *or* is unacceptable if one sentence entails the other; otherwise, the use of *or* is acceptable" (Hurford 1974: 410). See Chierchia *et al.* 2001, Singh 2008, Chierchia *et al.* 2008, Yoon 2009, and Meyer 2014 for a series of studies on Hurford's Constraint and how negation and disjunction combine with one another to give rise to different presumptive meanings.

<sup>342</sup> In *Seven against Thebes*, for example, the messenger says Polynices and his allies swore an oath to *either* take Thebes by force *or* die and cover the earth with their blood (ὠρκωμότησαν ἢ πόλει κατασκαφᾶς / θέντες λαπάξειν ἄστν Καδμείων βίᾶ, / ἢ γῆν θανόντες τήνδε φυράσειν φόνω, *Septem* 46-8). In this case, the two options are understood to be mutually exclusive—the men do not think that they will both die *and* take Thebes. In this instance, we have a truly exclusive *or*. A similar use occurs later in the same play, when Megareus is described as either defeating Eteoclus or dying in the attempt—but clearly not both (ἀλλ' ἢ θανῶν τροφεῖα πληρώσει χθονί, / ἢ καὶ δὺ' ἄνδρε καὶ πόλισμ' ἐπ' ἀσπίδος / ἔλων λαφύροις δῶμα κοσμήσει πατρός, *Septem* 477-9). A thorough list of all such examples would be far too long, since this usage represents the overwhelming majority of the occurrences of ἢ . . . ἢ in Greek.

<sup>343</sup> Smyth does not seem to think that the difference between ἢ . . . ἢ and ἢτοι . . . ἢ or ἢ . . . ἢ καί has any bearing on the inclusive or exclusive nature. The most relevant observation is that ἢτοι . . . ἢ may be used instead of ἢ . . . ἢ when the first item listed is more probable (§ 2858). Similarly, he notes that ἢ καί "is often used where ἢ would suffice" (§ 2862). For ἢ in isolation in alternative questions, or in combination with πότερον, see § 2656-7, 2860. Smyth concludes that the repeated ἢ . . . ἢ serves "to connect the two members more closely" (§ 2856), but nothing about the nature of the disjunction implied. As to indirect alternative formations involving ἢ, he does note that πότερον . . . ἢ "may denote that the second alternative is more important than the first," whereas εἰ . . . ἢ "indicates that the second alternative is

. ἢ is not functioning in the way that either/or does in English, but is instead joining three (or more) discreet items with a simple “or” between each element. Often, as I will demonstrate, this is not an easy determination to make and the semantic functions of ἢ . . . ἢ are somewhat ambiguous. For simplicity, I will limit myself here to examples whose context allow us to determine the inclusive or exclusive nature of the “or” in some fashion (based either on a discernable intent of the speaker or a discernable interpretation by the hearer—in more formal terms, the implicatures or inferences involved). I recognize that these examples are selectively chosen and not a representative sample of all of the instances this construction is used in Greek. My intent here is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of the uses of ἢ . . . ἢ in Greek but rather to illustrate the available semantic range that is *can* have and to establish the difference between the semantic and pragmatic range that this disjunction can exhibit in different contexts.

I have split up the uses of ἢ . . . ἢ which are not clearly exclusive into broad categories, for the purpose of analysis. These are not always neat and distinctly separate categories, but I think they prove useful as a framework. I will attempt to lay out the relevant pragmatic framework that governs some of these categories as I lay them out.

## **Inclusive (or Predominantly Inclusive) Uses of *Or***

### **I. Prayer Language**

The first category that I will argue is truly inclusive are the fossilized uses that occur in ritual language and prayers.<sup>344</sup> This includes two slightly different uses of ἢ . . . ἢ. The first set are uses of “word or deed,” as in example I.1 and I.2 below. The second type are those that occur in lists of pious or dedicatory acts (I.3 and I.4). Examples of both types are provided:

---

preferable or more probable” (§ 2675a, c). These are not directly relevant to the examples I am looking at, however, since these are specifically indirect formulations and I feel confident that excluding these instances does little to impact my study of ἢ . . . ἢ. Interesting, but also only tangentially relevant, is the rare substitution of ἢ . . . τε instead of ἢ . . . ἢ that Smyth notes at § 2982. Overall, Smyth does not comment on the exclusive or inclusive nature of any variation on these disjunctions, but the nuanced difference between ἢ . . . ἢ and other combinations does not seem to make a substantive difference in the inclusivity or exclusivity.

<sup>344</sup> For a more detailed look at ritual and prayer language, see Depew 1997 for a thorough overview. Miller 1986 provides a discussion of the *hypomnesis* element of prayers, in which the suppliant reminds the god of past service(s) rendered or piety shown. Graf 1991 and Festugière 1976 also discuss the reciprocal exchange aspects of prayer.

- |     |   |  |
|-----|---|--|
| I.1 | Ζεῦ πάτερ εἴ ποτε δή σε μετ' ἀθανάτοισιν ὄνησα<br>ἢ ἔπει ἢ ἔργω, τόδε μοι κρήνην ἐέλδωρ<br><i>Il.</i> 1.503-5   | Father Zeus, if I have ever helped you among the<br>immortals, in word or deed, accomplish my desire<br>for me <sup>345</sup>  |
| I.2 | ἠέλι', αἶδεσσαί με θεὰν σύ περ, εἴ ποτε δή σευ<br>ἢ ἔπει ἢ ἔργω κραδίην καὶ θυμὸν ἴηνα<br><i>h.Cer.</i> 64-5  | Helios, regard me as a goddess, if I have ever, in<br>word or deed, warmed your heart and spirit.  |
| I.3 | Ζεῦ πάτερ εἴ ποτέ τίς τοι ἐν Ἄργεϊ περ πολυπύρῳ<br>ἢ βοὸς ἢ οἶος κατὰ πίονα μηρία καίων<br>εὔχετο νοστήσαι, σὺ δ' ὑπέσχεο καὶ κατένευσας,<br>τῶν μνησαὶ καὶ ἄμυνον Ὀλύμπιε νηλεὲς ἦμαρ<br><i>Il.</i> 15.372-5   | Father Zeus, if anyone in Argos, rich in wheat,<br>ever prayed to return home, burning the fat thigh-<br>bones of a cow or a sheep for you, and you nodded<br>and assented, remember them and ward off the<br>pitiless day, Olympian one         |
| I.4 | κλυθί μευ, αἰγιόχοιο Διὸς τέκος, Ἄφρυτῶνη,<br>εἴ ποτέ τοι πολύμητις ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν Ὀδυσσεὺς<br>ἢ βοὸς ἢ οἶος κατὰ πίονα μηρί' ἔκηε,<br>τῶν νῦν μοι μνησαὶ, καί μοι φίλον υἴα σώωσον,<br>μνηστῆρας δ' ἀπάλαλκε κακῶς ὑπερηνορόντας<br><i>Od.</i> 4.763-6 | Hear me, unwearied child of aegis-bearing Zeus,<br>if the many-wiled Odysseus ever burned fat thigh-<br>bones of a cow or sheep for you in his halls,<br>remember them now and save my dear son and<br>ward off the terribly overbearing suitors |

A close parallel to this, though it is not strictly a prayer (since Telemachus addresses Nestor and Menelaus with these words) employs the same basic structure as part of the beseeching request:

- |     |   |  |
|-----|---|--|
| I.5 | λίσσομαι, εἴ ποτέ τοί τι πατήρ ἐμός, ἐσθλὸς Ὀδυσσεύς,<br>ἢ ἔπος ἢ τι ἔργον ὑποστὰς ἐξετέλεσσε<br>δήμῳ ἐνὶ Τρώων, ὅθι πάσχετε πῆματ' Ἀχαιοί,<br>τῶν νῦν μοι μνησαὶ, καί μοι νημερτὲς ἐνίσπετε.<br><i>Od.</i> 3.98-101 and 4.328-31 | I pray, if ever my father, noble Odysseus,<br>accomplished anything that he promised to you,<br>either some word or deed, in the Trojan land,<br>where the Achaeans endured great woes,<br>remember that now, I beg you, and tell me the<br>truth. |
|-----|---|--|

These uses at least suggest an inclusive interpretation of ἢ . . . ἢ—it would be a very strange strategy to invoke two pious acts, of which only one had actually been completed by the suppliant. The import of these prayers is certainly intended to be something to the effect of “Zeus (or Helios or Athena), I have served you in both these ways, please grant my prayer.” The choice of words couches these prayers in proper deference for the gods, but there would be no reason to call to mind the thighs of animals that had never actually been sacrificed to Zeus (thereby calling to mind sacrifices that Odysseus or the Achaeans had specifically *not* performed for Zeus) and we should understand this as an inclusive use of ἢ . . . ἢ, though perhaps a fossilized and formulaic use that is not entirely illustrative of more natural uses of ἢ . . . ἢ.

<sup>345</sup> This passage echoes Achilles' initial request at 1.394-5 (ἐλθοῦσ' Οὐλύμπων δὲ Δία λίσαι, εἴ ποτε δή τι / ἢ ἔπει ὤνησας κραδίην Διὸς ἢ καὶ ἔργω), though his formulation fits less neatly into the category of prayers, since he is specifying language to be used by Thetis when propitiating Zeus, but I am not comfortable calling his address to his mother a prayer, even though she is a divinity.

It is worth noting that the broad phrasing is fairly standard for prayers (i.e. “If ever I have pleased you in any way . . .”), but that does not undermine the basic rhetorical strategies in play here.<sup>346</sup> It is useful to examine other ways that this formulaic language is used, including in other prayer contexts:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>1.6 Σμινθεῦ εἴ ποτέ τοι χαρίεντ’ ἐπὶ νηὸν ἔρεψα,<br/>ἢ εἰ δὴ ποτέ τοι κατὰ πίονα μηρί’ ἔκηα<br/>ταύρων ἠδ’ αἰγῶν, τὸ δέ μοι κρήνην ἐέλωρ<br/><i>Il.</i> 1.39-41</p>     | <p>Sminthean, if ever I pleased you by placing a roof<br/>on your temple or if I ever burned fat thigh-bones<br/>for you, of bulls and goats, accomplish my desire<br/>for me.</p>      |
| <p>1.7 κλυθί μευ αἰγιόχοιο Διὸς τέκος Ἄτρυτώνη,<br/>εἴ ποτέ μοι καὶ πατρὶ φίλα φρονέουσα παρέστης<br/>δηΐω ἐν πολέμῳ, νῦν αὖτ’ ἐμὲ φίλαι Ἀθήνη·<br/><i>Il.</i> 5.115-7</p> | <p>Hear me, unwearied child of aegis-bearing Zeus!<br/>If ever you stood by my father in fierce battle,<br/>with kindly thoughts toward him, now be kind to<br/>me as well, Athena!</p> |

as well as when requests are made between mortals (here, Hecuba to Hector and Hecuba to the Trojan people):

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>1.8 Ἔκτορ τέκνον ἐμόν τάδε τ’ αἶδεο καί μ’ ἐλέησον<br/>αὐτήν, εἴ ποτέ τοι λαθικηδέα μαζὸν ἐπέσχον·<br/><i>Il.</i> 22.82-3</p>   | <p>Hector, my child, heed these things and take<br/>pity on me, if I ever offered my breast as a<br/>comfort to you</p>  |
| <p>1.9 ὄψεσθε Τρῶες καὶ Τρωάδες Ἔκτορ’ ἰόντες,<br/>εἴ ποτε καὶ ζῶοντι μάχης ἐκνοστήσαντι<br/>χαίρετ’, ἐπεὶ μέγα χάρμα πόλει τ’ ἦν παντὶ τε<br/>δήμῳ.<br/><i>Il.</i> 24.704-6</p> | <p>Come, Trojan men and woman, to see Hector, if<br/>you ever rejoiced to see him coming back from<br/>battle, while he was still alive, since he was a<br/>great source of joy for the city and all the<br/>people.</p> |

Lang usefully schematizes the different sorts of prayers into several categories.<sup>347</sup> She identifies this sort of prayer language as a single category of *da si dedi/da quia dedi*, correctly

<sup>346</sup> This is, I think, unlike the impulse behind prayers such as we see at *Ag.* 160-2 (Ζεύς, ὅστις ποτ’ ἐστίν, εἰ τὸδ’ αὐ- / τῶ φίλον κεκλημένῳ, / τούτῳ νιν προσενέπω, “Zeus, whoever he is, if this is pleasing to him to be called, I invoke him with this name”) or the general tendency to invoke a range of gods, to make sure the correct one is invoked (cf. the Chorus’ address to a wide range of gods at *OT* 151ff.). In those sorts of moments, the person praying is covering all their bases, so to speak, with the implicit assumption that there is no particular harm in invoking *extra* gods or invoking a god by additional names, as compared to the potential risks of not effectively obtaining the god’s help because the address was deficient in some way.

<sup>347</sup> Lang 1975 provides an outline of the types of communication humans use in relation to the gods in Homer and splits the non-conversational communication (i.e. prayers) into categories of *do ut des*, *da et dabo*, *da si dedi/da quia dedi*, and *da quia dedisti*. For purposes of comparison, only her *da si dedi/da quia dedi* category is directly relevant. In this category, she places several of my examples above in addition to Chryses’ prayer to Apollo at *Il.* 1.39-41, which has a great deal in common with these other examples (as noted above), though it does not involve the use of ἢ . . . ἢ. In this broader category of *da si dedi/da quia dedi*, she also places things like Agamemnon’s prayer to Zeus at *Il.* 8.236ff. and *IO.* 432ff., though these are somewhat different rhetorically, since they do not invoke the “if ever I . . .” language, though they do all call on past services rendered to the god as a rationale for why the god should heed their prayer now.

Reminiscent of the examples above are the sort of “εἴ ποτε” uses that are oriented toward the divinity addressed, such as ὡσεὶ κυβερνήτας σοφός, ὕμνοάνασ- / σ’ εὔθυνη Κλειοῖ / νῦν φρένας ἀμετέρας, / εἰ δὴ ποτε καὶ πάρος (Bacchylides 12.1-4) and εἴ ποτε καὶ προτέρας ἄτας ὑπερ ὀρυσμένης πόλει / ἠνύσατ’ ἐκτοπίαν φλόγα πῆματος,



recognizing that the practical effect of the language elides the difference between “if” and “because.” While a literal interpretation of these passages does offer these justifications in terms of *if* something happened, they are surely meant to convey the sense that the person speaking *did* do these things in the past. The force of *if* seems either purely rhetorical (since one does not properly make demands of gods) or else somewhat transferred. That is to say, the occurrences must have happened (one would not likely have forgotten if any service or sacrifice had been performed—it only strengthens a prayer to mention things that did happen, not conspicuous failures to act). The judgment—if we are to imagine that any sort of a judgment is presupposed in this language—must be more about the recipient’s actions and perceptions, and not the actions of the person praying.<sup>348</sup>

The examples above which invoke “word or deed” seem to be a special sub-group, in that the boundary between word and deed is not a clearly delineated one. Thetis’ prayer to Zeus (example 1.1) is a particularly illustrative example, since we know at least something about a moment that she is invoking with this prayer, since Achilles makes a specific request of her that she certainly seems to follow (1.386-412, with a particular resonance at lines 394-5). Achilles asks her to remind Zeus of the time when she was the only god who warded off shameful destruction from him (ἀεικέα λοιγὸν ἀμῦναι, 398). Her actions here involve both releasing Zeus from the chains in which he was bound (ὑπελύσαο δεσμῶν, 401) as well as summoning Briareus up to Olympus (ἐκατόγχειρον καλέσασ’ ἐς μακρὸν Ὀλυμπον, 402). We are not given a great deal of information as to how she called Briareus to Olympus,<sup>349</sup> but the language used to describe what she did seems to map neatly onto both word (καλέσασ’) and deed (ὑπελύσαο). I hesitate to give too much weight to this scene as an example of a clearly “inclusive or,” however, because it is quite easy to imagine a situation in which speaking leads to action or is indistinguishable from an active intervention and a single event could be both a word and a deed (speech acts as a broad category come readily to mind here). As such, I will do no more than suggest that this formulaic “word or

---

ἔλθετε καὶ νῦν. (OT 165-6). These fall into Lang’s *da quia dedisti* category of appeals and are not directly relevant for examining the theory of mind involved in these other prayers and appeals.

<sup>348</sup> To look at the preceding examples again, I would argue that the real question in 1.1 does not concern the word or deed, both of which we are to assume occurred; rather, it concerns ὄνησα. The question is not whether the acts occurred, but whether Zeus *thinks* that he was benefited by Thetis’ actions (and if, by extension, he owes her anything in exchange). Similarly, in 1.2, if there is a question, it concerns ἦνα. Both a word and a deed occurred, but Helios only owes Demeter any assistance if her words and deeds did actually accomplish their goal and warm Helios’ heart. While this line of reasoning does not map onto all of these examples (for instance, it does not apply to 1.4 at all), it does open up the interesting question of what sort of theories of mind underlie Greek piety and prayer.

<sup>349</sup> This scene is obviously far more complicated than I can adequately explore here. Willcock 1997 and Slatkin 1992 both discuss this fraught scene in far greater detail.

deed” phrasing does complicate any interpretation that would like to take ἢ . . . ἢ as entirely exclusive.

As a last note on prayer language, these examples all occur within the framing of εἴ ποτέ (if ever). *If* is, like negation, a downward entailing operator, which licenses certain constructions which would not otherwise be licensed.<sup>350</sup> We should keep this in mind when considering the use of ἢ . . . ἢ more broadly, since there are specific linguistic features which might explain this particular inclusive use of *or*.

## 2. Quasi-Hendiadys, Plausible Coexistence, and “Ideally Both” Uses

Three other closely related categories that I have identified are instances in which ἢ . . . ἢ serves to create something very similar to hendiadys; examples of things that easily coexist (often things whose coexistence can easily be supported with ready examples); and instances in which either of two alternatives would be sufficient, but both would clearly be preferred. This often occurs with weapons and similar things. For examples, Homer regularly joins things like an arrow and a spear in this way (βλήμενος ἢ ἰῶ ἢ ἔγχει ὄξυόεντι, “struck either by an arrow or a sharp spear,” *Il.* 8.514; αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ κ’ ἢ δουρὶ τυπείσῃ ἢ βλήμενος ἰῶ / εἰς ἵππους ἄλεται, “but when, either struck by a spear or hit by an arrow, he will leap onto his horses,” *Il.* 11.191-2). Similarly, this can refer to means of injury (ἢ βάλη ἢ ἐλάση, “if someone should either throw or strike,” *Od.* 17.279) or slightly less concrete “weapons” (more precisely, means of effecting harm): ἢ ἐτι τῆύσιον ἔπος ἔσσειται ἢ ἐτι ἔργον (“if there will be either some idle word or some idle deed,” *h.Ap.* 540). I start with these examples because many of these—particularly the examples in Homer—are some of the least exclusive examples, though they do represent a significant use of *or* in Greek. By this, I first mean that there is no reason why an injury by one of these types of weapons (say, an arrow) necessarily excludes the other, since they are closely linked to one another and multiple types of attacks can certainly afflict the same warrior. In Homer, at least, warriors are rarely wounded or killed by two different weapons, though there is no obvious reason why they could not be. Looking at the example from the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, however, we see a much

---

<sup>350</sup> See Chierchia et al. 2001: 160 on this point: “Scalar implicatures do not arise in downward entailing linguistic environments.” They conclude that the presence of a downward entailing operator blocks implicatures, which explains why ἢ . . . ἢ functions differently in this linguistic environment than it does in normal environments. For a more thorough discussion, see Appendix B.

broader use that recalls the prayer language from before. Here, idle words and idle deeds are not mutually exclusive and the poet immediately follows this line with ὕβρις θ', ἢ θέμις ἐστὶ καταθνητῶν ἀνθρώπων (“and hubris, which is customary among mortals”), which seems to equate hubris with idle words and deeds as things that are quite likely to happen and need to be warned against. In this sense, given the broader context, the use of ἢ . . . ἢ seems to be inclusive, and context is the determining factor.

Also in this category, as examples of quasi-hendiadys, I have placed things like the following passages:

- |     |   |  |
|-----|---|--|
| 2.1 | τὴν τε γὰρ πόλιν κοινὴν παρέχομεν, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ὅτε ξηνηλασίαις ἀπείργομέν τινα ἢ μαθήματος ἢ θεάματος | For we hold out our city as a public thing and there is no time when we use alien acts to prevent someone from either learning or seeing |
|     | Thuc. 2.39.1  |  |
| 2.2 | τίς γὰρ κόρην ἔρημον ἢ δάμαρτ' ἔχειν ἢ παιδοποιεῖν ἐξ ἐμοῦ βουλήσεται;                                  | For who will wish either to take a destitute girl as a wife or to father children with me?   |
|     | <i>Heracleidae</i> 523-4  |  |
| 2.3 | ἢ τίνα μοῦσαν ἐπέλω<br>δάκρυσιν ἢ θρήνοις ἢ πένθεσιν;   | What muse should I approach with either tears or dirges or mourning?   |
|     | <i>Helen</i> 165-6  |  |

All of these combine elements that certainly go closely together (learning and observing, wife and mother, tears and dirges) and cannot imply that one must occur at the exclusion of the other. The two alternatives are certainly meant to evoke different connotations in the hearers, but they cannot be understood as exclusive ors. For example, in 2.2, the maiden invokes the loss of her status as a wife first, and then as a mother. The two need not go together, but she here uses these to encompass and convey the hope of a good life (εὖ πράξειν, 521) that she can no longer attain. In this sense, the two are very much being used as an elaboration on the same idea and an exclusive interpretation would render this lament nonsensical.

Closely connected with these example are those instances in which ἢ . . . ἢ joins two things that have existed in the past and whose potential coexistence may be particularly relevant or desirable in the context. These uses are common in Thucydides:

- |     |  |  |
|-----|--|--|
| 2.4 | εἴ ποθέν τινα ἢ ναυτικοῦ ἢ χρημάτων δύναμις προσληψόμεθα | If, in some way, we will augment our strength, either nautical or monetary |
|     | Thuc. 1.82.1   |  |

- |     |  |   |
|-----|--|---|
| 2.5 | εἴ τις τι ἕτερος ἑτέρου προφέρει ἢ ἐπιστήμη ἢ εὐψυχία<br>Thuc. 7.64.2  | If someone surpasses another, either in skill or in courage   |
| 2.6 | εἰ μὴ γὰρ ἢ ναυσὶ κρατήσομεν ἢ τὰς προσόδους<br>ἀφαιρήσομεν ἀφ’ ὧν τὸ ναυτικὸν τρέφουσι, βλαψόμεθα<br>τὰ πλείω<br>Thuc. 1.81.4 | For unless we defeat them with our ships or remove the means with which they maintain their navy, we will be hurt badly |

In 2.4 and 2.5, we have two examples of a construction to which we could reasonably add “or, ideally, both” to the sentence. In 2.4, Archidamus is counseling the Spartans not to be too quick to enter into war with the Athenians before proper preparations can be made. In discussing the allies that Sparta will need to obtain, he says that they will need allies—either Greek or barbarian—just so long as they augment their strength, either nautical or monetary [*or, ideally, both*].” In 2.5, Nicias is concluding a speech meant to rouse his men up before battle and he follows this line with “he would not do better to display it [his skill or courage *or, ideally, both*], in any other time, showing himself both to be a benefit to himself and a savior to everyone” (οὐκ ἂν ἐν ἄλλῳ μᾶλλον καιρῷ ἀποδειξάμενος αὐτός τε αὐτῷ ὠφέλιμος γένοιτο καὶ τοῖς ξύμπασι σωτήριος). In both of these scenarios, either of the two elements listed would be sufficient on their own, but both would clearly be the preferred option. Similarly, in 2.6, at least one of the two alternatives is necessary (to avoid being hurt badly), but the context surely suggests that both would be the preferred outcome.

Finally, I would like to include the salient example from *Iliad* 1.150-151 in this category, since it presents a slightly different slant on this same question:

- |     |  |   |
|-----|--|---|
| 2.8 | πῶς τις τοι πρόφρων ἔπεσιν πείθηται Ἀχαιῶν<br>ἢ ὁδὸν ἐλθέμεναι ἢ ἀνδράσιν ἴφι μάχεσθαι;<br>Il. 1.150-151 | How should any of the Achaeans willingly obey your words, either to go on a journey or to fight with men? |
|-----|--|---|

In this case, not only have ὁδὸν ἐλθέμεναι and ἀνδράσιν ἴφι μάχεσθαι coexisted in the past, but their coexistence is the backdrop against which the entire *Iliad* is set. While the rhetorical force of this line implies that neither will occur in the future, the two elements are not mutually exclusive and went very closely together in the very recent past. Implicit in his speech here is the sense that one of the two elements will be more salient at any given time. The two are not entirely exclusive, but (in an inversion of the “minimal sufficiency” example from before) neither of these things will happen. Here, we could supply something such as “much less *both*” to flesh out the meaning more fully: “How should any of the Achaeans willingly obey your words, either to go on a journey or to

fight with men . . . much less *both?*” On this point, it is worth noting that a question—rhetorical or otherwise—is a downward entailing operator, which affects how implicatures work. As with conditionals (see the examples in section I, and several of the examples in this section), a question changes this into a different sort of linguistic context.

Moving from things that certainly *have* coexisted, the next type of inclusive use I have identified is things that readily *can* coexist. There is a fine line between these two types of easy coexistence and I would not suggest that this is a firm distinction at all, but there does seem to be a different nuance to some of these examples. Because these examples are quite numerous, I will provide a more cursory treatment here. This use includes lists of prizes that heroes might receive. The hero will not necessarily receive all the items listed, and they will presumably not get all of the items at the same time, but it also does not preclude multiple items. As an illustrative example, I offer *Iliad* 8.289,<sup>351</sup> in which Agamemnon praises Teucer’s fighting and promises him prizes from the sack of Troy:

2.9	πρῶτῳ τοι μετ’ ἐμὲ πρεσβήϊον ἐν χειρὶ θήσω, ἢ τρίποδ’ ἢ ἑ δῶω ἵππους αὐτοῖσιν ὄχεσφιν ἢ ἑ γυναῖχ’, ἢ κέν τοι ὄμῶν λέχος εἰσαναβαίνοι	I will place a prize in your hand first after me, either a tripod or two horses with their own chariot, or a woman who would go to bed with you
	<i>Il.</i> 8.289	

For a point of comparison, the prizes that Agamemnon offers Achilles (*Il.* 9.122ff = 9.264ff) include seven tripods (ἑπτὰ ἀπύρους τρίποδας, 122 = 264), twelve horses (δώδεκα δ’ ἵππους / πηγούς ἀθλοφόρους, 123-4 = 265-6), and seven women, including Briseis (δώσω δ’ ἑπτὰ γυναῖκας ἀμύμονα ἔργα ἰδυίας / Λεσβίδας, ἃς ὅτε Λέσβον εὐκτιμένην ἔλεν αὐτὸς / ἐξελόμην, αἱ κάλλει ἐνίκων φῦλα γυναικῶν. / τὰς μὲν οἱ δώσω, μετὰ δ’ ἔσσεται ἦν τότε ἀπηύρων / κούρη Βρισῆος, 128-32 = 270-4). These certainly *could* coincide in another situation, but they are also unlikely to in the context given. To effectively explain why this is unlikely, we much draw upon scalar implicature. If Agamemnon wanted to give him multiple prestigious prizes for his valiant fighting, there would be no obstacle to him doing so. As such, he would be perfectly capable of making the stronger claim (the scale in question here would be *<and, or>*, with *and* being the stronger item) that he would award Teucer a tripod *and* horses *and* a woman (as he does tell Achilles). Because he does not make a stronger claim, he implicates that he will not do so. Both

---

<sup>351</sup> Another example is *Od.* 15.84-5 (ἢ ἑ τινα τριπόδων εὐχάλκων ἢ ἑ λεβήτων, / ἢ ἑ δῶω ἡμιόνους ἢ ἑ χρύσειον ἄλεισον).

Teucer and a hearer in the audience will—without additional extenuating contextual information—infer that Teucer will not get all three items.

Closely related, we find a similar structure with lists of weather phenomena that can and do occur together.<sup>352</sup> Also in this category (and very closely connected to some of the previous categories I outlined) are examples describing actions that go closely together, such as Euripides' *Heracles Furens* 1025-7:

2.10	αἰαῖ, τίνα στεναγμὸν ἢ γόον ἢ φθιτῶν ᾠδάν, ἢ τὸν Ἄϊδα χορὸν ἀχήσω;	Ah, what groan or wail or song of the dead or deathly dance should I send forth?
------	--	--

*HF* 1025-7

This instance verges dangerously away from the strict either/or uses that I have focused on and seems far more likely to simply be a string discreet items connected with ἢ (as opposed to ἢ . . . ἢ as a unit), but this sort of use occurs commonly enough that it is worth mentioning and it does have parallels that map more neatly onto the either/or type of usage.<sup>353</sup> With these, I place instances from Pindar which serve as either a priamel (in which all the items are equally available and could coexist in one poem, but not this poem):

2.11	εἰ δ' ὄλβον ἢ χειρῶν βίαν ἢ σιδαρίταν ἐπαινῆσαι πόλεμον δεδόκηται	If it seems best to praise either wealth or strength of hands or iron war . . .
------	--	---

*Pind. N. 5.19*

or other lists that are presented as being a somewhat exhaustive list (in that the use of ἢ . . . ἢ is meant to broaden the scope of “fortunate” that is introduced with εὐτυχήσῃς):

2.12	εἴ τις ἀνδρῶν εὐτυχήσῃς ἢ σὺν εὐδόξοις ἀέθλοισι ἢ σθένει πλοῦτου κατέχει φρασὶν αἰαντῇ κόρον	If some man is fortunate, either in glorious contests or in the power of his wealth, and checks unending arrogance in his mind
------	---	--

*Pind. I. 3.1-2*

<sup>352</sup> Examples include *Il.* 10.5-8 (ὡς δ' ὅτ' ἂν ἀστράπτῃ πόσις Ἥρης ἠὲ κόμειο / τεύχων ἢ πολὺν ὄμβρον ἀθέσφατον ἠὲ χάλαζαν / ἢ νιφετόν, ὅτε πέρ τε χιῶν ἐπάλυνεν ἀρούρας, / ἠὲ ποθὶ πτολέμοιο μέγα στόμα πευκεδανοῖο) and Soph. *OC* 94-5 (σημεῖα δ' ἤξειν τῶνδ' ἐμοὶ παρηγγύα, / ἢ σεισμόν ἢ βροντὴν τιν' ἢ Διὸς σέλας)

<sup>353</sup> For a similarly problematic example, see *Alcestis* 86-8 (κλύει τις ἢ στεναγμὸν ἢ / χειρῶν κτύπον κατὰ στέγας / ἢ γόον ὡς πεπραγμένων). See also *Helen* 169-173 (εἶθ' ἐμοῖς γόοις / μόλοιτ' ἔχουσαι Λίβυν / λωτὸν ἢ σύριγγας ἢ / φόρμιγγας, αἰλίνοις κακοῖς / τοῖς ἐμοῖσι σύννοχα δάκρυα). For a less complicated example, see *Phoenissae* 1632-4 (ὅς ἂν νεκρὸν τόνδ' ἢ καταστέφων ἀλῶ / ἢ γῆ καλύπτων, θάνατον ἀνταλλάξεται), which provides only two alternatives that need not be mutually exclusive, since both indicate a means of giving honor to a corpse.

In all of these (2.10-3.12), ἢ . . . ἢ is used to join related items in a way that broadens the scope of a discussion by identifying discreet members of a group that the speaker wants to call to mind. In 2.10, this is a genre of lament—presumably only one of these laments is most appropriate to the situation and they cannot all be performed at the same time. However, the inclusion of all of these different items proves to be more of a rhetorical technique than an actual question by the Chorus, and it is meant to convey their deep anguish. By providing several alternatives, they ensure that they express the full range of their grief—whichever of those options is appropriate to the situation, *that* is what they want to perform. This is very much in keeping with the common practice of agonizing over the best term for something, but it also suggests that the exact underlying phenomenon that they would like describe requires multiple descriptors to convey it fully. The lamentation they want to perform can only really be understood by casting a wide semantic net, so to speak, that includes all the essential aspects of the underlying phenomenon. In 2.11 and 2.12, I would argue that we see a similar usage. These different alternatives are provided in order to cover a broad conceptual range. Pindar wants to make it exceedingly clear what “fortunate” means, and that requires some additional description that maps out the full concept. This does not necessitate either an inclusive or exclusive understanding of the *ors* being used here. Rather, I think that this represents something between the two—these are meant to produce something of a loose Venn diagram that approximates a discreet underlying concept that is difficult to convey (with language that cannot exactly express that precise meaning). Somewhere generally between the overlapping ideas expressed by στεναγμὸν and γόον and φθιτῶν ᾠδάν and Ἄιδα χορὸν is the actual phenomenon the Chorus wants to describe. This use does not fall neatly into an inclusive or exclusive reading, but allows for both, to some extent.

Finally, there are a few assorted examples that suggest inclusive readings, such as *Ajax* 119-120 (τούτου τίς ἄν σοι τάνδρὸς ἢ προνούστερος / ἢ δρᾶν ἀμείνων ηὔρέθη τὰ καίρια; “Who could be found who is more prudent than this man, or more able to do what the situation calls for?”), in which a more prudent man could easily be better at serving the needs of the moment and an exclusive reading would be less plausible than an inclusive reading. The question that Athena poses is rhetorical and essentially contrafactual in nature—there is, in fact, no one who was προνούστερος or δρᾶν ἀμείνων τὰ καίρια, which is her whole point in asking Odysseus this. Similarly, at *Antigone* 663-5 (ὅστις δ’ ὑπερβᾶς ἢ νόμους βιάζεται / ἢ τοῦπιτάσσειν τοῖς κρατύνουσιν νοεῖ, / οὐκ ἔστ’ ἐπαίνου τοῦτον ἐξ ἐμοῦ τυχεῖν, “But whoever transgresses and

either violates the laws or thinks to command their rulers, he will not get praise from me”), violating the laws and commanding the rulers are compatible and this passage too suggests an inclusive reading. Finally, *Bacchae* 740-2 offers a gruesome scene that must certainly be understood as an inclusive use of ἢ . . . ἢ: εἶδες δ’ ἂν ἢ πλεύρ’ ἢ δίχηλον ἔμβασιν / ῥιπτόμεν’ ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω· κρεμαστὰ δὲ / ἔσταζ’ ὑπ’ ἐλάταις ἀναπεφυρμέν’ αἵματι (You would see either a rib or a cloven hoof, tossed all over. They were dripping, hanging from the trees, defiled with blood”). An observer could easily see both ribs *and* hooves, if they were able to keep looking at the scattered gore. They could potentially see one at any given moment, but a truly exclusive reading here is not possible.

These are the most compelling examples of ἢ . . . ἢ being used in a way that is inclusive or potentially inclusive. Not all of these examples are definitively inclusive uses, but they do, to my mind, invite an inclusive reading. More importantly, they do not prohibit such a reading. These are also instances in which context does a great deal to determine the meaning of ἢ . . . ἢ, which is the crux of my argument in Chapter 1: the semantic range of ἢ . . . ἢ is not firmly established, and in certain contexts it can be inclusive, whereas it is clearly exclusive in others. This is the semantic ambiguity and context-determined meaning that Sophocles explores in the *Trachiniae*. Linguistically, these are all instances in which there is a downward entailing environment, which is significant because certain words (negative polarity items) can only occur in a downward entailing environment. There is not firm consensus about how downward entailing environments and negative polarity items relate to one another, and scholarship on this topic has tended to focus on living languages (see Appendix B for more on this), but there is reason to believe that the behavior of ἢ . . . ἢ might be explained by looking at the inclusive or, in Greek, as a negative polarity item.

## Neither Inclusive nor Exclusive

### 3. “Or at Least” Uses

The most interesting example of a use of *or* which cannot be classified neatly into an inclusive or exclusive category is a discrete subset of these examples which I have called “qualifying.” These include instances which are perhaps best rendered in English with “A . . . *or at least* B,” in which one of the two items that is being compared is a small section from within a larger group. The simplest instance of this is the type that we see in the following passages:





involving *some or all*, a construction which seems to violate Hurford's Constraint (since *all* necessarily entails *some*) but which nonetheless occurs frequently. A (neo)Gricean approach dictates that a speaker will provide as much relevant information as they can, assuming that they are reasonably certain of the accuracy of what they know. "Some" then implicates "some but not all," since a speaker would say "all" if they were able to. The complications inherent in this idea can best be seen though an example, since the linguistic framework I have used does not effectively account for a statement of this sort:

Odysseus killed some of the suitors

which could conceivably mean

Odysseus killed some (but not all) of the suitors

Odysseus killed at least some of the suitors [and I do not know whether he killed all of them].

If an omniscient god or narrator speaks these words, we assume that the correct reading is that Odysseus killed some but not all of the suitors. If the speaker is a mortal character (say, Eurycleia), either of these two alternatives are viable. We can modify *some* to remove ambiguity, but we are then left with the constructions *some but not all* (which is, on certain interpretations, redundant, but not unacceptably so) or *some or all*, which seems to violate Hurford's Constraint. Multiple proposals have been suggested to effectively modify Hurford's Constraint,<sup>355</sup> which I mention primarily to show that this is a complicated and unresolved linguistic phenomenon.

To return to the examples provided above, we have something which resembles an inversion of the *some or all* construction: *all or at least some*. When explicitly stated, with *at least* added, this construction is perfectly clear, but *all or some* is somewhat less clear, for essentially the same reasons listed above.<sup>356</sup> For the general complexity surrounding these types of constructions, I have refrained from classifying these examples as inclusive or exclusive.

#### 4. Ambiguous Uses

My final category of non-exclusive *ors* is a far less secure category. These last examples *suggest* an exclusive reading (for a range of different contextual reasons), but they by no means demand it. This will be a useful transition point into some particularly interesting examples of

---

<sup>355</sup> For a non-exhaustive selection, see Spector 2003, Sauerland 2004, van Rooij and Schulz 2004, Spector 2006, Chierchia *et al.* 2009.

<sup>356</sup> Meyer 2014 is useful on this topic.

exclusive *ors*. The first subset of these examples consists of passages in which both alternatives *could* occur, but would often not be necessary. Many times, force is one of the two items presented, and there is an underlying assumption that if force were used, other means would not be necessary. However, in these sorts of instances, it would not be impossible for both to occur (one imagines an instance in which words include the threat of violence—the proverbial “offer he can’t refuse”—or in which words fail and then violence is used):<sup>357</sup>

- |     |   |   |
|-----|---|---|
| 4.1 | ὄς μ' ἐξοτρύνει παῖδ' ἔμὸν πείσαι λιταῖς<br>νεκρῶν κομιστήν ἢ λόγοισιν ἢ δορὸς<br>ῥώμη γενέσθαι καὶ τάφου μεταίτιον | He encourages me to persuade my child with<br>prayers to tend to the corpses, either with words<br>or with the strength of his spear, and be the cause<br>of the burial |
|     | Supp. 24-6  |   |

Similarly, there are a range of examples in which one of the two elements would be sufficient motive or explanation for events. Both certainly could be true, but either of the two alternatives would easily suffice. Examples of this usage include the following:

- |     |   |   |
|-----|---|---|
| 4.2 | τούς τε λόγους ὅστις διαμάχεται μὴ διδασκάλους τῶν<br>πραγμάτων γίνεσθαι, ἢ ἀξύνετός ἐστιν ἢ ἰδίᾳ τι<br>αὐτῷ διαφέρει | Whoever contends that speech should not<br>instruct actions, either that man is either lacking<br>sense or he has some sort of private interest |
|     | Thuc. 3.42.2  |   |
| 4.3 | ἀλλὰ σευ ἢ κάματος πολυᾶϊξ γυῖα δέδυκεν<br>ἢ νύ σέ που δέος ἴσχει ἀκήριον   | But either some impetuous weariness has come<br>upon your limbs or perhaps a spiritless fear holds<br>you                                       |
|     | Il. 5.811-12  |   |

In passage 4.2, either stupidity or a personal interest in the matter would explain someone employing the argument in question, but history is rife with examples of people displaying both stupidity and greed while advancing flawed arguments. In passage 4.3, either fear or fatigue alone might explain Diomedes’ withdrawal from battle (though, in the context of the poem, we know that neither is the true explanation) but fear and fatigue are not mutually exclusive.<sup>358</sup> As a final example, I would point to the following:

<sup>357</sup> For similar uses, see also Thuc. 1.33.3 (ἵνα μὴ τῷ κοινῷ ἔχθει κατ’ αὐτοὺς μετ’ ἀλλήλων στῶμεν μηδὲ δυοῖν φθάσαι ἀμάρτωσιν, ἢ κακῶσαι ἡμᾶς ἢ σφᾶς αὐτοὺς βεβαιώσασθαι) and Soph. *Phil.* 593-4 (διώμοτοι πλέουσιν ἢ μὴν ἢ λόγῳ / πείσαντες ἄξειν ἢ πρὸς ἰσχύος κράτος). I would also include Eur. *Phoen.* 1259-61 (ἀλλ’ εἴ τιν’ ἀλκὴν ἢ σοφούς ἔχεις λόγους / ἢ φίλτρ’ ἐπωδῶν, στεῖχ’, ἐρήτυσον τέκνα / δεινῆς ἀμίλλης), in which wise words could combine with a spell—in this case, the spell functions almost in the same way as force, in the previous examples, since magic can be seen as a form of compulsion.

<sup>358</sup> To these examples, I would add the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* 518-20 (ἀλλ’ εἴ μοι τλαίης γε θεῶν μέγαν ὄρκον ὁμόσσαι, / ἢ κεφαλῇ νεύσας ἢ ἐπὶ Στυγὸς ὄβριμον ὕδαρ, / πάντ’ ἄν ἐμῷ θυμῷ κεχαρισμένα καὶ φίλα ἔρδοις), in which Hermes’ oath would presumably be strong and binding if he swore by nodding his head or if he swore on the Styx, but oaths are often sworn on multiple things (the Hippocratic Oath, for example, is sworn on Ἀπόλλωνα ἱητρὸν καὶ Ἀσκληπιὸν καὶ Ὑγίαν καὶ Πανάκειαν καὶ θεοὺς πάντας τε καὶ πάσας. Similarly, Medea makes

4.4 δυοῖν γὰρ ἐχθροῖν εἰς ἓν ἐλθόντοιν στέγος,  
ἢ θάτερον δεῖ δυστυχεῖν ἢ θάτερον

For, with two enemies coming together under one roof, either the one must fare badly, or the other

*Ion* 848-9

In passage 4.4, the gnomic nature of the line (if the line is not spurious) suggests that only one of the two enemies will suffer (and so the other would be victorious), but Eteocles and Polynices offer a counter-example in which both men *can* die, even if that is not the most natural reading of the line.

### Exclusive *Ors*

Although there are many instances which allow for (or demand) and inclusive reading of ἢ . . . ἢ, the overwhelming majority of the instances I examined were clearly exclusive. My purpose here is to show that ἢ . . . ἢ *can* be used inclusively, but it would be disingenuous not to briefly discuss some noteworthy examples of exclusive uses. A large portion of these uses offer a basic choice between life and death, which are fundamentally irreconcilable. The most common instances take the form of *Iliad* 12.171-2:<sup>359</sup>

5.1 ὡς οἳ γ' οὐκ ἐθέλουσι πυλάων καὶ δύ' ἔοντε  
χάσασθαι πρὶν γ' ἢ κατακτάμεν ἢ ἀλῶναι

*Il.* 12.171-2

These men will not willingly fall back from the gates, though they are just two men, before they either kill or are killed

Other similar instances involve alternatives that are mutually exclusive for other reasons:

5.2 δύ' εἰσὶ τὸ πρόσθεν ὁδοί μοι  
φροντίζω τούτων ἦντιν' ἴω προτέρην  
ἢ μηδὲν δαπανῶν τρύχω βίον ἐν κακότητι,  
ἢ ζῶω τερπνῶς ἔργα τελῶν ὀλίγα

Theognis 1.911-14

There are two roads before me. I am thinking about which one I should take—either spending nothing and wearing out my life in wickedness or living pleasantly and accomplishing only a few things

5.3 κὰν τῶδ' ἀγῶν μέγιστος, ἢ κακὸν λαβεῖν  
ἢ χρηστόν

*Medea* 235-6

And the greatest struggle consists of this: either taking a good husband or a bad one.

---

Aegeus swear an oath on Γαῖαν Ἡλίου θ' ἀγνὸν σέλας / θεοὺς τε πάντας, *Med.* 752-3) and this is not a strongly exclusive use of or. Similarly, at *Thuc.* 2.13.1 (ὅτι Ἀρχίδαμος αὐτῶ ξένος ὦν ἐτύγχανε, μὴ πολλακίς ἢ αὐτὸς ἰδίᾳ βουλόμενος χαρίζεσθαι τοὺς ἀγροὺς αὐτοῦ παραλίπη καὶ μὴ δηῶση, ἢ καὶ Λακεδαιμονίων κελευσάντων ἐπὶ διαβολῇ τῇ ἑαυτοῦ γένηται τοῦτο), we see two different motivations which could easily work in tandem to explain Archidamus' actions, though either would also be sufficient motive on its own. As well as Eur. *IT* 380-4 (τὰ τῆς θεοῦ δὲ μέφομαι σοφίσματα, / ἢ τις βροτῶν μὲν ἦν τις ἄψηται φόνου, / ἢ καὶ λοχείας ἢ νεκροῦ θίγη χεροῖν, / βωμῶν ἀπείργει, μυσάρων ὡς ἡγουμένη, / αὐτῇ δὲ θυσίαις ἤδεται βροτοκτόνοις), in which any single source of pollution would suffice to make someone impure, but there is no reason to rule out multiple sources of pollution (and, in fact, engaging in murder pairs easily with touching a corpse).

<sup>359</sup> This is a very common type of construction and occurs

All of these examples involve alternatives that are necessarily mutually exclusive. Other extremely common uses of ἢ . . . ἢ include alternatives of the “this or that?” variety:

- 5.4 ποίαν ἢ ταύταν ἢ κείναν  
στείχω; Which way should I go, this or that?

*Hec.* 162-3

and of the “X or something else” form:<sup>360</sup>

- 5.5 κομίσαντες ἐσκόπουν ὅπως μετριώτατα ἢ ὀμήρων  
λήψει ἢ ἄλλῳ τῷ τρόπῳ καταπαύσουσι τὴν  
ἐπιβουλήν They contemplated and considered the most  
reasonable way—either by taking hostages or by  
some other method—for them to put a stop to  
the plot

*Thuc.* 8.24.6

Finally, there are a large number of instances (predictably, mostly in tragedy) that offer two different means of suicide, such as the following:

- 5.6 ποῦ δῆτ' ἐλήφθης ἢ βρόχους ἀρτωμένη  
ἢ φάσγανον θήγους; When, in fact, were you found hanging a noose or  
sharpening a sword?

*Troiaides* 1012-13

as well as time alternatives

- 5.7 τί ταῦτα μοχθεῖς; συμφοραὶ θεήλατοι  
πᾶσιν βροτοῖσιν ἢ τότε ἤλθον ἢ τότε Why are you so distressed? God-sent misfortunes  
come to all mortals, either at one time or at  
another time

*Andr.* 851-2

These common categories either demand or very strongly suggest an exclusive reading.

The instances I would like to examine more closely are the ones with more direct parallels to the cryptic oracle in the *Trachiniae*.

- 5.8 δίδωμ'· ἐλοῦ γάρ, ἢ πόνων τὰ λοιπά σοι  
φράσω σαφηνῶς, ἢ τὸν ἐκλύσοντ' ἐμέ I make this offer: choose what I will tell you—either  
your future sufferings or the one who will set me free

*PV* 780-1

- 5.9 ὁρᾶτε δ' ὡς τρεῖς μία τύχη τοὺς φιλότατους,  
ἢ γῆς πατρώας νόστον ἢ θανεῖν ἔχει. You see how one fate holds the three of us, most dear,  
to either return to our homeland or die.

*IT* 1065-6

- 5.10 ὡς ἐγὼ μόνη  
οὐκ ἂν δυοῖν ἤμαρτον· ἢ γὰρ ἂν καλῶς  
ἔσωσ' ἐμαυτήν ἢ καλῶς ἀπωλόμην. Since, on my own, I would not have failed at two  
things: for either I would have honorably saved myself  
or perished honorably.

*Soph. Elec.* 1319-21

<sup>360</sup> Aristotle discusses this type of disjunctive at some length at *De Interpretatione* IX (the so-called “tomorrow’s sea battle” argument).

- 5.11 οὐκ ἔστι. καὶ πρὸς γ' ἐξελῶ σφε τῆσδε γῆς,  
 δυοῖν δὲ μοίραιν θατέρᾳ πεπλήξεται·  
 ἢ γὰρ Ποσειδῶν αὐτὸν εἰς Ἅιδου δόμους  
 θανόντα πέμψει τὰς ἐμὰς ἀράς σέβων,  
 ἢ τῆσδε χώρας ἐκπεσῶν ἀλώμενος  
 ξένην ἐπ' αἴαν λυπρὸν ἀντλήσει βίον.  
*Hipp.* 893-8
- 5.12 τοῖνδ' ἐλοῦ δυοῖν πότμοιιν  
 τὸν ἕτερον· ἢ γὰρ παῖδα σῶσον ἢ πόλιν.  
*Phoen.* 951-2
- 5.13 μέγας γὰρ ἀγών, καὶ βλέπω δύο ῥοπᾶς·  
 ἢ γὰρ θανεῖν δεῖ μ', ἢν ἀλῶ τεχνωμένη,  
 ἢ πατρίδα τ' ἐλθεῖν καὶ σὸν ἐκσῶσαι δέμας.  
*Hcl.* 1090-2
- It isn't possible. And in addition, I will drive him out of this land, and he will be struck by one of two fates: either Poseidon will send him, dead, into the halls of Hades, paying heed to my curses, or else, driven out of this land and wandering over a foreign land, he will drink deeply of a miserable life.
- Chose one of these two fates: either save your child or the city.
- For the contest is great, and I see two ways the scale can incline: either I must die, if I am caught scheming, or I must come home to my fatherland and save your skin too.

In all six of these instances, the structure and import is similar to the oracles that Deianeira describes in the *Trachiniae*. All of these passages invite a straightforward, exclusive reading, just as Deianeira's words do, and all of these allow for a riddling inclusive reading, if they were placed in a different context. In passage 5.8, Prometheus offers Io two alternatives, to which the Chorus responds “τούτων σὺ τὴν μὲν τῆδε, τὴν δ' ἐμοὶ χάριν / θέσθαι θέλησον, μηδ' ἀτιμάσης λόγου,” (782-3) at which point he relents. The “answer” to that disjunct is in fact “both,” but the response of the Chorus makes clear that this is not the natural or intuitive understanding of Prometheus' offer. In passage 5.9, Iphigenia and Pylades and Orestes could—in a very differently-structured play—die upon reaching their homeland. Similarly, in passage 5.10, one can imagine an interpretation in which death is revealed to be synonymous with salvation (in the same way that death is a respite from toils) and Electra's two alternatives collapse into one meaning. In much the same way, Poseidon could destroy Hippolytus while he miserably wanders in a foreign land. Passage 5.12 presents slightly more difficulties, but Creon is a pure descendent of Cadmus and there is no explicit reason why he could not be sacrificed to save the city, thereby saving both his city and his son. All of these refer to a choice between two fates—and in passage 5.12, Tiresias is the speaker, lending a more prophetic authority to the words—but none of them prove to be deceptive. The most natural reading, with an exclusive use of or, turns out to be accurate.

Passage 5.13 I include for slightly different reasons. This parallels a different element of Deianeira's words. Here, Helen invokes the imagery of a scale (ῥοπή), which is the same word that Deianeira uses to describe Heracles' two potential fates (*Trach.* 81). This passage is a useful

comparandum for what Deianeira thinks she is describing. Here, the two alternatives really are mutually exclusive and map neatly onto the scale imagery—only one side of a scale can incline and only one of the two fates will occur.

These passages cast the strange oracles in the *Trachiniae* into much sharper focus—while ἢ . . . ἢ certainly can be used both inclusively and exclusively in a range of different ways in Greek literature, Deianeira's words have much more in common with exclusive uses of or than with the inclusive uses. The natural interpretation of her words would align with the comparanda listed above and the actual meaning of her words, only revealed later in the play, stretches the logical meaning of ἢ . . . ἢ. It does not represent an unparalleled use of this construction, as I have shown, but it does require an unconventional and unnatural reading of the oracle—and one that Deianeira very clearly does not anticipate.

## Appendix B: Linguistic Terms and Concepts

### Conventional Implicatures

Horn defines conventional implicatures as “detachable but non-cancelable aspects of meaning that are neither part of, nor calculable from, what is said” (Horn 2006: 4). Potts 2007 offers a slightly modified version which is not significantly different. A few examples will make conventional implicatures clearer.

The “classic” examples of conventional implicatures involve *but*, *therefore*, *even*, *still*, *again*, and possibly *too*.<sup>361</sup> Potts adds words such as *manage*, *fail to*, and *still*.

**Even** *Odysseus* finds that immoral.

Entails: *Odysseus* finds that immoral.

Conventionally implicates: *Odysseus* is the least likely to find something immoral.

*Achilles* is saddened, **but** he won't rejoin the fighting.

Entails: *Achilles* is saddened. *Achilles* won't rejoin the fighting.

Conventionally implicates: We would expect that if *Achilles* is saddened, he will rejoin the fighting.

*Heracles* **managed** to kill the hydra.

Entails: *Heracles* killed the hydra.

Conventionally implicates: It was difficult to kill the hydra, and *Heracles* exerted some effort to do so.

### Deeper Analysis of Implicature

The following analysis depends on these sentences, which will be analyzed in greater detail than they were in the introduction.

<b>Subtypes of Implicatures (after Grice 1961: §3)</b>
--

1a Even **KEN** knows it's unethical

1b **Ken** is the least likely [of a contextually invoked set] to know it's unethical

---

<sup>361</sup> See Kripke 1977 on the question of *too*. As he notes, in many examples of *too*, the conventional implicature is so common as to be trivial.



- 2a [in a recommendation letter for a philosophy position] Jones dresses well and writes grammatical English
- 2b Jones is no good at philosophy
- 3a The cat is in the hamper or under the bed
- 3b I don't know for a fact that the cat is under the bed<sup>362</sup>

Several key terms will be useful for a deeper analysis of these types of implicatures and inferences (and distinguishing the difference between the two categories). To begin with, the inference (1b) is only true if Ken does in fact know that it is unethical, but the same *truth-conditional content* expressed in a can be expressed in a way that does not generate 1b: “Ken knows it’s unethical (too).” This makes the inference detachable (since the inference can be detached from the utterance) but non-cancelable (because the inference cannot be canceled without contradiction).

Looking at 2a and 2b then, we see a different sort of inference at work. This inference is *non-conventional*, in that it does not derive from the conventional lexical meaning of the words, but rather from the utterance of those words in a particular context. This inference is also *cancelable*, in that the inference can be canceled, either by explicitly correcting the inference (by adding, for example, “but I don’t mean to suggest that . . .”) or by changing the context in which the words are uttered. However, it is *non-detachable*, in that any other way of expressing the same content in the same context would yield the same inference.

Looking now at 3a and 3b, we see a very similar situation. These inferences are also non-conventional, cancelable, and non-detachable, but there is an important distinction: the context in which 2b is a valid inference is much more specific than the context of 3b. In fact, only a very specific context licenses 2b, which makes 2b an example of a *particularized conversational implicature*, whereas 3b is an example of a *generalized conversational implicature*.

## Grice’s Cooperative Principle and Maxims of Conversation

### Grice’s Cooperative Principle and Maxims of Conversation (Grice 1989: 26-7)

**Cooperative Principle:** “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange.”

**Maxims of Conversations:**

**QUALITY:** Try to make your contribution one that is true.

---

<sup>362</sup> An equally valid implicature here would be “I don’t know for a fact that the cat is in the hamper.”

- 
1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
  2. Do not say that for which you lack evidence.

**QUANTITY:**

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

**RELATION:** Be relevant.

**MANNER:** Be perspicuous.

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief. (Avoid unnecessary prolixity.)
4. Be orderly.

Here, I have excerpted several additional principles, from both Davis 2014 and Grice 1989. These were not directly relevant in much of my study of Sophocles, but they are important for broader pragmatic analyses of literary (and non-literary) texts.

**Principle of Style:** Be stylish, so be beautiful, distinctive, entertaining, and interesting.

Clear and simple prose—“just the facts, please”—can be boring, tedious and dull. We liven up our writing with figures of speech and other devices. In the process, we sacrifice perspicuity (violating Manner). We sometimes “embellish” a narration to make it more interesting (violating Quality) and delete boring or ugly details even when they are important (violating Quantity).<sup>24</sup>

**Principle of Politeness:** Be polite, so be tactful, respectful, generous, praising, modest, deferential, and sympathetic.

Speakers frequently withhold information that would be offensive or disappointing to the hearer, violating Quantity. Speakers often exaggerate in order to please or flatter, and utter “white lies” in order to spare the hearer's feelings, violating Quality. People pick “safe topics” (e.g., the weather) to stress agreement and communicate an interest in maintaining good relations—but violating Relation. Euphemisms avoid mentioning the unmentionable, but in the process violate Manner and Quantity.<sup>25</sup>

### **Grice on False Information**

The maxim of Quality, enjoining the provision of contributions which are genuine rather than spurious (truthful rather than mendacious), does not seem to be just one among a

---

<sup>24</sup> Davis 2014

<sup>25</sup> Davis 2014, drawing on Leech 1983 as well as directing readers toward Lakoff 1977; Brown & Levinson 1978; 1987; Horn 1989: 360; Matsumoto 1995: §2.4. Contrast Huang 2007: 37, fn. 12; Pinker 2007. Grice 1975:28, he notes, “acknowledges the Principle of Politeness, and suggests that it generates implicatures that are both nonsemantic and nonconversational.”

number of recipes for producing contributions; it seems rather to spell out the difference between something's being, and (strictly speaking) failing to be, any kind of contribution at all. *False information is not an inferior kind of information; it just is not information.*<sup>16</sup>

## Q- and R-based Implicature

The final theoretical concept that I would like to introduce is that of Q-based and R-based implicature. These are slight modifications to the concepts of implicature laid out thus far and stem from an attempt to combine the Gricean maxims into more succinct principles. These are based off of Zipf's "speaker and auditor economies"<sup>26</sup> and there are two fundamental principles involved<sup>27</sup> (drawing on Grice's maxims, where Q refers to Quantity and R refers to Relation):

Q Principle: Say as much as you can [given R].

R Principle: Say no more than you must [given Q].

Horn then follows this formulation with some elaboration:

Q-based implicature is typically negative in that its calculation refers crucially to what could have been said but wasn't: H infers from S's failure to use a more informative and/or briefer form that S was not in a position to do so. R-based implicature involves social rather than purely linguistic motivation and is exemplified by indirect speech acts and negative

---

<sup>16</sup> Grice 1989: 371, emphasis my own.

<sup>26</sup> Zipf 1949: 20ff.

<sup>27</sup> These principles are the result of a great deal of linguistic scholarship, but I am essentially taking Horn's formulation of them, which was—as far as I know—the first attempt to systematize this (Horn 2006: 13). His chapter on implicature has the full synopsis of relevant scholarship and the history of debates about these topics. The versions I provide here are slightly modified from Horn's original formulations by Meibauer 2006: 563 and Huang 2006, 2007: 37–9 to exclude Quality from the Q principle. Horn's formulation has the consequence that people violate the principle when they lie or use figures of speech and the stripped down version is often used more simply (Davis 2014). For the justification of these two principles from Grice's basic maxims: "The Q principle is a lower-bounding hearer-based guarantee of the sufficiency of informative content ('Say as much as you can, modulo Quality and R'); it collects the first Quantity maxim along with the first two 'clarity' submaxims of manner and is systematically exploited (as in the scalar cases discussed above) to generate upper-bounding implicata. The R principle, by contrast, is an upper-bounding correlate of the Law of Least Effort dictating minimization of form ('Say no more than you must, modulo Q'); it collects the Relation maxim, the second Quantity maxim, and the last two submaxims of Manner, and is exploited to induce strengthening implicata" (Horn 2006: 13).

strengthening (including so-called neg-raising, i.e. the tendency for *I don't think that  $\varphi$*  to implicate *I think that not- $\varphi$* ).<sup>28</sup>

## Downward Entailment

Gazdar<sup>31</sup> noted that scalar implicatures seem to be suspended under negation, which led linguists to look more closely at how scalar implicatures are modified in different linguistic contexts. Horn suggested that it is not simply under negation that scalar implicatures are suspended, but in all *downward entailing contexts*, an idea developed at much greater length by Chierchia and others.<sup>32</sup>

Downward entailment (opposed directly to upward entailment, unsurprisingly, though upward entailment is not particularly relevant to my arguments and I will not be looking at it in any great detail) is significant for a variety of linguistic reasons and is a very useful concept in my exploration of language and oracular communication in Sophocles. From a linguistic theory standpoint, however, it is a concept that is inextricably linked with polarity items and I will return to the broader concept of downward entailment once I have explored polarity briefly.

*Polarity items* are words that can only appear in certain linguistic environments. These environments are characterized by their “polarity,” which can either be positive or negative. *Positive polarity items (PPIs)* are less directly relevant for my discussion, so I will focus instead on *negative polarity items (NPIs)*. As one might imagine, a negative polarity item is one that only appears in a negative context. A negative context is known as the *licensing context* for an NPI. A licensing context is simply the linguistic context in which these types of words can occur. This distinction is made much simpler by some illustrative examples.

*Any(where/thing/body/one)* and *at all* are common NPIs. The most common negative contexts (i.e. contexts which license NPIs) include basic negation as well as words that imply some

---

<sup>28</sup> Horn 2006: 13

<sup>31</sup> Gazdar 1979

<sup>32</sup> Horn 1989: 23-4 introduces this idea without much elaboration. Chierchia 2004 provides a much more detailed look at this phenomenon. He modifies this conclusion slightly, to think about contexts that license *any*, as opposed to downward entailing environments more generally, on the grounds that downward entailment is a theoretical characterization of contexts, whereas *any*-licensing is an empirical criterion. While his argument is quite compelling, it also introduces a level of specificity and terminology that is unnecessary for this project and Horn's original suggestion (as explored and generally supported by Chierchia) will suffice for my purposes.

degree of negation (verbs like *doubt*, *dislike*, *prevent*; adverbs like *barely*, *seldom*), questions (direct and indirect), and a range of other clause types (conditionals in particular) and many comparisons.

For an example of this, consider the following exchange from *The Big Lebowski* (1998):

*The Dude: I don't see any connection to Vietnam, Walter.*

*Walter Sobchak: Well, there isn't a literal connection, Dude.*

*The Dude: Walter, face it, there isn't any connection.*

Here, the negations (**don't** see, **isn't**) license the NPI (any). It would be nonsensical to say “I see any connection to Vietnam” without the negations there. However, as we see in another exchange about Walter’s persistent references to Vietnam, a question can also license the use of an NPI.

*The Dude: What . . . has anything got to do with Vietnam?*

For a more colorful example, consider the NPI *give a damn*<sup>36</sup>. Joan Jett famously claimed: “I don’t give a damn about my bad reputation,” (“Bad Reputation,” 1980) but it would have been very strange indeed, for both semantic and contextual reasons, for her to sing “I give a damn about my bad reputation.” However, as noted above, a question generally licenses the use of an NPI, and “Ms. Jett, do you give a damn about your bad reputation?” is a perfectly plausible question.

To return, then, to downward entailment, there is no firm linguistic consensus about whether downward entailment is enough to explain NPIs. In broad terms,<sup>33</sup> downward entailment exists in contexts where there is a licensed inference from a set to a subset. In logical form, this means that a function (f) is DE if and only if:

f(A) entails f(B) whenever B ∈ A

---

<sup>36</sup> While not relevant to a discussion of Greek tragedy, where we will not find any Greek equivalents to colloquial, emphatic language, some of the most amusing (to my mind) NPIs to examine are idiomatic and colloquial phrases such as *lift a finger*, *in the world, the hell* (and its R-rated variant, *the fuck*), *give/be worth a damn/a shit*, etc. We can see how these phrases function similarly and require a negative context to license their (linguistically) appropriate use.

<sup>33</sup> This definition comes from Chierchia’s summary of Ladusaw’s seminal work on downward entailment in 1979, as does the subsequent logical form.

So to return to the examples above, contexts which license NPIs are essentially the same as downward entailing contexts (or similar enough that, for my purposes, the distinction can be overlooked without a problem). So, to take the easiest example, consider negation:

A: Achilles does not like liars

B: Achilles does not like Odysseus

We know that Odysseus is a habitual liar, so Odysseus is a member of the larger set of liars. Negation is a downward entailing environment because A entails B. Any downward entailing environment will license inferences from the largest set to any smaller subset.<sup>34</sup> Any environment that operates this way is called a *downward entailing environment* and, as I noted above,<sup>35</sup> these are largely the same as environments that license the use of *any*, which is a simple test for downward entailment.

## Hurford's Constraint

Hurford's Constraint is the last discreet bit of linguistic theory that I will introduce here. In its original formulation, Hurford 1974 noted:

*Hurford's Constraint: A sentence that contains a disjunctive phrase of the form 'S or T' is infelicitous if S entails T or T entails S.*

Put more simply, it does not make sense to say either of the following

*I want to see a play or a tragedy*

*I want to see a tragedy or a play*

---

<sup>34</sup> The "downward" element refers to the smaller set in play in sentence B. This environment licenses inferences to a subset of the original claim. If we were to accept the Greek proverb, *All Cretans are liars*, then we could see how this would also operate—rather than a sub-set of I (Odysseus), we would have a subset of Cretans. We could then easily replace *Achilles does not like Odysseus* with *Achilles does not like Cretans* and it would still be entailed by sentence A.

<sup>35</sup> FN #####

In this case, play is S and tragedy is T. Because *want to see a tragedy* entails *I want to see a play*, the two sentences above are not felicitous (that is, they are not semantically and pragmatically appropriate, though they are grammatically acceptable).

However, this observation has since been complicated quite a bit.<sup>29</sup> For example, if we tweak the examples above slightly, we have a seemingly acceptable sentence:

*I want to see the first play or the second play or both.*

Strictly speaking, *I want to see both plays* entails *I want to see the first play or the second play*.

Further complicating things, when we think about examples of the following sort:

*I want to see some or all of the plays*

we have a perfectly natural, intelligible sentence, but it seems to violate Hurford's Constraint.

Gazdar<sup>30</sup> suggested a generalization to address this:

A sentence containing a disjunctive phrase 'S or T' is infelicitous if S entails T or if T entails S, unless T contradicts the conjunction of S and the implicatures of S.

To expand this a bit more, when I say *I want to see some of the plays*, I implicate that I do not want to see all of the plays, since I would simply say *all* if that were the better options. As such, scalar implicatures allow us to modify the original sentence to mean:

*I want to see some **but not all** of the plays or I want to see all of the plays.*

---

<sup>29</sup> Chierchia, Fox and Spector 2009 on the complications and an elegant solution to these complications, by integrating work on implicatures, including embedded implicatures, and where and when implicatures occur (Chierchia 2004). Much of this presentation of Hurford's Constraint is informed by this article.

<sup>30</sup> Gazdar 1979. In response to this, Chierchia, Fox and Spector 2009: 3 argue the following:

- 1) Hurford's Constraint is correct as originally stated.
- 2) All the apparent violations of Hurford's Constraint involve the presence of an implicature computing operator within the first disjunct, ensuring that Hurford's Constraint is met - hence the presence of a 'local implicature'.

They apply an exhaustivity operator that can be inserted and computed locally and argue convincingly that this provides a better solution to the apparent issues with Hurford's Constraint as originally formulated and they reject Gazdar's generalization as unnecessary and — in some situations — inadequate. I find their arguments quite compelling, but they introduce a great deal of detailed linguistic nuance that is not necessary for this project, since the few situations in which these distinctions matter do not come up in the course of any of my examples. As such, I will adopt Gazdar's generalization as a simpler option.

At this point, there is no issue with these overlapping categories and formulations of the “some or all” sort do not present a problem, from a pragmatic perspective.

## Glossary of Linguistic Terms

The following terms were discussed in the Introduction but have been replicated here for ease of reference. Many of the examples here are the same

***Block***: the process of overriding a pragmatic process that would otherwise occur.

***Entailment***: Entailments can occasionally have the same basic content as implicatures, but they are generally distinct. A *sentence* can entail something, whereas a *speaker* implicates something.

Entailment is the relationship between two sentences when one demands the truth of the other. For example:

A) That urn contains the ashes of Orestes

B) Orestes is dead

Sentence A ***entails*** sentence B. If sentence A is true, sentence B *must* be true. This relationship has nothing to do with the utterance of the sentences or the speaker’s intentions or the context.

Sentence A simply requires the truth of sentence B.

***Inference***: Inferences are distinct from implicatures, though they are often conflated with them.

The critical distinction here is that an inference is something that a hearer makes and an implicature is something that a speaker intends. A speaker can implicate something without the hearer making the intended inference and a hearer can infer something that the speaker did not implicate. In a world of perfect and complete communication, these ought to line up with one another, but the two terms describe opposite sides of unspoken communication.

***Detachable*** an inference is detachable if the inference can be detached from the utterance

***Cancelable***: an inference is cancelable if the inference can be canceled without contradiction, either by explicitly correcting the inference or by changing the context in which the words are uttered

***Non-cancelable***: an inference which cannot be canceled without contradiction



**Implication:** (what is *implied*) depends on semantic content (what actually is said). If a sentence is true, then what it implies is necessarily true.

**Implicature:** an aspect of what is meant by a speaker that is not a part of what is said by that speaker. Implicature (what is *implicated*) involves what is not said and depends on pragmatic elements instead.

**Conventional Implicatures:** per Horn, these are “detachable but non-cancelable aspects of meaning that are neither part of, nor calculable from, what is said are conventional implicatures.” Potts 2007 offers a slightly modified version, but for my purposes, there are not significant differences between the two. These are implicatures which are not connected to or derived from the Grice’s Maxims or the cooperative principle. Conventional implicatures are part of the literal meaning of the words uttered.

**Conversational implicatures:** These implicatures are derived in some sense from the context in which something is said. A conversational implicature can be either generalized (present in all contexts) or particularized (generated only in a specific context). A conversational implicature can also be a conventional implicature, in which case it is often referred to as a *generalized conversational implicature*.

**Scalar implicature:** An implicature which is generated from Gricean maxims and which suggests that the speaker made as strong a claim as they felt they were able to make. As a result, the speaker implicates that, to the best of the speaker’s knowledge, they could not truthfully make a stronger claim.

**Presupposition:** Presuppositions are also a feature of a sentence, but they work slightly differently from entailments. A presupposition involves a presupposed truth that is taken for granted. For example, *That urn contains the ashes of Electra’s brother* **presupposes** that Electra has a brother.

**Truth-conditional content:** the conditions (of the world) under which the utterance is true. If the truth conditions obtain, the utterance is true.

## Bibliography

- Albini, U. (1974). "L'ultimo atto dell' *Edipo a Colono*." *La Parola del Passato* 157: 225-231.
- Amandry, P. (1950). *La mantique apollinienne à Delphes; essai sur le fonctionnement de l'oracle*. Paris: E. de Boccard.
- (1956). "'Les thèmes de la propagande delphique,' de J. Defradas." *Revue de Philologie, de Littérature et d'Histoire Anciennes* 30: 268-282.
- Arnush, M. (2007). "Pilgrimage to the oracle of Apollo at Delphi: Patterns of Public and Private Consultation." In J. Elsner and I. Rutherford (Eds.), *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods* (97-110). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bach, K. (1982). "Semantic Nonspecificity and Mixed Quantifiers." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 4(4): 593-605.
- (2006). "The top 10 misconceptions about implicature." *Drawing the boundaries of meaning: Neo-Gricean studies in pragmatics and semantics in honor of Laurence R. Horn*: 21-30.
- Beekes, R. S. P. and Van Beek, L. (2010). *Etymological dictionary of Greek*, Brill Leiden.
- Beerden, K. (2013). *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World: Worlds Full of Signs: Ancient Greek Divination in Context*. Leiden: Brill.
- Birner, B. (2006). "Inferential relations and noncanonical word order." In B. Birner and G. Ward (Eds.), *Drawing the boundaries of meaning: Neo-Gricean studies in pragmatics and semantics in honor of Laurence R. Horn*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 31-51.
- Birner, B. J. and Ward, G. (2006). "Information Structure." *The Handbook of English Linguistics*: 291.
- Bloch, R. (1963). *Les prodiges dans l'antiquité classique: (Grèce, Étrurie et Rome)*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Blundell, M. W. (1987). "The Moral Character of Odysseus in *Philoctetes*." *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 28(3): 307.
- Bodson, L. (1978). *Hiera zōia: contribution à l'étude de la place de l'animal dans la religion grecque ancienne*. Bruxelles: Académie royale de Belgique.

- Bollack, J. (1990). *L'Oedipe roi de Sophocle: le texte et ses interprétations*. 4 vols. [Villeneuve d'Ascq, France]: Presses universitaires de Lille.
- Bollack, J., de La Combe, P.J., Wisman, H. (1977). "La réplique de Jocaste." *Cahiers de Philologie* 2: 1-104.
- Bouché-Leclercq, A. (1879). *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité*. 4 vols. Paris. [rpt. New York 1975]
- Bowden, H. (2005). *Classical Athens and the Delphic oracle: divination and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bowman, L. (1999). "Prophecy and Authority in the *Trachiniai*." *The American Journal of Philology* 120(3): 335-350.
- Bowra, C. M. (1940). "Sophocles on His Own Development." *The American Journal of Philology* 61(4): 385-401.  
(1965). *Sophoclean tragedy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bremer, J. M. (1976). "Why messenger-speeches?" In J. Bremer, S. Radt, and C. J. Ruijgh (Eds.), *Miscellanea tragica in honorem JC Kamerbeek*. Amsterdam, 29-48.
- Brown, K., Bauer, L., Berns, M., Miller, J., and Hirs, G. (2006). *The encyclopedia of language and linguistics*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Brown, P. and Levinson, S. C. (1978). "Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena." In E. Goody (Ed.), *Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction* (56-311). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, P. and Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Vol. 4). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brugman, C. (1995). "Polysemy." In J. Verschueren, J.-O. Östman, and J. Blommaert (Eds.), *Handbook of Pragmatics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Budermann, F. (2000). *The language of Sophocles: communality, communication, and involvement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bushnell, R. W. (1988). *Prophesying tragedy: sign and voice in Sophocles' Theban plays*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Busine, A. (2006). "The Officials of Oracular Sanctuaries in Roman Asia Minor." *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 6: 273-314.
- Buxton, R. (1996). "What Can You Rely on in *Oedipus Rex*?" In M. S. Silk (Ed.), *Tragedy and*

- the tragic: Greek theatre and beyond* (38-48). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Cairns, D. (2013). "Divine and Human Action in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*." In D. Cairns (Ed.), *Tragedy and Archaic Greek Thought* (119-171). Swansea: Classical Press of Wales.
- Chierchia, G. (2004). "Scalar implicatures, polarity phenomena and the syntax/pragmatics interface." In A. Belletti (Ed.), *Structures and Beyond: The Cartography of Syntactic Structures* (39-103). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chierchia, G., Spector, B., and Fox, D. (2008). "Hurford's constraint and the theory of scalar implicatures: Evidence for embedded implicatures." *Manuscript, MIT and Harvard*.
- Chirassi Colombo, I. (1991). "Le Dionysos oraculaire." *Kernos* (4): 205-217.
- Clark, M. C. and E. Csapo (1991). "Deconstruction, Ideology, and Goldhill's *Oresteia*." *Phoenix* 45(2): 95-125.
- Classen, C. J. (1976). *Sophistik*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Claus, D. B. (1981). *Toward the soul: an inquiry into the meaning of ψυχή before Plato*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Clay, J. S. (1996). "Fusing the Boundaries: Apollo and Dionysos at Delphi." *Mètis*. 83-100.
- Collobert, C., et al. (2012). *Plato and myth: studies on the use and status of Platonic myths*. Leiden: Brill.
- Cornford, F. M. (2014). *Plato's cosmology*. London: Routledge.
- Craik, E. M. (1978). "A Note on Sophokles' *Philoktetes* 456-458 and *Antigone* 323-326." *Mnemosyne* 31(2): 196-198.
- (1979). "Sophoklean Melodrama." *L'Antiquité Classique* 48(1): 15-29.
- (1980). "Sophokles and the Sophists." *L'Antiquité Classique* 49: 247-254.
- Crane, G. (1990). "Ajax, the Unexpected, and the Deception Speech." *Classical Philology* 85(2): 89-101.
- Cuyckens, H. and B. Zawada (2001). *Polysemy in cognitive linguistics: selected papers from the International Cognitive Linguistics Conference, Amsterdam, 1997*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Dahlmann, H. (1928). *De philosophorum graecorum sententiis ad loquellae originem pertinentibus capita duo*. Diss. Leipzig.
- Dakaris, S., Vokotopoulou, I., and Christidis, A.-F. (2013). *Τα χρηστήρια ελάσματα της Δωδώνης*. Των ανασκαφών Δ. Ευαγγελίδη, 2 vols, BAE.

- Dalimier, C. (1998). *Platon. Cratyle*. GF, Paris.
- Davies, M. (1991). *Trachiniae*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (2015). "The Theban Epics." *Hellenic Studies Series* 69.
- Davis, S. (1991). *Pragmatics: a reader*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Davis, W. (2014). "Implicature." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2014 Edition)*. E. N. Zalta.
- Dawe, R. (2001). "On interpolations in the two Oedipus plays of Sophocles." *Rheinisches museum für philologie* 144(H. 1): 1-21.
- Defradas, J. (1954). *Les Thèmes de la propagande delphique*. Paris: C. Klincksieck.
- Delcourt, M. (1981). *L'Oracle de Delphes*. Paris : Payot.
- Dodds, E. R. (1966). "On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*." *Greece & Rome* 13(1): 37-49.
- Donnellan, K. S. (1966). "Reference and Definite Descriptions." *The Philosophical Review* 75(3): 281-304.
- Dynel, M. (2007). "New Approaches to the Linguistics of Humour." *Journal of Pragmatics* 39(12): 2345-2354.
- (2010). "Not hearing things-Hearer/listener categories in polylogues." *Mediazonne* 9.
- (2011). *The Pragmatics of Humour across Discourse Domains*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- (2011). "Revisiting Goffman's Postulates on Participant Statuses in Verbal Interaction." *Language and Linguistics Compass* 5(7): 454-465.
- Easterling, P. E. (1981). "The End of the *Trachiniae*." *Illinois Classical Studies* 6: 56-74.
- (1997). Form and Performance. *The Cambridge companion to Greek tragedy*. P. E. Easterling. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 151-177.
- Easterling, P. E. and Muir, J. V. (1985). *Greek religion and society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Edmunds, L. (1981). "The cults and the legend of Oedipus." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 85: 221-238.
- (1996). *Theatrical space and historical place in Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- (2002). "Oedipus as Tyrant in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*." *Syllecta Classica* 13(1): 63-103.

- Edwin, S. W. (1977). "Discourse and Logical Form." *Linguistic Inquiry* 8(1): 101-139.
- Ehrenberg, V. (1954). *Sophocles and Pericles*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Eidinow, E. (2013). "Oracular consultation, fate and the concept of the individual." In V. Rosenberger (Ed), *Divination in the ancient world: Religious options and the individual*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- (2014). "Oracles and oracle-sellers: an ancient market in futures." *Religion and Competition in Antiquity*. Brussels: Éditions Latomus. 343: 55-95.
- Evans, J. (1982). "The Oracle of the 'Wooden Wall'." *The Classical Journal* 78(1): 24-29.
- Fairbanks, A. (1906). "Herodotus and the Oracle at Delphi." *The Classical Journal* 1(2): 37-48.
- Festugière, A. J. (1976). "ἄνθ' ὧν: La formule 'en échange de quoi' dans la prière grecque hellénistique." *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 60(3): 389-418.
- Fiengo, R. and R. May (1994). *Indices and identity*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Finkelberg, M. (1991). "Royal Succession in Heroic Greece." *The Classical Quarterly* 41(2): 303-316.
- Finley, J. H. (1942). *Thucydides*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- (1967). *Three essays on Thucydides*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Flacelière, R. (1938). "Le fonctionnement de l'oracle de Delphes au temps de Plutarque." *Études Archeologiques Publiées par les Annales de l'École des Hautes Études de Gant* 11: 69-73.
- (1961). *Devins et oracles grecs*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Fontenrose, J. E. (1988). *Didyma: Apollo's Oracle, Cult, and Companions*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Forrest, W. G. (1958). "Oracles in Herodotus." *The Classical Review* 8(2): 122-124.
- Freud, S. (1922). *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*. (trans. Joan Riviere). G. Allen & Unwin.
- Friese, W. (2010). *Den Göttern so nah: Architektur und Topographie griechischer Orakelheiligtümer*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Fuqua, C. (1980). "Heroism, Heracles, and the *Trachinae*." *Traditio* 36: 1-81.
- Gagarin, M. (2001). "Did the Sophists Aim to Persuade?" *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 19(3): 275-291.
- Gazdar, G. (1979). *Pragmatics: implicature, presupposition and logical form*. New York: Academic Press.

- Gellie, G. H. (1972). *Sophocles: A Reading*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press.
- Georges, P. B. (1986). "Saving Herodotus' Phenomena: The Oracles and the Events of 480 BC." *Classical Antiquity* 5(1): 14-59.
- Georgoudi, S. (1998). "Les porte-paroles des dieux: réflexions sur le personnel des oracles grecs." In I. Chirassi Colombo and T. Seppilli (Eds.), *Sibille e linguaggi oracolari: mito, storia, tradizione: atti del convegno, Macerata-Norcia, settembre 1994*. Pisa: Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, 315-365.
- Gill, C. (1980). "Bow, Oracle, and Epiphany in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*." *Greece & Rome* 27(2): 137-146.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, Doubleday.
- (1964). "The Neglected Situation." *American anthropologist* 66 (2): 133-136.
- (1974). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- (1976). "Replies and responses." *Language in Society* 5(03): 257-313.
- (1978). "Response cries." *Language*: 787-815.
- (1979). "Footing." *Semiotica* 25(1-2): 1-30.
- (1981). *Forms of talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Goldhill, S. (1984). *Language, sexuality, narrative: the Oresteia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1987). "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107: 58-76.
- (2012). *Sophocles and the language of tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldhill, S. and Hall, E. (2009). *Sophocles and the Greek Tragic Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goldstein, D. (2013). "Wackernagel's Law and the Fall of the Lydian Empire." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 143(2): 325-347.
- Graham, D., Osborne, C., and Caston, V. (2002). *Presocratic Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Gregory, J. (2005). *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Grice, H. P. (1961). "The Causal Theory of Perception." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 35: 121-168.

- (1975). "Logic and conversation." In P. Cole and J. L. Morgan (Eds), *Syntax and semantics*. New York: Academic Press.
- (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Guarducci, M. (1978). *Epigrafia greca: Epigrafi sacre pagane e cristiane*. Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato: Libreria dello Stato.
- Halliday, W. R. (1913). *Greek Divination: A Study of its Methods and Principles*. London: Macmillan.
- Harvey, F. (1966). "Literacy in the Athenian Democracy." *Revue des études grecques* 79(376): 585-635.
- Heiden, B. (1988). "Lichas' Rhetoric of Justice in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*." *Hermes* 116(1): 13-23.
- (1989). *Tragic rhetoric: an interpretation of Sophocles' Trachiniae*. New York: P. Lang.
- Henrichs, A. (1975). "Two Doxographical Notes: Democritus and Prodicus on Religion." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 79: 93-123.
- (1983). "The "Sobriety" of Oedipus: Sophocles *OC* 100 Misunderstood." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 87: 87-100.
- (1993). "The Tomb of Aias and the Prospect of Hero Cult in Sophokles." *Classical Antiquity* 12(2): 165-180.
- (1994). "Anonymity and Polarity: Unknown Gods and Nameless Altars at the Areopagos." *Illinois Classical Studies* 19: 27-58.
- (1994). "'Why Should I Dance?': Choral Self-Referentiality in Greek Tragedy." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 3(1): 56-111.
- Kirk, G. S. (1954). *Heracitus: The cosmic fragments*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hester, D. (1981). "Some Deceptive Oracles: Sophocles, *Electra* 32-7." *Antichthon* 15: 15.
- Hickey, R. (2014). *A Dictionary of Varieties of English*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hinds, A. E. (1967). "The Prophecy of Helenus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*." *The Classical Quarterly* 17(1): 169-180.
- Hoey, T. F. (1977). "Ambiguity in the Exodos of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*." *Arethusa* 10(2): 269-295.
- Holladay, A. (1987). "The Forethought of Themistocles." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107: 182-187.
- Holland, L. B. (1933). "The Mantic Mechanism at Delphi." *American Journal of Archaeology* 37(2): 201-214.



- Horn, L. R. (1976). *On the Logical Properties of Logical Operators in English*. Bloomington: Indiana University Linguistics Club Working Papers Online.
- (1984). "A New Taxonomy for Pragmatic Inference: Q-based and R-based Implicature." in Schiffrin, D. (ed). *Meaning, Form, and Use in Context: Linguistic Applications*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 11-42.
- (1989). *A natural history of negation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- (1991). "Given as New: When Redundant Affirmation Isn't." *Journal of Pragmatics* 15(4): 313-336.
- Horn, L. R., Birner, B., Ward, G. (2006). *Drawing the boundaries of meaning: neo-Gricean studies in pragmatics and semantics in honor of Laurence R. Horn*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hornblower, S. (1987). *Thucydides*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Housman, A. E. (1972). *The Classical Papers of A. E. Housman*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Hurford, J. R. (1974). "Inclusive or Exclusive Disjunction." *Foundations of Language*. 11: 409-411.
- Immerwahr, H. R. (1966). *Form and Thought in Herodotus*. Cleveland: Published for the American Philological Association [Chapel Hill, N.C.] by the Press of Western Reserve University.
- Jacoby, F. (1913). "Herodotos." *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Stuttgart. Supplementband II: 205-520.
- Jakobson, R. (1960). "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics." *Style in Language*: 350-377.
- Jay-Robert, G. (1997). "Les "hosioi" de Delphes." *Euphrosyne* 25: 25-45.
- Jeremy, C. (2001). *The Liar's Tale: A History of Falsehood*. New York: Norton.
- Johnston, S. I. (2005). *Mantikê : Studies in Ancient Divination*. Leiden: Brill.
- (2008). *Ancient Greek Divination*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Jong, I. J. F. d. and Rijksbaron, A. (2006). *Sophocles and the Greek Language: Aspects of Diction, Syntax and Pragmatics*. Leiden: Brill.
- Kaimio, M. (1970). *The Chorus of Greek Drama Within the Light of the Person and Number Used*. Helsinki: Societas scientiarum Fennica.
- Kamerbeek, J. C. (1953). *The plays of Sophocles; commentaries*. Leiden: Brill.
- (1965). "Prophecy and Tragedy." *Mnemosyne* 18(1): 29-40.

- Kane, R. L. (1975). "Prophecy and Perception in the *Oedipus Rex*." *TAPA* 105: 189-208.
- Katz, J. (2016). *Speaking American: How Y'all, Youse , and You Guys Talk: A Visual Guide*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Kennedy, G. A. (1994). *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kerferd, G. B. (1950). "The First Greek Sophists." *The Classical Review* 64(1): 8-10.  
(1981). *The sophistic movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kerferd, G. B. (1981). *The Sophists and Their Legacy*. Wiesbaden: Steiner.
- Kindt, J. (2006). "Delphic Oracle Stories and the Beginning of Historiography: Herodotus' *Croesus Logos*." *Classical Philology* 101(1): 34-51.
- Kirk, G. S., et al. (1983). *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kirwan, C. (2005). "Argument." In T. Honderich (Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kranz, W. (1921). "Aufbau und Gehalt der des Sophokles." *Sokrates* 75.  
(1933). *Stasimon: Untersuchungen zu Form und Gehalt der griechischen Tragödie*. Berlin: Weidmann.  
(1967). *Studien zur antiken Literatur und ihren Fortwirken; kleine Schriften*. Heidelberg: C. Winter.
- Kraus, C. S. (1991). "'ΛΟΓΟΣ ΜΕΝ ΕΣΤ' ΑΡΧΑΙΟΣ': Stories and Story-Telling in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*." *TAPA* 121: 75-98.  
(2007). *Visualizing the Tragic: Drama, Myth, and Ritual in Greek Art and Literature: Essays in Honour of Froma Zeitlin*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kripke, S. (1977). "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 2: 255-276.
- Lakoff, R. (1977). "What You Can Do with Words: Politeness, Pragmatics and Performatives." *Proceedings of the Texas Conference on performatives, presuppositions and implicatures*. ERIC.
- Lang, M. (1967). "Kylonian Conspiracy." *Classical Philology* 62(4): 243-249.  
(1984). "Herodotus: Oral History with a Difference." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 128(2): 93-103.

- Lardinois, A. (1992). "Greek Myths for Athenian Rituals: Religion and Politics in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus*." *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 33(4): 313.
- Lawrence, S. (2010). "Apollo and his Purpose in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*." *Studia Humaniora Tartuensia* 9: 18 pages.
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of Politeness*. London: Longman.
- Lehoux, D. (2007). "Drugs and the Delphic Oracle." *Classical World* 101(1): 41-56.
- Lehrer, A. (1990). "Polysemy, conventionality, and the structure of the lexicon." *Cognitive Linguistics* 1(2): 207-246.
- Lesky, A. (1966). *A history of Greek literature*. London, Methuen.
- Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
(2000). *Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Lhôte, É. (2006). *Les lamelles oraculaires de Dodone*. Genève : Droz.
- Linforth, I. M. (1952). *The Pyre on Mount Oeta in Sophocles' Trachiniae*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lloyd, A. B. (1975). *Herodotus, Book II*. Leiden: Brill.
- Lloyd-Jones, H. (1963). "Review: The Oxyrhynchus Papyri. Part 27 by E. G. Turner; John Rae; L. Koenen; José Maria Fernandez Pomar." *Gnomon* 35(5): 433-455.  
(1978). "Ten Notes on Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* (appendix)." In R. Dawe, J. Diggle, and P. Easterling (Eds.), *Dionysiaca: Nine Studies in Greek Poetry Presented to Sir Denys Page on his Seventieth Birthday* (60-61). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
(1994). *Sophocles*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lloyd-Jones, H. and J. Griffin (1999). *Sophocles Revisited: Essays Presented to Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lloyd-Jones, H. and N. G. Wilson (1990). *Sophoclea: Studies on the Text of Sophocles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Long, A. A. (1968). *Language and Thought in Sophocles: A Study of Abstract Nouns and Poetic Technique*. London: Athlone Press.
- Lu, K. E. (2013). *Heracles and Heroic Disaster*. Classics Department, University of Michigan. PhD.

- Luraghi, N. (2001). *The Historian's Craft in the Age of Herodotus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacLeod, C. W. (1974). "Form and Meaning in the Melian Mialogue." *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* (H. 4): 385-400.
- Maignon, A. D. (1989). "Form and Content in the Lille Stesichorus." *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 31(1): 31-56.
- Marcus, R. (2005). "Validity." In T. Honderich (Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Markantonatos, A. (2007). *Oedipus at Colonus: Sophocles, Athens, and the World*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- (2012). "Introduction: Sophocles and his Critics." In A. Markantonatos (Ed.), *Brill's Companion to Sophocles* (1-15). Leiden: Brill.
- Marshall, C. W. (2006). "How to Write a Messenger Speech (Sophocles, *Electra* 680-763)." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies. Supplement* (87): 203-221.
- Mastrorarde, D. J. (1979). *Contact and Discontinuity: Some Conventions of Speech and Action on the Greek Tragic Stage*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Matsumoto, Y. (1995). "The Conversational Condition on Horn Scales." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 18(1): 21-60.
- Maurizio, L. (1995). "Anthropology and Spirit Possession: A Reconsideration of the Pythia's Role at Delphi." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115: 69-86.
- (1997). "Delphic Oracles as Oral Performances: Authenticity and Historical Evidence." *Classical Antiquity* 16(2): 308-334.
- (2013). "Technopaegnia in Heraclitus and the Delphic Oracles: Shared Compositional Techniques." In J. Kwapisz, D. Petrain, and M. Szymanski (Eds.), *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry* (100-120). Berlin: De Gruyter.
- McClure, L. (2015). "Tokens of Identity: Gender and Recognition in Greek Tragedy." *Illinois Classical Studies* 40(2): 219-236.
- McComiskey, B. (1994). "Sophistic Rhetoric and Philosophy: A Selective Bibliography of Scholarship in English Since 1900." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 24(3/4): 25-38.
- Meibauer, J. and Brown, K. (2006). "Implicature." In *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics (Second Edition)* (568-581). Oxford: Elsevier.

- Merkelbach, R. and Stauber, J. (1996). "Die Orakel des Apollon von Klaros." *Epigraphica Anatolica*: 1-54.
- Mikalson, J. D. (1980). "Review of Fontenrose." *The Classical World* 74(3): 179-180.
- (2012). "Gods and Heroes in Sophocles." In A. Markantonatos (Ed.), *Brill's Companion to Sophocles* (429-446). Leiden: Brill.
- Moore, K. Z. (1980). "The Beauty of the Beast: Presence/Absence and the Vicissitudes of the Sphinx in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*." *boundary 2* 8(3): 1-18.
- Moravcsik, J. (1991). "Appearance and Reality in Heraclitus' Philosophy." *The Monist* 74(4): 551-567.
- Morgan, C. (1989). "Divination and Society at Delphi and Didyma." *Hermathena* (147): 17-42.
- Morrison, J. S. (1941). "The Place of Protagoras in Athenian Public Life (460-415 B. C.)." *The Classical Quarterly* 35(1/2): 1-16.
- Murray, O. (2001). "Herodotus and Oral History." In N. Luraghi (Ed.), *The Historian's Craft in the Age of Herodotus* (16-44). Oxford: Oxford University Press. [originally published 1987 in *Achaemenid History*].
- (2001). "Herodotus and Oral History Reconsidered." In N. Luraghi (Ed.), *The Historian's Craft in the Age of Herodotus* (314-325). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Naerebout, F. G. and Beerden, K. (2012). "'Gods Cannot Tell Lies': Riddling and Ancient Greek Divination." In J. Kwapisz, D. Petrain, and M. Szymanski (Eds.), *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry* (121-147). Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Nerlich, B. (2003). *Polysemy: Flexible Patterns of Meaning in Mind and Language*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Nerlich, B. and D. D. Clarke (2001). "Ambiguities We Live By: Towards a Pragmatics of Polysemy." *Journal of Pragmatics* 33(1): 1-20.
- Nilsson, M. P. (1906). *Griechische feste von religiöser bedeutung, mit ausschluss der attischen*. Leipzig: Teubner.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2006). "The *Oedipus Rex* and the Ancient Unconscious." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations*: 155.
- Nussbaum, M. C. and M. Schofield (2012). "Heraclitus." in S. Hornblower, A. Spawforth, and E. Eidinow (Eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ormand, K. (2012). *A Companion to Sophocles*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

- Østerud, S. (1973). "The Intermezzo with the False Merchant in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* 542-627." *C&M* 9: 10-26.
- Ostwald, M. (1992). "Athens as a Cultural Centre." *Cambridge Ancient History* 5: 306-369.
- O'Sullivan, N. (1995). "Pericles and Protagoras." *Greece & Rome* 42(1): 15-23.
- Paolucci, A. (1963). "The Oracles Are Dumb or Cheat: A Study of the Meaning of *Oedipus Rex*." *The Classical Journal* 58(6): 241-247.
- Papadimitropoulos, L. (2008). "Heracles as Tragic Hero." *The Classical World* 101(2): 131-138.
- Parke, H. W. (1945). "The Use of Other than Hexameter Verse in Delphic Oracles." *Hermathena* (65): 58-66.
- (1967). *The Oracles of Zeus: Dodona, Olympia, Ammon*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- (1985). *The Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Parker, R. (2016). "Seeking Advice from Zeus at Dodona." *Greece & Rome* 63(1): 69-90.
- Parry, A. (1969). "The Language of Thucydides' Description of the Plague." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 16(1): 106-118.
- Partington, A. S. (2009). "A Linguistic Account of Wordplay: The Lexical Grammar of Punning." *Journal of Pragmatics* 41(9): 1794-1809.
- Pavlou, M. (2013). "Attributive Discourse in the Speeches in Thucydides." In A. Tsakmakis and M. Tamiolaki (Eds.), *Trends in Classics - Supplementary Volumes: Thucydides Between History and Literature* (409-434). Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Payne, M. E. (2000). "Three Double Messenger Scenes in Sophocles." *Mnemosyne* 53(4): 403-418.
- Pepicello, W. J. (1987). "Pragmatics of Humorous Language." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 1987(65): 27-35.
- Peradotto, J. (1974). "*Odyssey* 8.564-571: Verisimilitude, Narrative Analysis, and Bricolage." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 15(5): 803-832.
- Pinker, S. (2007). *The Stuff of Thought: Language As a Window Into Human Nature*. New York: Viking.
- Pirenne-Delforge, V. (1998). *Les Panthéons des cités: des origines à la Périégèse de Pausanias: actes du colloque organisé à l'Université de Liège du 15 au 17 mai 1997, 2e partie*. Liège : Centre International d'Étude de la Religion Grecque Antique.
- Plant, I. M. (1999). "The Influence of Forensic Oratory on Thucydides' Principles of Method."

- The Classical Quarterly* 49(1): 62-73.
- Podlecki, A. J. (1966). "The Power of the Word in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*." *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 7(3): 233.
- Politzer, G. and L. Macchi (2000). "Reasoning and Pragmatics." *Mind & Society* 1(1): 73-93.
- Pomtow, H. (1918). "Delphische Neufunde Neue delphische Inschriften." *Klio* 15: 1-77.
- Pontier, P. (2013). "The Litotes of Thucydides." In A. Tsakmakis and M. Tamiolaki (Eds.), *Trends in Classics - Supplementary Volumes: Thucydides Between History and Literature* (353-370). Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Pratt, L. (1994). "Odyssey 19.535-50: On the Interpretation of Dreams and Signs in Homer." *Classical Philology* 89(2): 147-152.
- Price, J. J. (2013). "Difficult Statements in Thucydides." In A. Tsakmakis and M. Tamiolaki (Eds.), *Trends in Classics - Supplementary Volumes: Thucydides Between History and Literature* (435-445). Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Price, S. (1985). "Delphi and divination." In P. Easterling and J. Muir (Eds), *Greek religion and society* (128- 154). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pustejovsky, J. (1995). *The Generative Lexicon*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Ready, J. L. (2014). "Omens and Messages in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: A Study in Transmission." in Scodel, R. (ed). *Between Orality and Literacy: Communication and Adaptation in Antiquity*. Leiden: Brill, 29-55.
- Recanati, F. (1991). "The Pragmatics of What is Said." In S. Davis (Ed.), *Pragmatics: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 97-120.
- Reeve, M. D. (1970). "Some Interpolations in Sophocles." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 11.
- Reinhardt, K. (1912). "Hekataios von Abdera und Demokrit." *Hermes* 47(H. 4): 492-513.  
(1979). *Sophocles*, translated by H. Harvey and D. Harvey. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Reinhardt, K. and Becker, C. (1960). *Vermächtnis der Antike; gesammelte Essays zur Philosophie und Geschichtsschreibung*. Göttingen, : Vanderhoeck and Ruprecht.
- Ringer, M. (1998). *Electra and the Empty Urn: Metatheater and Role Playing in Sophocles*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Robbins, F. E. (1916). "The Lot Oracle at Delphi." *Classical Philology* 11(3): 278-292.
- Robertson, N. (1982). "Review of Fontenrose." *Phoenix* 36(4): 358-363.

- (1987). "The True Meaning of the 'Wooden Wall'." *Classical Philology* 82(1): 1-20.
- Robinson, D. B. (1969). "Topics in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*." *The Classical Quarterly* 19(1): 34-56.
- Romilly, J. d. (1988). *Les grands sophistes dans l'Athènes de Périclès*. Paris: Editions de Fallois.
- Rose, P. W. (1976). "Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the Teachings of the Sophists." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 80: 49-105.
- (1992). *Sons of the Gods, Children of Earth: Ideology and Literary Form in Ancient Greece*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Rosenberg, V. (1999). "Die Okonomie der Pythia oder: Wirtschaftliche Aspekte griechischer Orakel." *Laverna* (10): 153-164.
- Rosenberger, V. (2003). "Reisen zum Orakel: Griechen, Lyder und Perser als Klienten hellenischer Orakelstätten." in Witte, M. and Alkier, S. (eds). *Die Griechen und der Vordere Orient: Beiträge zum Kultur- und Religionskontakt zwischen Griechenland und dem Vorderen Orient im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 25- 58.
- (2013). *Divination in the Ancient World: Religious Options and the Individual*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Rudnytsky, P. L. (1987). *Freud and Oedipus*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rudnytsky, P. L. and E. H. Spitz (1994). *Freud and Forbidden Knowledge*. New York: New York University Press.
- Rutherford, I. (2007). *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sag, I. A. (1980). *Deletion and Logical Form*. New York: Garland Publishers.
- Saxonhouse, A. W. (1988). "The Tyranny of Reason in the World of the Polis." *The American Political Science Review* 82(4): 1261-1275.
- Schadewaldt, W. (1958). "Der Prolog der *Odysee*." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 63: 15-32.
- Schein, S. L. (2013). *Sophocles: Philoctetes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schiappa, E. (2013). *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Schiffrin, D. (1984). *Meaning, Form, and Use in Context: Linguistic Applications*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.



- Schneidewin, F. W. (1888). *Aias*. Berlin: Weidmann.
- Schultz, C. E. (2016). "Roman Sacrifice, Inside and Out." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 106: 58-76.
- Schwinge, E.-R. (1962). *Die Stellung der Trachinierinnen im Werk des Sophokles*. Göttinge: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- Scodel, R. (1982). "Hybris in the Second Stasimon of the *Oedipus Rex*." *Classical Philology* 77(3): 214-223.
- (1984). *Sophocles*. Boston, Twayne Publishers.
- (1999). *Credible impossibilities: conventions and strategies of verisimilitude in Homer and Greek tragedy*, Teubner.
- (2005). "Sophoclean Tragedy." *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Oxford: 233-250.
- (2006). "Aetiology, Autochthony, and Athenian Identity in *Ajax* and *Oedipus Coloneus*." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies. Supplement*(87): 65-78.
- (2009). "The Persuasions of *Philoctetes*." In J.R.C. Cousland and J. Hume (Eds.), *The Play of Texts and Fragments* (49-62). Boston: Brill.
- (2012). "Sophocles' Biography." In K. Ormand (Ed.), *A Companion to Sophocles*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 25-37.
- Scullion, S. (1999). "Tradition and Invention in Euripidean Aitiology." *Illinois Classical Studies* 24: 217-233.
- Seale, D. (1982). *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Searle, J. R. (1979). *Expression and meaning: studies in the theory of speech acts*. Cambridge, Eng.; New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Sedley, D. (2003). *Plato's Cratylus*, Cambridge University Press.
- Segal, C. (1964). "Sophocles' Praise of Man and the Conflicts of the *Antigone*." *Arion*, 3(2): 46-66.
- (1966). "The *Electra* of Sophocles." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 97: 473-545.
- (1975). "The Hydra's Nursling: Image and Action in the *Trachiniae*." *L'Antiquité Classique* 44(2): 612-617.
- (1977). "Philoctetes and the Imperishable Piety." *Hermes* 105(2): 133-158.
- (1981). *Tragedy and civilization: an interpretation of Sophocles*. Cambridge: Published for Oberlin College by Harvard University Press.

- (1982). "Sophocles *Electra* 610-11 Again." *Classical Philology* 77(2): 133-136.
- (1994). "Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*: Freud, Language, and the Unconscious." In P. Rudnytsky (Ed.), *Freud and the Forbidden Language*, 72-95.
- (1995). *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- (1996). "The Chorus and the Gods in *Oedipus Tyrannus*." *Arion* 4(1): 20-32.
- (2000). "The Oracles of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*: Convergence or Confusion?" *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 100: 151-171.
- Sennet, A. (2016). "Ambiguity." In E. N. Zalta (Ed.). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2016 Edition)*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
- Serra, G. (2003). "La fine dell' *Edipo re*." in Avezzù, G. (ed). *Il dramma sofocleo. Testo, lingua, interpretazione*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 321-339.
- Sheppard, J. T. (1918). "The Tragedy of *Electra*, According to Sophocles." *The Classical Quarterly* 12(2): 80-88.
- (1927a). "Electra: A Defence of Sophocles." *The Classical Review* 41(1): 2-9.
- (1927b). "Electra Again." *The Classical Review* 41(5): 163-165.
- Sidwell, K. (1996). "Purification and Pollution in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*." *The Classical Quarterly* 46(1): 44-57.
- Silk, M. S. (1996). *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Simons, M. (2005). "Semantics and Pragmatics in the Interpretation of 'or'." *Semantics and Linguistic Theory*: 205-222.
- Solmsen, F. (1975). *Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sourvinou-Inwood, C. (1979). "The Myth of the First Temples at Delphi." *The Classical Quarterly* 29(2): 231-251.
- (1989). "Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles' *Antigone*." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 109: 134-148.
- Stanton, G. R. (1973). "Sophists and Philosophers: Problems of Classification." *The American Journal of Philology* 94(4): 350-364.
- Stinton, T. (1976a). "Notes on Greek tragedy, I." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 96: 121-145.
- (1976b). "The Riddle at Colonus." *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 17(4): 323.

- (1977). "Notes on Greek Tragedy, II." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 97: 127-154.
- Stockinger, H. (1959). *Die Vorzeichen im homerischen Epos: ihre Typik und ihre Bedeutung*. St. Ottilien, Oberbayern: EOS Verlag.
- Stone, M. and D. Hardt (1999). "Dynamic Discourse Referents for Tense and Modals." In H. C. Bunt and R. Muskens (Eds), *Computing Meaning*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 287-299.
- Stoneman, R. (2011). *The Ancient Oracles: Making the Gods Speak*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Suarez de la Torre, E. (1998). "Les dieux de Delphes et l'histoire du sanctuaire." In V. Pirenne-Delforge (Ed), *Les Panthéons des cités: des origines à la Périégèse de Pausanias: actes du colloque organisé à l'Université de Liège du 15 au 17 mai 1997, 2e partie*. Liège: Centre International d'Étude de la Religion Grecque Antique, 61-87.
- Sullivan, S. D. (1999). *Sophocles' Use of Psychological Terminology: Old and New*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press.
- Syse, H. (2006). "Plato, Thucydides, and the Education of Alcibiades." *Journal of Military Ethics* 5(4): 290-302.
- Tambiah, S. J. (1990). *Magic, Science and Religion and the Scope of Rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tausiani, A. (2011). "ΟΥ ΜΗ ΠΙΘΗΤΑΙ: Persuasion Versus Deception in the Prologue of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*." *The Classical Quarterly* 61(02): 426-444.
- Thalmann, W. G. (1982). "The Lille Stesichorus and the *Seven against Thebes*." *Hermes* 110(4): 385-391.
- Thomas, R. (2000). *Herodotus in context: ethnography, science and the art of persuasion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, R. (2006). "Thucydides' Intellectual Milieu and the Plague." In A. Rengakos and A. Tsakmakis (Eds.), *Brill's Companion to Thucydides* (87-108). Leiden: Brill.
- Thompson, D. A. W. (1936). *A Glossary of Greek Birds*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Tompkins, D. P. (2013). "The Language of Pericles." In A. Tsakmakis and M. Tamiolaki (Eds.), *Trends in Classics - Supplementary Volumes: Thucydides Between History and Literature* (446-464). Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Travis, R. (1999). *Allegory and the Tragic Chorus in Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

- Truelove, S. M. (2012). "Plato and Thucydides on Athenian Imperialism." Government Department, University of Texas. PhD.
- Tsakmakis, A. and C. Themistokleous (2013). "Textual Structure and Modality in Thucydides' Military Exhortations." In A. Tsakmakis and M. Tamiolaki (Eds), *Trends in Classics - Supplementary Volumes: Thucydides Between History and Literature*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 391-408.
- Tyrrell, W. (2006). "The Suda's *Life of Sophocles* (Sigma 815)." *Electronic Antiquity* 9: 4-231.
- Tyrrell, W. B. and Bennett, L. J. (1998). *Recapturing Sophocles' Antigone*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- van Erp Taalman Kip, A. M. (2007). "Athena's One-Day Limit in Sophocles' *Aias*." *Mnemosyne* 60(3): 464-471.
- van Nortwick, T. (2015). *Late Sophocles: The Hero's Evolution in Electra, Philoctetes, and Oedipus at Colonus*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Vansina, J. (1985). *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Vayos, L. (2006). "Intertextuality as Irony: Heracles in Epic and in Sophocles." *Greece & Rome* 53(1): 48-59.
- Vernant, J.-P. (1974). *Divination et Rationalité*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Verschueren, J., et al. (1995). *Handbook of Pragmatics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Versnel, H. (1992). *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion, Volume 2: Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual*. Leiden: Brill.
- Waldock, A. J. A. (1951). *Sophocles, the Dramatist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ward, G. L. and Hirschberg, J. (1991). "A Pragmatic Analysis of Tautological Utterances." *Journal of Pragmatics* 15(6): 507-520.
- Weiner, E. J. and De Palma, P. (1993). "Some Pragmatic Features of Lexical Ambiguity and Simple Riddles." *Language & Communication* 13(3): 183-193.
- Whitman, C. H. (1951). *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Whitman, C. H. and C. Segal (1982). *The Heroic Paradox: Essays on Homer, Sophocles, and Aristophanes*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Whitmarsh, T. (2015). *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

- Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, T. J. W. v. (1917). *Die dramatische technik des Sophokles*. Berlin, Weidmann.
- Willcock, M. M. (1977). "Ad Hoc Invention in the *Iliad*." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 81: 41-53.
- Winnington-Ingram, R. P. (1971). "The Second Stasimon of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 91: 119-135.
- (1980). *Sophocles: An Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Witte, M. and Alkier, S. (2003). *Die Griechen und der Vordere Orient: Beiträge zum Kultur- und Religionskontakt zwischen Griechenland und dem Vorderen Orient im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- Woodard, T. M. (1964). "*Electra* by Sophocles: The Dialectical Design." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 68: 163-205.
- Worman, N. (1999). "Odysseus Panourgos: The Liar's Style in Tragedy and Oratory." *Helios* 26: 35-68.
- (2002). *The Cast of Character: Style in Greek Literature*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Wright, E. (1982). "Derrida, Searle, Contexts, Games, Riddles." *New Literary History* 13(3): 463-477.
- Wright, M. (2005). "The Joy of Sophocles' *Electra*." *Greece & Rome* 52(2): 172-194.
- Wunder, E. (1841). *Eduardi Wunderi emendationes in Sophoclis Trachinias*. Grimae: J. M. Gebhardt.
- Yus, F. (2003). "Humor and the search for relevance." *Journal of Pragmatics* 35(9): 1295-1331.
- Zipf, G. K. (1949). *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort: An Introduction to Human Ecology*. Cambridge: Addison-Wesley Press.