
Sophocles: Some Bearings

Author(s): Robert M. Torrance

Source: *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 1965, Vol. 69 (1965), pp. 269-327

Published by: Department of the Classics, Harvard University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/310785>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*

JSTOR

SOPHOCLES: SOME BEARINGS

BY ROBERT M. TORRANCE

HOW are we to read Sophocles? The question is anything but rhetorical, as the sweeping diversity of current interpretations makes clear.¹ This most "classic" of all Greek poets is also the hardest for us to know how to approach. His characters, indeed, are drawn with such clarity and power as to leave no doubt of their compelling magnificence and grandeur. Yet the implications of their actions and the meaning of the great forces at work within and upon them — these are problems which thrust themselves forward with an impact almost equal to that of the characters themselves. Sophocles writes not of ideas but of people; yet in few poets is one aware of so vast and cogent an intellect shaping and molding the diverse materials of his drama into a unity as complex as it is comprehensive. His very simplicity, because so much has gone into its making, is the special source of his difficulty: his works contain so highly concentrated a distillation of experience that, for all their clarity, they seem inexhaustible of possibilities, interpretations, ambiguities. His harmony dizzies.

Sophocles' seven extant plays were written, in all probability,² over a period which nearly spanned the latter half of the fifth century B.C. These were the years of Pericles and the Parthenon, the invasions of Attica and the Plague, Cleon and his victories, the Peace of Nicias, the Sophists and Socrates, the disastrous Sicilian expedition, and the approaching final defeat of Athens. They were years of almost unparalleled turbulence and activity. Yet so great an artist was Sophocles, and so successful in fusing the elements of his experience into myth and drama, that the order of his plays (insofar as it can be determined) has more often than not been ignored in discussing his works: their qualities of permanence and universality have greatly obscured the possibility of significant change and development in his thought and outlook.³ This fusion is no small part of the poet's triumph, but may well be hazardous to the reader's and critic's understanding of the complex issues of the plays. Certainly we may determine, and must not underestimate, the presence in Sophocles' work of certain unchanging values of paramount importance: his heroes, from first to last, possess a

kinship in grandeur and tragic dignity, and all that he wrote bears the stamp of a powerful integrating personality. But we shall be ill-advised, and most probably led astray, if we attempt to define "Sophoclean thought" or to understand the forces at work in the plays without taking into account whatever development may have occurred in so active an intellect during those many long years of excitement and change.

Moreover, the artistic integrity of Sophocles' plays is likely to obscure for the reader not only the changes in his ideas, but even their very nature. Few can doubt, on beholding or reading the *Antigone* or the Oedipus plays, for example, that the poet is deeply concerned with the fundamental issues of human life as he sees it: but what are these issues, and in what terms are we to discuss them? For all his unquestionable intellect, Sophocles is the least abstract, the least conceptual, of authors. So inseparably are his ideas bound up with his characters, the language they speak, and the situations they speak it in, that it is meaningless to discuss them in any other context. Aeschylus, with the more or less consistent religious symbolism of his choruses, and Euripides, with his sophistic language and passionately polemic spirit, are much easier to talk about. With Sophocles we scarcely know where to begin.

Yet perhaps if we admit at the outset the possibility that development in Sophocles' vision of life may have occurred in the forty-year span between the first and the last of his extant plays, the *Ajax* and the *Oedipus at Colonus*, we shall have, at least, a point of departure. An examination of these two dramas and a comparison of any significant similarities and differences in their thematic structures may enable us, tentatively, to measure and appraise whatever change may have taken place; may provide us, further, with some bearings for the interpretation of the intervening plays and of Sophoclean drama as a whole. Just because of that characteristically unifying compression by which Sophocles, simplifying outline without simplifying content, conveys so much in the course of each brief, clear drama, it is perhaps possible for his critic, by dealing in the poet's own terms, to suggest much of value in brief compass. I would emphasize "the poet's own terms." There is no greater pitfall for the reader or critic who would endeavor to understand, than to impose on an author terms which are alien to him. Sophocles has most conventionally been presented in religious terminology, Greek or Christian, as one who taught in his plays the gods' punishment of those who sinned against them. This view has been developed at great length in C. M. Bowra's *Sophoclean Tragedy*.

Bowra writes:

The central idea of Sophoclean tragedy is that through suffering a man learns to be modest before the gods . . . Each learns his real state and accepts it by abandoning his illusions . . . When they are finally forced to see the truth, we know that the gods have prevailed and that men must accept their own insignificance . . . Despite all the suffering and horror we feel not indignation but relief, because in spite of everything the human characters have made their peace with the gods.⁴

According to this view the hero is punished, as in Aeschylus, by the *atê* of the gods for some *hybris* resulting from a "tragic flaw," a *hamartia*, and is thus brought either to wisdom in submission, or to death. It is a marvelously consistent explanation, but we may, perhaps, judiciously question its applicability, in large part, to the text of Sophocles.

In opposition to this rather complacent theological viewpoint has arisen the "humanistic" interpretation, according to which the concerns of Sophocles were radically different from those of Aeschylus. In his provocative book *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism*, Cedric Whitman, the most cogent and original exponent of this view, writes:

The trilogy was the perfect vehicle for divine justice. Why then did Sophocles abandon it? It is customary to say that he was more interested in individual fates; but it is clearer to observe that he was not concerned with divine justice but with divine injustice. The single play offered Sophocles that form of moral problem which for him was most pertinent: the morality of individual man in the face of irrational evil . . . The emphasis consequently shifts, not merely from god to man, but from the structure of cosmic justice to the structure of human morality.⁵

Now, if "humanism" is understood to mean simply a greater emphasis and sharper focus on man than is apparent in Aeschylus, Sophocles is clearly a humanist. But if we must further understand this humanism to imply an "agnostic attitude" and "indifference" on the poet's part toward gods who "no longer stand in the moral picture,"⁶ then we must again question the relevance of the interpretation to the terms of the drama on which it is imposed.

My point is that, at least to begin with, the opposition between a "theological" and "humanistic" view of Sophocles is not pertinent to the plays themselves, and sets up a distorting prism between them and the reader. Bowra speaks throughout his book of the cardinal Greek virtue of *sophrosynê*, which he characteristically translates "modesty." Yet the noun itself appears nowhere in Sophocles; and though its verbal and adjectival forms are frequent, it is noteworthy that in the

last, longest, and most ostensibly “religious” of the plays, the *Oedipus at Colonus*, no form of the word is found at all. It would seem that Sophocles, in the grand tradition of the Oxford master, was somewhat absent-minded about the “lesson” he meant to teach. Similar, on the other side of the fence, is Whitman’s use of the word *aretê*. Ever since Werner Jaeger’s now classic discussion of this term (roughly, “courage” for Homer and “virtue” for Plato and Aristotle) in his *Paideia*, it has become customary to apply it rather loosely to a wide range of excellences, so that Whitman speaks even of Deianeira’s “supremacy of gentleness” in the *Trachiniae* as “a kind of arete.”⁷ Unfortunately Sophocles, lacking the fruits of Jaeger’s erudition, uses the word but six times in his seven plays,⁸ and then only of warriors. An interpretation of Sophocles centered around *aretê* seems no more justified than one based on *sophrosynê*.

Another, more radical, solution to the problem of Sophocles’ thought has been advanced by A. J. A. Waldock in *Sophocles the Dramatist*. Waldock contends, with disarming candor, that Sophocles, as a practical playwright preoccupied with his theatrical effects, simply “eschews thinking.”⁹ This is a book whose pages are interspersed with occasional insights of great solidity: it should serve, at the very least, as a roadblock in the path of doctrinaire theories. But, in the end, the eschewal of thinking which its pages manifest is not to be laid at Sophocles’ door.

Sophoclean criticism in English has more recently been graced by the keen observations of H. D. F. Kitto and Bernard Knox. Kitto has evolved a conception in which *Dikê*, “a universal rhythm, ruling in the physical world and in human affairs alike,”¹⁰ plays a central role in Sophocles’ vision of life. This conception has led him to discover a close interplay between the human and the divine throughout the tragedies. Knox, meanwhile, has given us some of the most balanced and penetrating analyses of Sophocles’ plays in English. His grasp of their historical context, his close adherence to their text, and above all his appreciation of their heroic qualities, are unexcelled. Yet both Kitto and Knox have concerned themselves almost exclusively with the unchanging, the constant elements in Sophocles’ vision, thus leaving unexplained the disparity of mood and structure between the earlier and the later plays — between, for instance, the *Trachiniae* and the *Electra*.¹¹

What is needed is to abandon the presuppositions of strictly theological or strictly humanistic viewpoints and to examine the plays, first in themselves and then in comparison one with another. In doing so we

must be prepared to follow up the implications of differences as well as of similarities. Let us begin at the beginning, with *Ajax*.

I. *AJAX*

No quality of the *Ajax*¹² is more immediately striking than its violent contrasts. Contrast pervades the language, with its sweeping oppositions of images culminating in the juxtapositions of winter and summer, night and day, friend and enemy, in Ajax's great central speech (646–92), and dominates the dramaturgy, with its sudden, unexpected shifts of mood and its harshly discordant groupings of characters. Ajax himself, who is part of this world, stands in uncompromising opposition to it, a monolithic colossus in a milieu of conflict and change. Such is his defiant posture, and such his hostile surroundings, that he virtually cries out for judgment. Yet how are we to judge him, this heroic criminal of terrible grandeur who fights stubbornly against a world he cannot change, and would rather die than change himself to adapt to its ways? We must attempt, by examining the position in which Ajax is placed, and places himself, *vis-à-vis* the gods and his fellow men, to orient ourselves in such terms as the drama requires.

The question of men's relationship to the gods is abruptly brought to the fore in the prologue, and is commented on by nearly every principal character in the play. No doubt whatsoever exists in anyone's mind that human actions are directly subject to divine supervision and control. Odysseus says to Athena, "In all things, as in the past, so in the future, I am guided by your hand" (34–5); for "anything may happen when a god contrives" (86). Tecmessa tells the Chorus that Ajax's words in his madness were such as "a god, and no man, had taught" (243–4). The Chorus, in turn, fears some blow from a god has befallen him (278–9); and later, after Ajax's death, Tecmessa cries in lamentation, "These things would not have been thus without the gods" (950). Teucer is outspoken in his belief: "I should say that these things and all things always are contrived for men by the gods; and whoever is not pleased with this, let him cherish his ideas as I mine" (1036–9). Menelaus too is prepared to credit the gods with saving his life and taking Ajax's (1057–61). But it is Ajax himself who, on recovering from his madness and realizing he has slain sheep instead of the Greek leaders, is most emphatic of all: "The gorgon-eyed invincible goddess, daughter of Zeus, when I was preparing my hand against *them*, foiled me by casting on me a raving disease, so that I bloodied my hands on these flocks" (450–3). This unanimity of the characters concerning the

control exercised by the gods over men is a striking feature of the play, emphatic and questioned by no one. The element of conflict, however, asserts itself forcefully in the strain between what we may call the divine framework of the tragedy and its human content.

The viewpoint of human activity taken by these controlling divinities is so unequivocally expounded in the prologue as to cast its shadow over the entire play. Athena's words are so simple, direct, and incapable of misconstruction as to seem almost crude. "Is it not the sweetest of laughter to laugh at one's enemies?" she asks (79). "Do you see, Odysseus, how great is the strength of the gods?" (118). And, lest there should be any ambiguity, she concludes:

Therefore, beholding such things, never speak presumptuously against the gods, or act arrogantly, if ever you prevail over someone by strength of hand or by abundance of great wealth. For a day turns all human things aside and restores them again; and the gods love the wise (τοὺς σώφρονας) and hate the evil. (127-33)

Whatever, we may think of this edict,¹³ it is stated with power and conviction, and is confirmed overwhelmingly throughout the play. Ajax commits unmistakable *hybris* in his attempt to kill the Greek commanders, and *atē* comes upon him for it in the form of divine madness. These traditional religious terms are consistently used of him.¹⁴ As for Athena, her speech and actions are wholly appropriate to the avenging deity. No one in the entire play complains that she is unjust, however harsh and cruel her actions may seem to us. She simply gives Ajax his deserts, and this is recognized by all. Nor is her motivation personal or spiteful. Ajax has given her sufficient cause to bear a grudge, as we learn at length from the Messenger (756-77). But this insolent behavior, this self-willed flouting of divine assistance, was not the direct cause of his punishment, nor must it be taken as merely a personal insult to Athena, who is, after all, the goddess of wisdom. Instead, it illustrates Ajax's lifelong habit of thinking, as the Messenger twice says (761, 777), not *κατ' ἄνθρωπον*, not as a man, realizing his limitations, should. His presumptuous words were indeed the origin of Athena's anger (776-7); but the direct cause of Ajax's punishment, which all this serves to clarify, was his attempt to kill his commanders in anger at the judgment of the arms. It was after, not before, that attempt that Athena sent divine madness on Ajax. His violent punishment came in requital for a violent deed; he got what he was asking for. He cries that Athena "is torturing me to death" (403) — precisely as he himself had thought he was torturing Odysseus (110-113). Thus Athena is

neither a "spirit of the hour" nor a malignant and jealous woman. She is the arbiter of destiny, the dispenser of an impeccable — but inhuman — justice.¹⁵ Her very inhumanity, indeed, is understandable only as being her immortality viewed from another perspective.

But this other perspective is our own; and thus we are brought face to face with the drama's contrasting human content. The contrast is a strong one, so strong that we must beware lest it throw our interpretation off center. Ajax's punishment and death, seen from the viewpoint of the gods, *sub specie aeternitatis*, is perfectly right, perfectly just: he has reaped what he sowed, no more. The wheel has come full circle, and *atê* has followed *hybris*. And yet, there *is* more. Such a view is one thing for the unembroidered gods, but we are men; and Ajax is no mere symbol of punished crime, but a fellow being who, however heinous his deeds may have been, commands our fullest respect by the inflexible rigidity with which he persists in refusing to learn the wisdom of yielding to life. He will break, but not bend. He is too big for his frame. He is wrong, but he is great. Everything in the play — the devotion of Tecmessa and the Chorus, the loyalty of Teucer, the envious hatred of the Atreidae, and the tribute paid by Odysseus at the end — underscores this central fact. In contrast Athena is cold and remote. To laugh at one's enemies is an Olympian prerogative, but as Odysseus immediately recognizes, and as the Atreidae will later graphically demonstrate, it is not a form of behavior suited to mortal men. The gap between the impersonal divine justice embodied in Athena and the very personal human grandeur of Ajax is thus complete. Odysseus seeks to bridge this chasm by combining an awareness of the supreme power of the gods with the maintenance of his essential humanity. Because of his eminent *sophrosynê* he is not only loved by the gods but, by the end of the play, universally respected among men. The Chorus, which had from the beginning (148–150) accused him of slandering and plotting against Ajax, now says, "Odysseus, whoever says that you were not born wise in judgment, being such as you are, is a foolish man" (1374–5). Yet the very fact that he is necessary in the scheme of the drama serves also to *emphasize* the underlying polarity of its universe. The qualities which set Ajax apart from Odysseus, which make him grander and more heroic, are those which, inevitably it seems, pit him against justice and the gods. "I see," says Odysseus, "that all of us who live are nothing else but phantoms or a flitting shadow" (125–26). In contrasting human with divine power, he is unquestionably right: the wise man must know that men are as nothing when opposed to that "strength of the gods" (118) which becomes so amply apparent to the

characters in the course of the play. Yet Ajax's refusal to believe that men are merely shadows, which blinds him and pits him against the gods, is also the essence of his heroism. The two qualities seem inextricably united: such heroism contains an inherent *hybris*, and *hybris* an inherent *até*. The resolution offered in the final scene is tenuous at best. Odysseus, who had shrunk back in the prologue from the encounter between Ajax and Athena, here negotiates a truce between Teucer and the Atreidae, and shows that there is a place in this universe for a man of capacious understanding and generosity, of *sophrosyné*. But such a one, even to live on in a world of shadows, must be cautious, watchful, unheroic. Ajax, who was heroic, is dead. And though his heroism, his *areté* (1357), has won him a degree of vindication, that vindication is valid, and could exist, only in the eternal changelessness of death, for the terms on which it rests are incompatible with the flux which is life. With this tension the play ends. Ajax will be buried, and as the Chorus carries his body out Teucer proclaims him "the best of men" (1416). But the final effect is not one of "pomp and orchestral sonority," of "apotheosis" and "moral triumph."¹⁶ The contrasts have been too great. Odysseus has achieved a humane solution, and Ajax's reputation, which had so concerned the Chorus throughout, has been firmly upheld. But what has happened to Ajax, his crime and his fall, has not been undone, and could not have happened otherwise. The disparity between divine justice and power, on the one hand, and human heroism and greatness of soul, on the other, is left, in the terms of this play, unresolved and unresolvable.

I shall return later to what I believe some of the implications of this latently irreconcilable split to be. Now it is sufficient to note that it exists, and pervades the play. Much the same kind of duality and strain manifests itself in Ajax's relations with his fellow men. Just as the very qualities which endowed him with heroism placed Ajax in conflict with the divinely established order of life, and led to his downfall, so do these same qualities isolate him from common humanity. Again, the elements of the play seem to contain an inherent dissonance, evidenced in its sharp structural divisions, which endows the whole with a certain supreme tension.

In Ajax's dealings with those around him this quality is evinced in a mutual lack of communication and understanding, as if the characters, being what they are, were moving inevitably in different dimensions. This is particularly clear with Tecmessa. She is a wholly sympathetic character, completely loyal and devoted to Ajax, and fully capable of sharing his sorrows. In an emphatic, if rather awkward exchange with

the Chorus (265–77), she stresses that they, by their consciousness of Ajax’s suffering, must bear its burden as much as he: “It is we, who are not afflicted, who suffer now” (269). The Chorus say that they “share in his grief” (283), but carry less conviction; only shortly before, on first hearing that Ajax had in fact performed the deed which rumor had attributed to him, they had been prepared to flee so as *not* to “share in his grief” (255). Tecmessa’s compassion, shown in such touches as her concern to save her child Eurysaces from his raving father (531), is genuine and unrestrained. She poignantly tells the Chorus, in her grief for Ajax’s death, “It is for you to conjecture about these things, but for me to understand them only too much” (942). Yet in Ajax her love and sympathy meet a brick wall. He is totally impregnable to her. They speak at odds, by their very natures. Two speeches (430–80, 485–524) which stand at the center of the first episode underline this cleavage. Ajax, disgraced and humiliated by his ignominious failure to kill his leaders, blames Athena and determines neither to shame his father by returning home, nor to gladden the Atreidae by throwing himself into battle. He concludes that “the well-born man must either live well or die well; you have heard all”:

ἀλλ’ ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκέναι
τὸν εὐγενῆ χρῆ· πάντ’ ἀκήκοας λόγον. (479–80)

Tecmessa, on the other hand, urges the necessity of yielding to the stream of life and of considering others. She herself was free-born but is now a slave; she implores Ajax not to abandon her and his parents and child. A man should requite good with good. Thus she, in turn, concludes that “kindness is always the begetter of kindness, and whoever forgets the time when he has received a benefit, he will not become a ‘well-born’ man”:

χάρις χάριν γάρ ἐστιν ἢ τίκτουσ’ αἰεὶ
ὅτου δ’ ἀπορρεῖ μνήστις εὖ πεπονθότος,
οὐκ ἂν γένουτ’ ἔθ’ οὗτος εὐγενῆς ἀνὴρ. (522–4)

This antithesis is more than a rhetorical device. These views of life are mutually exclusive. Ajax’s code, which has made him great, has made him immobile as well.

The ideal of the *εὐγενής*, the “well-born” man, which both Ajax and Tecmessa here stress in their different ways, is a very important one in this play. A pride in family, a strong sense of kinship and duty, is a basic component of Ajax’s heroic character. In the speech to Tecmessa quoted from above he compares his own disgraceful deeds to the fame his father Telamon had won at Troy (434–40), asks how he can

face his father if he returns dishonored (462–5), and says, “I must seek some means by which to show my father that, born from him, I am not spineless by nature” (470–2). Tecmessa, who knows him well, argues in return that by ending his life he will expose her to the taunts of his enemies, and “these words will be shameful to you and to your race” (505). “Respect your father” (506), she pleads; “respect your mother” (507); “pity your child” (510). Ajax is not moved by her appeal, but has his son brought out, and says of him: “He must soon be broken into his father’s rough ways and become like him in nature. O child, may you be more fortunate than your father but like him in other respects, and you will not be bad” (548–51). Ajax, having committed his shameful mistake, sees no choice for himself but to die. If this means sorrow not only for Tecmessa and Eurysaces, but, as the Chorus too perceives, for his mother (622–34) and father (641–5) as well, that is but one more of the conflicts inherent in the structure of the play: only by grieving them can he prove himself worthy of them. Before he throws himself on his sword Ajax calls on the sun to “announce my destruction and my fate to my old father and the poor woman who bore me. She will indeed be wretched when she hears this report, and will raise a great wail through all the city. But I need not thus lament in vain, but must begin the deed with haste” (848–53). This is his only way to be true to the nature he was born with.

A similar sense of the importance of race is seen in Ajax’s half-brother Teucer. This is especially worthy of note since Teucer is illegitimate and a bowman — therefore of lower social standing. He too imagines the harsh greeting he will receive from his father Telamon if he returns home in dishonor (1008–20). He accuses Menelaus of merely *seeming* to be *εὐγενής* (1095), and takes great pride in his own birth. Agamemnon insults him by calling him low-born and a slave (1229–31, 1235, 1259–61), and Teucer, far from claiming that birth is unimportant, replies at length by contrasting his own lineage with Agamemnon’s, entirely to his own favor (1288–1305). A man’s birth, in this play, is closely bound up with his honor and self-esteem and, like the power of the gods, is of undisputed importance.

These scenes between Teucer and the Atreidae bring into focus still another central conflict of the drama, that between authority and the individual. In the parodos the Chorus had said: “The small without the great are a tottering bastion for the walls, for the little man would prosper best with the great, and the great served by the lesser. But it is not possible to teach foolish minds these things” (158–63). The final part of the play, before Odysseus enters, is the perfect illustration

of this futility. The situation is one where the little man attempts brazenly to rule the fallen great.¹⁷ Menelaus gloats over Ajax's body, and says, "If we were not able to control him when alive, at least we will wholly rule him when dead" (1067-8). He goes on, in his Spartan way, to defend the paramount importance of law, fear, and submission. Without them, he says, an army cannot be ruled wisely, *σωφρόνως* (1075). Therefore he will refuse the criminal Ajax burial. What he does not see, the Chorus points out: "Menelaus, do not, when you have set down wise counsels, yourself become insolent (*ὕβριστής*) toward the dead" (1091-2). Menelaus, in his supreme pettiness, is the living refutation of his bold words. Authority is not wrong in itself; but he is simply too slight a man to invest it with any real human meaning. He stresses the form and neglects the content. Agamemnon too makes no allowance for human greatness outside the mold he conceptualizes. Yet Teucer, though our sympathies lie with him, is not a character to command deep admiration. He is too small, too rigid, too vitriolic; he lacks vision and stature. He trades stinging taunts on equal terms with those Atreidae whom Ajax had shunned. To him, as to Menelaus, the Chorus's words are pointed: "I do not approve of such a tongue in the midst of hardships, for harsh words, even if completely just, sting" (1118-9). Indeed, the emphasis of this last part of the play falls heavily on *words*. "What dread courage your tongue breeds" (1124), Menelaus sarcastically tells Teucer; and goes on to compare him with a man "bold in tongue" (1142). Agamemnon enters on hearing of Teucer's "dread words" (1226), and Teucer returns his compliment by accusing him of "speaking many mindless words" (1272) — just as he dismissed Menelaus as "a foolish man speaking slight words" (1162). In the midst of such wrangling, such *logomachia*, the Chorus's plea (1264) — "Would that you both might have the sense to show wisdom (*σωφρονεῖν*)" — falls stillborn. Such wisdom Odysseus alone, in his play, possesses.

Thus these scenes of contention and invective serve several functions in the play. They heighten our sense of Ajax's grandeur by simple contrast with these little men, these men of words. But they also constitute a commentary, in the form of a serious parody, on Ajax's relations with the gods. There is the same kind of unresolvable conflict between the proud and upright Teucer and the state-minded Atreidae as, on a totally higher plane, existed between great Ajax and the impersonal justice embodied in Athena. The Atreidae show the concept of justice in its most debased and impoverished form because, as Odysseus says, they "would destroy the laws of the gods" (1343) by refusing

Ajax the honor which is his due in death. When impersonal justice becomes personal and vindictive, it is starkly revealed as hatred and tyranny. Odysseus, who stood so helplessly by in that first confrontation, restores a tenuous balance by his humanity, vision, and awareness that he himself, like his old enemy Ajax, is mortal (1365). But Agamemnon leaves vowing eternal enmity (1372-3), and Teucer prays that the gods may bring destruction on those who had insulted Ajax (1389-92). The opposites come no closer to union; the centrifugal forces are in no way diminished. Odysseus, though honored by all, is very nearly as isolated as Ajax had been.

Such is the milieu in which Ajax's tragedy occurs: a world of absolute contrasts held together only by Odysseus' moderation and wisdom, and by Ajax's own unyielding personality. In such a world what does the hero learn? He learns nothing, because he will take it on no terms but his own. A universe where "a day turns all human things aside and restores them again" (131-2) renders all certainty impossible. Odysseus says at the beginning, "We know nothing clearly, but wander" (23), and the Chorus concludes the play with the lines: "Men can know many things by seeing, but until he sees, no man is a prophet of how he will fare in the future" (1418-20). It is just this uncertainty which Ajax cannot accept: he must shape the course of his life even if he must die to do so. He stands against all that his universe is, and knowledge of it is painful to him. To his child Eurysaces he says, "I envy you this, that you do not perceive these hardships. For the sweetest life lies in understanding nothing, until you learn of joy and grief" (552-5). Rightly he tells Tecmessa, "You seem to me to be thinking foolishly if you intend to educate my temper now" (594-5). He would not be Ajax if he were other than he is, and to stay Ajax the world will be well lost.

It is this which gives the immense irony to his great speech on time and change.¹⁸ The world in which this play takes place is, I have tried to show, such that Ajax is left with only two alternatives: to reject it outright or to adapt himself to its uncertain ways. There is no compromise; he cannot remain a hero and stay alive. For a moment, in this speech, it seems that he has taken the course which is clearly impossible for him. Time, he says, brings to birth and obscures all things. Now he pities Tecmessa and will bury his sword, softened by her pleas. He will learn "to submit to the gods and reverence the Atreidae" (666-7), for they are his rulers. As winter gives way to summer, night to day, wind to calm, sleep to wakefulness, so will he learn to be wise, *σωφρονεῖν* (677). For he knows that friends may in time become enemies and enemies friends.

The peculiar irony of all this is that Ajax, whom consciousness pains, is fully conscious of the wisdom — for others — of what he is saying, but no less aware of its utter impossibility for him. He knows he will reject this course because, life being what it is, he cannot follow it and retain his integrity. Time changes all things, yes; but Ajax's greatness has its identity only in immutability. It is an absolute; if he cannot nobly live, now that he is disgraced, then he *must* nobly die. Wisdom, *sophrosynê*, is a wise course for those who would live on in this world. Ajax had recommended it to Tecmessa (586), and if the Atreidae misunderstand it as badly as they misunderstand the nature of justice, that does not invalidate it for those who, like Odysseus, can live life in accord with a broad, sympathetic comprehension of its meaning. But Ajax's nature is rooted in values which do not partake of *sophrosynê*, and if self-imposed death is the outcome of such a nature, whose excesses lead to crime and to downfall, then, by his code as an *εὐγενής*, he must accept that outcome. Learning is impossible for him: he must act in accord with the consequences of what he is and what he has done.

Therefore any judgment of Ajax based on the paramount value of either submission or defiance must be false. This is a play about a hero in a world where heroism, on his terms, can no longer exist. We learn respect and awe for Ajax's greatness, for his adherence to permanent values in a world where little else is permanent, but we see also the insane futility of his effort to be a god, and know that his fall is inevitable, and therefore just, by the nature of things as they are. Teucer's anapests at the close of the play are no song of moral triumph. They are, quite simply, an elegy. Ajax was great and is dead.

2. OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

We must return later to some of the problems raised by this reading of the *Ajax* — some of the implications of the divisive forces at work in this study of a great man in a universe where such greatness is ultimately destructive of others and of self, and where only the man of cautious *sophrosynê* can maintain his values and live on in a world of change, a world whose final justice, however sure, is remote and hard to perceive. But first, to gain some sort of perspective through contrast, let us examine the play which Sophocles wrote near the end of his life, a long generation later — the *Oedipus at Colonus*.¹⁹

The contrasts within this drama are no less marked than those of the *Ajax*, but they are of a different order entirely, and the total

impression is vastly dissimilar. Oedipus, for all his heroic energy, for all the many sufferings he has so irrationally endured, dies at one with himself, the gods, and those around him whom he has chosen for his own. This is a play where titanically kinetic forces coexist and intermingle with acceptance, understanding, and love. What has made this change, this reorientation of outlook, possible?

We have seen that Ajax, in his heroic solitude, was thrown out of contact even with those who, like Tecmessa and the Chorus, consistently took his part: for all practical purposes he talked only to himself and cared for nothing but his own integrity and honor. In this play, however, Oedipus reacts strongly — whether for good or bad — to those who compose his world, and eventually realizes his own identity through his relations with them. This is apparent from the first in the interplay between Oedipus and the old men of Colonus who are the Chorus. Throughout the play we are reminded that he is, as the Chorus says, “a stranger in a strange land”: *ξένος ἐπὶ ξένῃς* (184). His status as a *ξένος* is referred to by every character, except his own daughters, who enters to him: by the citizen of Colonus (75), the Chorus (162), Theseus (562–3), Creon (745), and Polyneices (1335). In Athens Oedipus has found the city, he says, which alone is famed for protecting and helping strangers (261–2). Yet when the Chorus discovers him violating their sanctuary, blind and in rags, and learns that he is that Oedipus who is famed throughout Hellas for his dreadful deeds and misfortunes, their fear and distrust are without restraint. They claim, on learning his identity, the right to revoke the promise they had earlier made, to protect him (228–36). But slowly they change. Antigone appeals to their natural sense of reverence and humanity (237–53), and they answer: “Be certain, child of Oedipus, that we pity you and him alike for your misfortune” (254–5). Only fear of the gods, they say, has caused their concern (256–7). On hearing Oedipus’ impassioned plea of innocence (258–91) they agree to let Theseus decide the matter (294–5). Later, when the scene with Ismene confirms Oedipus’ good intentions, the Chorus is anxious “to advise what will benefit you” (464). And after the scene with Theseus the rapport is complete. The Chorus has learned the true value of this blind old man who has come to bestow his blessing on their land, and begins its great ode by singing, “Stranger, you have found in this land of fine horses the best home on earth, white Colonus” (668–70). Hereafter they will be his staunchest supporter and ally, and he, in turn, will benefit the city which has befriended him with all the limitless power that resides in his suffering, polluted body.

But this responsiveness on the Chorus’s part is equaled by Oedipus

himself. He, unlike Ajax, has a choice, and is able to exercise it. He need not accept or reject his experience in its entirety to retain his integrity as an individual. At all times he shows the utmost respect for the customs and traditions of Athens. He ends his first speech to Antigone by saying, "We have come as strangers to learn from the citizens, and to perform what we hear of" (12-13). Almost his first words to the Chorus are, "Do not, I beseech you, consider me lawless" (142). When Oedipus asks Antigone's advice on whether she should leave the grove of the Eumenides as the Chorus demands, in accord with law (168), she replies, "O father, we must have the same concerns as the citizens, yielding and listening as befits us" (171-2). His readiness, as the Chorus requests, to "hate what the city holds in dislike and reverence what is dear to it" (185-7) contributes greatly to winning their regard. When they bid him perform the rites of propitiation to the Eumenides, whose sanctuary he has violated, he assures them he will "fulfill all" (465); he is indeed eager to learn from them: "Teach me," he says (468); "teach me this too" (480). Because he is willing to comply with the laws of their city and their gods, he wins their trust and confidence; and when Creon enters Oedipus is able to speak "on their behalf" (811). There is a give-and-take here which would have been wholly impossible in Ajax's world.

Yet any suspicion that Oedipus is crushed and humbled by disaster is shattered once for all in the scene with Creon. Creon, in this play, is perhaps the least attractive character in Sophoclean drama;²⁰ but we must bear in mind that he enters with a most polite, almost obsequious speech, and is, after all, Oedipus' brother-in-law and uncle. Oedipus had been king of Thebes, and Creon's appeal to patriotism should be a strong one. Athens, he says, is indeed a worthy city; "but your own home would be revered with greater justice, since she was your nurse of old" (759-60). Yet Oedipus, in answer, flares up to the heights of indignation, puncturing at a stroke Creon's elaborate hypocrisy. Kinship and patriotism, he says, meant nothing to Creon before, when he banished Oedipus from Thebes; yet now he pretends to offer Oedipus asylum "when the favor confers no benefit" — *ἄτ' οὐδὲν ἢ χάρις χάριν φέρου* (779). Oedipus will have no truck with this brand of patriotism. Any ties he might have had with a city which has so wronged him he severs here with unmistakable finality.

In complete contrast to his forthright rejection of Creon and Thebes is the relationship which Oedipus establishes with Theseus. Here are two men who have no ties of city or family, yet come to be indissolubly united by their common vision and humanity. When Theseus first

enters he recognizes Oedipus and “pities” him (556). But his pity is not condescending. He has the deepest respect for Oedipus as a fellow human being:

I know that I myself was brought up as a stranger like you, and, in a strange land, contended, more than any other, with dangers to my life. And so I would not turn aside or refuse to help anyone who is a stranger, as you are now; for I well know that I am a man, and that tomorrow holds no greater portion for me than for you. (562-8)

In tone this resembles the speech of Odysseus. But the difference is more important. Oedipus, unlike Ajax, unlike Agamemnon or even Teucer, can *respond*; and between him and Theseus is established a kinship, a *ξενία*, transcending the ties of city or of blood. For Oedipus has found in himself the strength to reject offers which, like Creon’s, are “good in word but bad in deeds” —

λόγω μὲν ἐσθλά, τοῖσι δ’ ἔργοισιν κακά, (782)

and to enter into a spiritual communion with the men of Athens who, as Theseus says, “are not zealous to make our lives brighter in words than in what we do” (1143-4). Creon, Oedipus immediately knows, is “dreadful in tongue” alone (806), for time has made him “empty of mind” (931); but Theseus speaks “with my mind as well as from my tongue” —

τῶ νῶ θ’ ὁμοίως κἀπὸ τῆς γλώσσης λέγω. (936)

Thus Oedipus has made his choice on grounds not of word but of deed, and has been rewarded by the protection which Theseus and his Athens have given him.

The same exercise of a choice based on the perception of the reality beneath appearances is evident in Oedipus’ attitude toward his sons and daughters. In the *Ajax*, we have seen, the ties of family were of great importance: Ajax strove mightily to be worthy of his father and live up to his code as well-born man. In this play it is far otherwise. Oedipus, famed through all Greece for his dreadful birth, his *αἰνὰ φύσις* (212), is scarcely *εὐγενής*. If he is to achieve any sort of greatness he must erect it on some foundation other than that of birth. Indeed, the word *εὐγενής* appears only once in the play, when Creon, in his first line, flatteringly addresses the “well-born inhabitants of this land” (728). Oedipus must, and does, transcend family just as he has transcended city. When Antigone, near the beginning, pleads for mercy from the Chorus, she asks them to consider her “as one sprung from

your own blood" (245-6). This is a highly unusual argument for a pre-Stoic, or pre-Christian Greek to make; but again the bond of sympathy and understanding is the one which holds. Now, the love which old Oedipus shows for the daughters who have stood by him in all his hardships is unbounded. They, like Tecmessa, are wholly unselfish; as Ismene says, "One should not remember her labor when she labors for her parents" (508-9). And again unlike Ajax, Oedipus *responds*. He realizes, he tells the Chorus, that "from these virgins, insofar as their nature allows, I have the maintenance of my life, and safety on land, and the succor of kinship" (445-7). His reunion with them (1099ff) is a scene of almost unbearable tenderness. Then, just as he had yielded to the Chorus in leaving the grove of the Eumenides, so does he submit to Antigone's reiterated plea to "yield" (1184, 1201) to her and hear, however unwillingly, the supplication of her brother. Oedipus' words to his daughters before his final passing are, as the Messenger reports them, one of the great moments in Greek poetry:

Folding his arms around them, he said: "O my children, this day your father is no longer with you. For everything about me has died, and no longer will you have the toilsome lot of caring for me. I know it was hard, my children; but one word dissolves all these sufferings. For such love as you have had from me you can have from no other; but now you will pass the rest of your life without me." (1611-9)

Oedipus, in defying Creon, had earlier said, "Even faring as I am, I would not live badly if I found joy therein" (798-9). Joy, *τέρψις*, so intense that he can tell it only to Theseus (1121-2), is what this blind old man, known for his sufferings through all Greece, finds in his daughters. "I have what is dearest," he says (1110): *ἔχω τὰ φίλτατα*. And Antigone, at the end, understands this presence of joy in the sharing of sorrow. "There was," she sings, "a certain longing even for hardships. What was in no way dear *was* dear, when I held him in my arms" (1697-9). At the close of the *Ajax* Agamemnon had sworn that his hatred would follow Ajax even in the world below — "he will be equally hateful to me there as here" (1372) — and Teucer had declined Odysseus' offer to assist in the funeral "lest in doing so I offend the dead man" (1395). But here Antigone cries out, "O father, O my loved one, clad forever in darkness under the earth, not even there below will you be unloved by me and her" (1700-4). From first to last this play is permeated by the power of undying love.

But this is a love no longer dependent on the ties of blood. Throughout the play Oedipus had drawn a sharp distinction between the

daughters who shared his sufferings and the sons who exiled him and sat on his throne (337ff, 445ff). More than once he had cursed those sons for the wrongs they had done him, and even prayed that he might have the power to determine the issue between them (422-3). Now, immediately after the reunion with his daughters and immediately before the thunder which will call him to his mysterious end, Oedipus is actually brought face to face with his son Polyneices.²¹ The dramatic power of this scene in this place, with Oedipus' long silence of almost a hundred lines (1254-1347), is immense. It is the answer to the Chorus's darkly pessimistic ode on old age, with its picture of Oedipus beaten by winds from all the corners of the earth (1239-48). Antigone had barely convinced her father even to hear Polyneices, by appealing to the natural bond of kinship: "You begot him, and so it is not right for you, even if he is doing the most unholy of wicked deeds, to requite him with evil" (1189-91). Yet Polyneices' long and moving appeal has no effect on Oedipus, who sees through him with remorseless clarity. He answers: "If I had not begotten these daughters to care for me, I would not exist, for all your doing. Now they preserve me and care for me; they are men, not women, in working to help me. But you were born from another, not from me" (1365-9). Oedipus here finally and irrevocably places the ties of humanity above those of kinship and race, just as he had placed them above those of city.²² Polyneices, "spat upon and fatherless" (1383), must reap what he has sown. His refusal to Antigone to turn back from his expedition against Thebes — "it is impossible" (1418) — makes clear that Oedipus' curse is not an old man's act of petulant resentment, but an insight, such as is given to the gods alone, into those qualities in Polyneices which reveal him not as a son but as a man whose own nature is bringing his doom inevitably upon him.

Oedipus, then, moves in a world where men may, with sufficient good will, respond to one another on the basis of what, within them, they most essentially are. In this world Oedipus towers high over even the most sympathetic of his fellow men. He has wandered long and suffered much in the many years since that day when he first discovered the terrible secret of his birth and gouged out his eyes with the brooch of his wife and mother. What, we may ask, has time taught him?

Time pervades the play, and Oedipus, above all others, feels its power. To Theseus he says:

Dear son of Ageus, only the gods do not grow old or die; but omnipotent time confounds all other things. The strength of the earth and the strength of the body waste away; trust dies and distrust is born; and

the same spirit does not stand fast among friends or between cities. For some now, and for some in the time to come, what is pleasant becomes bitter, and sweet again. And if all is well now between you and Thebes, yet myriad time gives birth in her going to myriad nights and days. (607-18)

Clearly time has taught Oedipus a sense of change, of mutability. His words themselves are remarkably like those which Ajax spoke before him — save only that what was for Ajax impossible and ironic is for Oedipus fraught with a lifetime's meaning. Long time, χρόνος μακρός, and the learning that comes with time, have been his constant companion. After he had blinded himself at Thebes, he recalls to Ismene, then “in time, when my suffering was assuaged, I learned that my wrath had run too far in punishing my previous errors” (437-9). Time has humbled Oedipus when first we see him, and taught him, as it taught Odysseus in the *Ajax*, the vastness of the unseen forces of the universe — forces which before he had so imperfectly perceived. It has taught him also the value of learning itself; “for in learning,” as he tells Antigone in the closing lines of the prologue, “is a safeguard for our actions” (115-6). The words “teach” and “learn”, διδάσκω, μαθάνω, and their compounds, occur time and again in this play; and Oedipus is as ready to learn from Theseus and the Chorus as they from him. The sense of the changes wrought by time and the flexibility with which the wandering Oedipus has learned to meet them, thus make themselves felt from the first. The Chorus, after the Polyneices scene and only a moment before the thunderclap which will summon Oedipus to a timeless existence, sings: “Time sees, always sees these things, overturning some, and on the next day restoring others again” (1453-5).

Time, then, has taught Oedipus the breadth of vision and the flexibility of character which allow him to look for good in the ways of others and to bear his misfortunes with resignation and even humility. This is the dominant impression at the beginning of the play:

Child of the blind old man, Antigone, what land have we come to — the city of what men? Who will welcome the wandering Oedipus today with paltry gifts? I ask for little and bring still less, but this suffices for me; for my sufferings and long time, my companion, and, third, my integrity (τὸ γενναῖον) teach me to be content. (1-8)

He has learned the wisdom to say, “Let us not fight necessity” (191).

Yet if time has taught him an awareness of change, an endurance of suffering, and the ability to meet the exigencies of circumstance, it has also served, more importantly still, to validate and ratify that

third component of his contentment, his essential integrity or nobility: τὸ γενναῖον. The word recurs repeatedly in the play. It is this quality which the citizen of Colonus perceives from the first in the blind beggar who has violated the precinct of the Eumenides (75–6). It is this quality, too, which Oedipus immediately recognizes in Theseus (569–70), and which unites them from the outset in a kinship stronger than that of blood. For this he blesses Theseus when his daughters are restored to him (1042), and when at last he must part from them, Theseus consents “like a noble man” — ὡς ἀνὴρ γενναῖος (1636) — to their charge. In his last words to them it is with τὸ γενναῖον that Oedipus says they must depart (1640).

Now, in this awareness of strength and integrity which the suffering Oedipus has gained, the principal ingredient is his passionate conviction of his own innocence. This conviction is closely involved with his transcendence of the ties of blood. As he faces and overcomes each new and painful attack upon him, we see him become increasingly certain of himself. In the prologue he is so humble and submissive as to seem abject. To the Eumenides he prays for death, “unless I seem unworthy, who am always a slave to the most extreme sufferings of mankind” (104–5). “Pity,” he beseeches, “this wretched image of the man Oedipus; for my body is no longer as it was of old” (109–10). “Though great,” he tells the Chorus, “I am anchored on the small”: κἀπὶ μικροῦς μέγας ὄρμουν (148). And when the Chorus inquires after his birth he is too deeply ashamed to admit it. Finally, when he does, it is because “I have no way to hide it” (218). Yet as the drama moves on, Oedipus’ stature grows in his own eyes and in ours. He is moved to this first protestation of innocence (258–91) by a sense of despair: these men of Athens, most devout of cities, are about to expel him. Yet it is only his name they fear, not himself or his deeds; “for my deeds lie more in suffering than in performance” (266–7). The disparity between Oedipus’ defiled, rag-clad body and his inner worth is as wide as that between Creon’s persuasive speech and base acts. How, asks Oedipus, was he bad by nature — πῶς ἐγὼ κακὸς φύσιν; (269). Even if he had known he was killing his father, none could blame him for hitting back when he was struck at. But as it was, he acted in total ignorance. When the Chorus next asks about his misfortunes in the commos after the scene with Ismene, Oedipus shrinks back and again tries to conceal his sufferings: “Do not, by our friendship (πρὸς ξενίας), lay open the shameful things I have suffered” (515–6). But again he adamantly proclaims his innocence: “I have borne misfortunes, strangers, I have borne them unwillingly, god knows; and none of

these things are self-chosen" (521-3). He repeats that he has suffered rather than done evil. He killed one who would have killed him; he was "pure by law, and unknowing" (548) when he did the deed.

These declarations, however, are merely prefatory to the great and indignant defence which Oedipus delivers before Creon. Here there is no reluctance or shame. On the contrary, it is Creon who had said to him, "Alas, have I not cast a wretched reproach on you and me and all our race? It is not possible to hide what is in the open; so now, by your father's gods, Oedipus, obey me: *you* must hide it by consenting to return to the home and city of your fathers" (753-8). But by now, fortified by his new friends and by his own sense of right, Oedipus needs to conceal nothing. When Creon tells Theseus that he thought no one would want this incestuous parricide, Oedipus breaks into his longest, most passionate defence. "I will not," he says, "be silent" (980). Perhaps the gods were angry at his race of old; but *in himself* there had been no previous *hamartia* to which his own dreadful errors could be ascribed:

ἐπεὶ καθ' αὐτόν γ' οὐκ ἂν ἐξέυροις ἐμοὶ
 ἁμαρτίας ὄνειδος οὐδέν, ἀνθ' ὅτου
 τὰδ' εἰς ἐμαυτὸν τοὺς ἐμούς θ' ἡμάρτανον. (966-8)

This flat denial that his punishment came on him for any personal fault is his first affirmation of his innocence in the eyes of heaven: before he had appealed only to his ignorance and to the principle of requital which Creon has here just invoked against him ("I deemed it best to requite what I had suffered," 953). Now he comes to the heart of the question: "If by oracles some divine doom was coming on my father to die at the hands of his children, how could you rightly blame me, who as yet had birth from neither father nor mother, but was unborn?" (969-73). For the first time Oedipus asserts the total irrationality, for himself, of what he has suffered. "I entered upon these evils led by the gods," he says (997-8). He asserts this irrationality, but the very consciousness of it gives him strength; and, far from complaining of it, he calls upon the Eumenides to stand by him and be his allies (1010-3). He has found his own greatness; he is ready now to meet Polyneices and speak to him not as a father but as a god. Then, with the thunder-clap, our sense of time suddenly alters; the moment toward which all these years had been leading, the "resting-point in long time," *παῦλαν ἐν χρόνῳ μακρῷ* (88), which the oracle had foretold, is upon us. It is, Oedipus tells Theseus, "the turn of the scale for my life" — *ῥοπή βίου μοι* (1508). Three times in his long speech the Messenger stresses

10+H.S.C.P.

the swiftness of the marvelous events he has witnessed: *ταχέϊ σὺν χρόνῳ* (1602), *χρόνῳ βραχέϊ* (1648), *βαιὼν οὐδὲ σὺν χρόνῳ* (1653) — that is how these things came to pass. “Suddenly” (1610) Oedipus hears a rumble from the earth²³; “suddenly” (1623) a voice cries out so that “suddenly” (1625) the hair of those present stands on end. “Go with all speed,” Oedipus tells his daughters — *ἄλλ’ ἔρπεθ’ ὡς τάχιστα* (1643); and when they look back he has vanished. It has all been the work of a moment.

Time had taught Oedipus, after his fall, the necessity of yielding to a world of change which he must accept without fully understanding; it had taught him, with this and beyond it, the permanent, unchanging value of the greatness which lay within him. Now in a moment which, as Oedipus had foreseen (585), would include all the others, that long process of myriad time passes, suddenly, into the timeless.

Throughout this play we have seen a remarkable fusion of diverse elements into a complexly but consistently interrelated whole. The dimension which gives all these elements their final validity is that of the gods. In the *Oedipus at Colonus*, unlike the *Ajax*, we find no hint of a consistent theology whereby the good are rewarded and the evil punished. On the contrary, as we have seen, Oedipus only fully discovers his worth with the realization that man may suffer without cause, and yet retain his integrity and nobility of character. But the absence of the old theology does not mean the absence of the gods. Their presence is pervasive from first to last in this drama marked throughout by the extraordinarily intimate correlation between the human and the divine. Thus the faith in the gods and the reverence toward them which Oedipus exhibits in this play are another expression, in different terms, of the self-knowledge and inner faith which he has achieved. Not that the gods are *symbols* of internal character traits: the gods, quite clearly, are *gods*²⁴; they are the forces which rule in the universe, outside and above man, not from within him. But the measure of the harmony which characterizes the universe in which this drama moves is that man, as he comes to discover what is true and lasting within him, and to fulfill his own potentialities for greatness, learns also to reverence the gods and even to become identified with them.

Just as Oedipus found a kinship with Athens, Theseus, and his loyal daughters which transcended patriotism and family ties and was based on what was best in himself and them, even so does he discover a kinship with nature and the gods. His tutelary deities are the “ladies dreadful to behold,” *πότνια δεινώπες* (84), known in Athens as the Eumenides, or Kindly Ones. It is their grove which Oedipus enters at

the beginning, and which Antigone describes: "This is a sacred place, it is clear, teeming with laurel, olive, and the vine; and within it thick-feathered nightingales sweetly sing" (16-18). It is they whom the citizen of Colonus describes as "the daughters of Earth and Darkness" (40). "The people hereabouts," he says, "would call them the all-seeing Eumenides; but other names are pleasing elsewhere" (42-3). It is to them that Oedipus suddenly prays (84-110), saying that Apollo had prophesied that he would find rest and an end to his life in their precinct. The intimate relationship between man, nature, and the gods which is so soon apparent here in the prologue continues and is developed throughout the play.

Appropriately, Oedipus' attitude is one of faith and reverence: of *eusebeia*. The acceptance of suffering and the sense of his own value and integrity which time has taught him have their correspondence in his humility before the gods, and his worship of them. He steps forth with Antigone from the grove of the Eumenides, as he says, "entering on reverence": *εὐσεβίας ἐπιβαίνοντες* (189). And the words he speaks embody a faith which seems strange indeed from a man who has suffered so long with no apparent cause. The gods, he says, "look on the reverent man, and look on the irreverent, and there is no escape for the impious mortal" (279-81). He himself, he says, is "sacred and reverent" (287). The oracles concerning him, he tells Theseus, will be fulfilled "if Zeus is still Zeus and Zeus's son Phoebus is sure" (623). To Creon he says that his source of knowledge is "Phoebus and Zeus himself, his father" (792-3). Moreover, this reverence for the gods is another quality which acts as a bond uniting Oedipus with Theseus and Athens. It is Athens, Oedipus knows, which is famed throughout Greece as "most reverent toward the gods" (260). As he says to Creon, "If any land knows how to worship the gods with honor, this one is pre-eminent" (1006-7). In thanking Theseus for returning his daughters, Oedipus declares, "I have found reverence among you alone of men" (1125-6). Indeed, it was from a sense of reverence that Theseus originally accepted the wandering suppliant and made him a citizen of his land (636-7). The matchless ode on Colonus, with its praise of the green glens and thick foliage where the nightingale sings and Dionysus treads, of the sleepless streams among the narcissus and crocus where Aphrodite and the Muses dance, of the olive and the horse, the gifts of Athena and Poseidon — this is but the most lovely expression of the reverential awe which fills this play. Even ritual is significant. The libations to the Eumenides are described in small detail (465-92). Theseus was sacrificing to Poseidon when interrupted by Creon's outrages (888). And

Oedipus, before his end, has his daughters cleanse him according to ritual custom (1598–1603). There is no question as to the importance of reverence and worship of the gods in this play. It is as much a religious as it is a human drama.

But the two, we must understand, are one. Reverence here does not imply surrender to the will of alien gods, but rather the discovery and fulfillment of self: of that within man which is, like the gods, universal. Man in this play is seen against the background of the infinitely greater forces embodied in the never-dying gods; but man, too, partakes of these forces and has that within him which is lasting and divine. What Oedipus discovers in himself are the qualities, not which separate, but which unite him with other men of good will, and with the gods.

For with the gods he is, finally, united. As the play progresses, Oedipus steadily grows. The faith in the gods which he expresses all along seems, paradoxically perhaps, not to carry the fullest conviction until he is correspondingly certain of his own complete freedom from personal guilt. When Ismene says early in the play that the gods will raise him, he replies, "It is a poor thing to raise an old man who fell when young" (395). He fails, in these lines, to understand that the gods will not raise him until he has raised himself; that he can become like a god only by being godlike. It is not until his passionate plea of innocence before Creon, and the demonstration of strength in his oracular denunciation of Polyneices, that the thunder comes. His voice had early seemed divine, an *δμφή*, to the Chorus (550); now (1351) it seems so to Oedipus himself. After much suffering and long time he has found and embraced the permanent within him; he has transcended human mutability; he sees with the vision and speaks with the voice of the gods. His curses "will prevail if *Dikē*, spoken of old, sits by Zeus in accord with the ancient laws" (1381–2). When the thunder comes he knows immediately that "the winged lightning of Zeus will lead me forthwith to Hades" (1460–1). "The gods themselves," he tells Theseus, "are the heralds who announce this to me, belying none of the signs laid down before" (1511–2). "You convince me," Theseus replies, "for I see you speaking oracularly (*θεσπιζοντα*) of many things" (1516). The blind man who had said, "My body would not have the strength to walk if left alone or without a guide" (501–2), departs with no other guides than Hermes and Persephone (1548). In his death he is joined somehow with the elements. The Messenger says:

In what way he perished no mortal but Theseus could say. For no god's lightning bolt destroyed him, and no storm stirred from the sea in that time; but either some god was his guide, or the nether world,

earth's painless foundation, cleaving in good will (*εὖνον διαστάν*). For the man was not summoned with wailing, or pained by disease, but wondrous if ever man was. (1656-65)

"I think," Oedipus had told his daughters, "that one soul may suffice to pay this debt for ten thousands if it come with good will — *ἦν εὖνους παρῆ*" (498-9). Even so had Oedipus come to Athens, and found "this city, and all its people, united with me in good will" —

*πόλιν τέ μοι
ξυνοῦσαν εὖνον τήνδε καὶ γένος τὸ πᾶν.* (772-3)

And now, perhaps, the very earth of Attica has cleaved in good will to receive the old man who brought as his only gift "my wretched body, not comely to look upon, yet with profits beyond fair appearance" (576-8). That body remains defiled to the end — Oedipus shrinks back from allowing Theseus to take his hand (1132-6) — but the man within has gone beyond. In what way he perished no mortal but Theseus could tell; for us it must remain a mystery and, like all mysteries, ineffable. Oedipus, in his dreadful birth, was punished for no fault of his own, nor is there any cause to be found for his divinely guided descent to the world below. But, though inexplicable, Oedipus' ending is not arbitrary. He himself, before leaving, reaffirms for one last time his unshaken faith that "the gods look well, though late, when a man abandons the divine and turns to madness" (1536-7); and the Chorus, when he departs, sings, "Many sorrows were coming upon him without cause; but a just *daimon* will uplift him again" (1565-7). In transcending the mortal ties of blood and city, Oedipus has purged himself of all but what is lasting, and that is divine. His curse on Polyneices was the curse not of a father but of a god; and his last words on stage, not a curse but a blessing, have authority no less divine: "May you be of good destiny, and, faring well in good fortune forever, remember me when I am dead" —

*εὐδαίμονες γένοισθε, κἀπ' εὐπραξίᾳ
μέμνησθέ μου θανόντος εὐτυχέϊς αἰεί.* (1554-5)

By the time these words were spoken in the Theater of Dionysus in 401 B.C., the long war against Sparta had ended in defeat, and the city of the tragic poets, wondrous if ever city was, had, like Oedipus and the poet of ninety years both buried in her soil, died, and bequeathed her blessing to all who would come in good will.

3. SOME BEARINGS

Points of comparison and contrast between these two plays will be apparent from the readings I have given. Before examining the intervening dramas, however, I should like to make a few general observations and suggest some possible lines of development.

It is scarcely too much to say that the *Oedipus at Colonus* embodies a resolution of those conflicts which presented themselves so irreconcilably in the *Ajax*. In the earlier play human greatness and the divine will were at odds; the hero was isolated from humanity by his own code of nobility; the learning which comes with time was impossible for him; and he was left only with the choice of living in accord with his principles or, when they became untenable in life, dying for them. In the *Oedipus at Colonus*, as I have tried to show, all these disparate elements are fused in a spiritual synthesis of the highest order, and viewed as variant but consistent aspects of an experience fundamentally one. So complex is this fusion that we must examine some of the elements which have gone into its making.

Sophocles, we know, was one of the great innovators of Western dramatic literature. He not only abandoned the trilogy for the single play, introduced the third actor, and reduced the lyrical role of the Chorus; he also was the first dramatist ever consistently to center his plays on the sufferings of individuals. This is well known and often said. But, again because of the near perfection of balance and harmony which the plays achieve, the implications of these theatrical changes may easily be overlooked. Yet Sophocles lived and wrote in an age when, of all ages, intellect and spirit were most intimately and vitally fused with literary form, and his way of writing plays will not be found devoid of implications for his way of viewing life.

Now, the influence of Aeschylus on Sophocles' *Ajax* has been discussed mainly in matters of technique and style.²⁵ This, of all his plays, is closest, in the sweep of its language and the boldness of its imagery and theatrical effects, to the weighty grandeur of Aeschylean tragedy. The structure of the play, moreover, with its sharp division in two, seems still to reflect the structural division inherent in the form of the trilogy.²⁶ In such matters the presence of Aeschylus is very much in evidence. But the influence of the older dramatist is not a technical one alone. The theodicy so splendidly set forth in the plays of Aeschylus represents the high point of a long and consistent development of Greek thought. Poets from Hesiod to Solon and after had concerned themselves with the vexed relationship between human insolence

and divine punishment — between *hybris* and *atē*. That *Dikē* which Hesiod invoked in the *Works and Days* became, in Solon, more closely identified with the whole fabric of the social order.²⁷ The concept, in one form or another, is central to early fifth-century religious thought. It pervades Herodotus. But Aeschylus, more than any other, justifies the gods to men by seeing divine justice as a cosmic process in time.²⁸ If we think in terms, not *primarily* of the individual at a given moment, but of society in its development, then the gods may be seen, in the end, as unimpeachably just. To show how *Dikē* works through time is the central burden of Aeschylus' great tragic poems.

The concept of divine justice, with *atē* requiting *hybris*, is, we have seen, important to the *Ajax* also. But Sophocles, unlike Aeschylus, is writing primarily about an individual; he is writing not a trilogy but a single play. And here, indeed, is a principal cause of the conflict between what I have called the divine framework and the human content of that drama. The crime-and-punishment formula is basic to the play; but no less basic is the greatness of Ajax in his suffering; and the two are simply not, in human terms, fully compatible. The form of the single play thrusts the protagonist to the fore; and for *him*, that individual being seen now in sharp focus, the laws of *hybris* and *atē* seem almost crude. The perspective has changed, but the old conception of deity has not changed with it. The contrast with the *Oedipus at Colonus* is complete. Here the irrationality, or at least the inscrutability, of the individual's suffering is an accepted and central fact. The gods are seen now not as arbiters of human destiny, dispensing punishment for crime in lofty but chilling justice, but rather as components and coordinates of that destiny itself. And man is more at one with the universe and its gods only insofar as he is more at one with himself and with other men of good will. Divine justice has become more complex, indeed, and less apparent, less comprehensible, but also more real and meaningful for the man himself who suffers. The stress and disparity between the human and the divine are gone. Oedipus views the gods not with the defiance of Ajax or the cautious *sophrosynē* of Odysseus, but with *eusebeia*: an attitude of reverence and worship arising from the awareness that, in the essential greatness which he has discovered within himself in the midst of all his uncomprehended suffering, he is one with the gods, who are just.

In the *Ajax* we have noted also the importance of the bonds of kinship and blood. Here again we feel the presence of older ideas. Aeschylus in his trilogies had dealt powerfully and subtly with the close ties between succeeding generations. He had reformulated and reinterpreted in the

terms of his own poetry the old Greek idea of the family curse. In the *Ajax* Sophocles is writing, of course, about an individual, not a family. But behind this individual, whom we see only in a single crisis, lies the accumulated bulk of his own deeds and those of his house, which influence, indirectly at least, his actions and his fate. Ajax must die in order not to disgrace his family honor, which is his own honor as well. The contrast with the later play is clear in the terms used of their heroes. Ajax is *εὐγενής*, Oedipus *γενναῖος*. Both words may be roughly translated "noble." But, though by no means exclusive, their meanings are significantly different. Aristotle, discussing good birth in the *Rhetoric*, writes:

Good birth is an honor from one's ancestors. It is contemptuous even of those who are its ancestors' equals, for what is far off is more honored and easier to boast of than what is near. Being well-born is being in accord with the excellence of one's race (ἔστι δὲ εὐγενὲς μὲν κατὰ τὴν γένους ἀρετήν), but integrity is that which does not depart from one's nature (γενναῖον δὲ κατὰ τὸ μὴ ἐξίστασθαι τῆς φύσεως) — a quality which for the most part is not found in the well-born, most of whom are of little value. (*Rhetoric* II.xv.2–3)

Again in the *Natural History* (I.i.32) he makes a similar distinction: *εὐγενὲς μὲν γὰρ ἔστι τὸ ἐξ ἀγαθοῦ γένους, γενναῖον δὲ τὸ μὴ ἐξιστάμενον ἐκ τῆς αὐτοῦ φύσεως*. The relevance of this distinction to our two plays is clearly apparent. Ajax is a man who is much concerned with living up to the old heroic code: he must be true to his father's ideal even to the point of dying for it. Only by being uncompromisingly *εὐγενής* can he also be, as Odysseus recognizes (1355), *γενναῖος*. Only by living and dying in accord with the *aretē* of his race is he able to be true to his nature — and become of great value indeed. With Oedipus it is different. Far from being *εὐγενής*, he was, as he knows, "born ill-starred" (974). Yet he is able nonetheless, by transcending the bonds of city and family and discovering the ties of love and reverence which unite him with his daughters, with the men of Athens, and with the gods, to fulfill the potentialities of his nature and become, in a fuller, more universal sense, *γενναῖος*. He is true not only to his own nature, but to the nature of man.

Furthermore, as we have seen, time plays no organic part in the *Ajax*. For all its peerless grandeur there is something stiff, something static, about it. Aeschylean tragedy had been conceived in terms of a family or society of men working out their destiny in the long and complex process of time. But in the *Ajax* the individual hero is divorced from time and placed before us in his moment of greatness and disaster.

This accounts not only for the dual structure, with the second half of the drama commenting on the first and placing it in a new perspective. It explains also, in part, the ambivalence we feel toward this man whose actions we must judge as his alone, unextenuated, or extenuated but little, by the actions of others and the corrective of time. Aeschylus' lost play on Ajax's death was preceded by a *Judgment of the Arms* and succeeded by a *Salaminians*. That of Sophocles stands alone. It is as if we were to judge Orestes only from the *Choephoroe*, with no *Agamemnon* before and no *Eumenides* to follow. But in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, though the action centers no less upon an individual, time has become an operative force, serving both to purge Oedipus' nature through the learning that comes from suffering and experience, and to confirm and validate its essential greatness through perseverance, courage, and magnanimity. Time is the medium through which Oedipus *becomes* what, most essentially, he *is*.

4. THE INTERVENING PLAYS

Antigone

In the *Antigone*²⁹ the internal conflicts which we have seen in the *Ajax* are even more sharply delineated: the play gains its peculiar dynamism, in large part, through the juxtaposition and confrontation of opposites. This quality characterizes the language of the play, with its charged antitheses — Antigone's *σὺ μὲν γὰρ εἴλου ζῆν, ἐγὼ δὲ κατθανεῖν* (555) is one typical instance — and the character portrayal, with its forcefully contrasted and balanced debates. The prologue establishes the pattern which the central scenes — those between Creon and Antigone, Creon and Haemon, Creon and Teiresias — simply repeat, of collision between sharply crystallized and hopelessly opposed views of life. This divisiveness is basic to the play's structure as well. The *Antigone* presents us with a conflict similar to that between Teucer and the Atreidae at the end of the *Ajax*: both Teucer and Antigone are determined to bury their brother's body in defiance of political authority. But because this conflict lies at the center of the *Antigone*, the issues involved in the first half of the *Ajax* enter into it also; and here there is no Odysseus to plaster over the widening breach. Antigone is Ajax's spiritual sister: just as he would train his son "in the rough ways of his father" (548), so does the Chorus describe Antigone's nature as "rough and from a rough father" (471). Ajax had said, "It is shameful for a man who finds no

10*

alteration of hardships to desire long life" (473-4); and Antigone's words seem an echo: "Whoever lives, like me, amid many hardships — how should he not find profit in death?" (463-4). They alone of Sophocles' heroes are thus resolute on death as the alternative to a life whose mold they cannot be made to fit,³⁰ and their suicides, unlike Eurydice's or the wretched Deianeira's in the *Trachiniae*, are acts of proud defiance — gauntlets thrown at the feet of the world. Antigone is contrasted with Ismene much as Ajax was contrasted with Tecmessa: both protagonists reveal magnificent heroic energy dependent, for good or bad, on the inflexibility of their values. It is with pain that Antigone mocks her sister (551), yet mock she must. Like Ajax again in her deepest values, she tells Ismene in the prologue (38) that her behavior will demonstrate whether or not she was born *εὐγενής*. For Antigone feels no sense at all of personal defilement from *her* dreadful birth. The sense of family which we have noted in Ajax is her ruling passion: born from an ill-starred, incestuous union, she will nonetheless unhesitatingly lay down her life for the brother who has waged war against her native city.

But similar in character as Ajax and Antigone are, the difference in the positions they adopt is of no less importance; for Ajax pitted himself against the gods, but Antigone bases her stand on adherence to their laws. Her opponent, Creon, is a man at least as inflexible as she, but who, in his arrogance and pride, has blinded himself to those very laws which Antigone invokes, the laws of Zeus and of "*Dikē*, who resides with the gods below" (451-2). Antigone has Ajax's greatness; Creon has only his *hybris*. It was in his power to do otherwise than he did, but he was blind; and he has no trace of Ajax's greatness of soul to redeem him. No other character in Sophoclean drama so perfectly exemplifies Aristotle's man "among those of great reputation and prosperity, but not distinguished for virtue and justness, who is brought to misfortune not by wickedness or perversity, but by some error (*ἀμαρτίαν τινά*)" (*Poetics* xiii.3). Indeed, the verb *ἀμαρτάνω*, to err, is central to an understanding of Creon's position in the play.³¹ "Do I err in revering my powers?" Creon indignantly asks; and Haemon replies, "You are not reverent when you trample on the honors due to the gods" —

Creon: ἀμαρτάνω γὰρ τὰς ἐμὰς ἀρχὰς σέβων;
Haemon: οὐ γὰρ σέβεις, τιμὰς γε τὰς θεῶν πατρῶν. (744-5)

Antigone ends her last doubt-tormented speech by saying, "If these things are well in the gods' sight, I will come to know my error when I have suffered; but if it is these men who err, may they not suffer more evils than they do to me" (925-9). By the end of the play, certainly, it is

starkly clear that the error, the *hamartia*, is Creon's alone: ἀπὸς ἁμαρτιῶν (1260). And the nature of his error is no less clear. "It is common to all men to err," Teiresias tells him; "but when one does err, that man is no longer ill-counseled (ἄβουλος) or unblessed who, when he has fallen on an evil, heals it and is not unmoveable" (1023-7). But Creon *is* unmoveable; he cannot see "how much the best of possessions is good counsel (εὐβουλία)" (1050). By the end of the play this lesson has borne down upon him with crushing weight; he has demonstrated, the Messenger says, "how much the greatest evil that attaches to a man is ill counsel (τὴν ἄβουλίαν)" (1242-3). Creon himself laments that Haemon has died by his ill counsels (δυσβουλίας, 1269); and the Chorus ends by singing, "By far the foremost part of happiness is understanding" (1347-8). Clearly then Creon's tragedy lies in not understanding and following the advice that was available to him; in not grasping the truth of Haemon's plea: "It is no shame for a man, if he is wise, to learn many things and not to stretch too far" (710-1). In placing the claims of the city as he conceives them above the laws of the gods Creon is making a mistake *which he could have avoided*, and which he will learn to his sorrow. When Teiresias tells him that "for these deeds the late-destroying avengers, the Furies of Hades and the gods, lie in wait to take you in the midst of these evils" (1074-6), it is clear that divine justice is taking its course and Creon is reaping the fruits of his error. This, however grim, is right and well; for we can scarcely fail to see that *atē* is coming upon him for a clearly demarcated *hybris*.

Yet it is a striking characteristic of this tragedy that, although Creon stands structurally at its center, it is not he but Antigone who gives it not only its name but its lasting interest. As the plot is structured Antigone is, very nearly, a peripheral casualty, along with Haemon and Eurydice, of Creon's tragic error; but it is she whom we remember. This conflict of interest, embedded in the very structure of the play, is similar to that which we felt between the divine frame and the human content of the *Ajax*. And the implications range far. If on the one hand Creon is the clearest exemplar of justly punished *hybris* in Sophocles, yet what, on the other hand, are we to say of the catastrophes which befall Antigone? If her alliance with the gods, through her adherence to their laws, makes her more *right* than Ajax, whom she so resembles in character, yet it thereby also makes her death seem more irrational. Creon's reverence, we have seen in the passage quoted above, is for his own powers, his ἀρχαί. But Antigone, by defending the bonds of kinship and burying her brother at the price of death, is, as

she says in her last words, “revering reverence”: τὴν εὐσεβίαν σεβί-
 σασα (943). Even the Chorus, while disapproving her harsh rigidity,
 has conceded this: σέβειν μὲν εὐσέβειά τις (872). Why then, if the
 gods are just, did she who defended their laws fall? Teiresias, their
 prophet, says nothing about her. The Chorus, in the second stasimon,
 advances, for the only time with such emphasis in Sophocles, the
 Aeschylean idea that Antigone is being brought low by a blood curse
 on the house of Oedipus: “Those whose house the gods have shaken
 escape no *atê*” (583–5). Perhaps, as with Ajax,³² greatness itself leads
 to ruin: “Nothing vast,” they sing, “enters the life of mortals without
atê” (613–4). Antigone herself, when the Chorus tells her, “You are
 paying for some ordeal of your father’s,” replies, “You have touched
 on my most grievous care” (856–7), and proceeds to lament the curse
 on her house. There is no other reason, in the scheme of things set
 forth in this play, that this fate should come on *her*; for the “self-willed
 temper” (875) with which the Chorus reproaches her has alone given
 her the strength to follow the resolute and lonely path which she has
 chosen. Considering her splendid greatness of spirit and her reverence
 for her brother and the gods, and considering the fate of the innocent
 Haemon and Eurydice, we must surely find divine justice severely
 taxed in this play. All the elements which in the trilogies of Aeschylus
 had vindicated god to man are present, except the restorative of time.
 And without this element justice, in the terms of the Aeschylean theo-
 dicy, seems scarcely just. When the focus has shifted from the house
 to the individual, the inherited curse is no longer comprehensible.
 Seen as the tragedy of Creon the play is a perfectly rational dramatiza-
 tion of the familiar *hybris-atê* formula; its universe is one where wise
 counsel and understanding may avert disaster. But seen as Antigone’s
 tragedy it is the story of a brave and uncompromisingly heroic girl who
 defends the laws of family and of the gods — and is destroyed for her
 pains. The agonized doubt of her unanswered question as she is about to
 be led to living burial foreshadows the dominant mood of the following
 plays: “Why should I, in my misery, look to the gods? What ally
 should I call upon when, for my reverence, I have acquired irreverence
 in return?” —

τί χρὴ μὲ τὴν δύστηνον ἐς θεοὺς ἔτι
 βλέπειν; τί ν’ αὐδᾶν ξυμμάχων; ἐπεὶ γὰρ δὴ
 τὴν δυσσέβειαν εὐσεβοῦσ’ ἔκτησάμην. (922–4)

It is a question not easily to be dismissed. The *Antigone*, beneath its
 balanced antitheses, tight dramatic structure, and seemingly traditional
 patterns of ideas, conceals vast potentialities of unreason and chaos.

Trachiniae

I have emphasized the disparities and conflicts inherent in the *Antigone*, as well as the *Ajax*, because I think they account for much of the gripping tension of those dramas, and also make more comprehensible the dark terror of the middle tragedies, the *Trachiniae* and the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. If I am right in seeing a severe and increasing strain between the traditional theodicy and the new emphasis on the individual suffering human being, then we might well expect something to give. And that is just what seems to happen. The *Trachiniae*³³ is a tragedy from which any meaningful form of divine justice has utterly vanished. The beauty of its poetry, the power of its characterization, are unexcelled, but only heighten thereby the horror of the relentless destruction which overwhelms these people who are blind, not through some particular *hybris*, but because they are human.³⁴ The deep-running stresses and conflicts of the earlier plays here have burst the floodgates. The imagery, founded on the opposition of light and darkness — of the searing sun and the blazing sacrificial fire; the dark waters of Achelous, the sunless casket containing the robe, and the black blood of shaggy Nessus — this is no more violent in its contrasts than is the play's structure, half dominated by the gentle Deianeira, half by the savage Heracles, its scenes see-sawing from the frantic exultation of the choral "Io io Paean!" (222) to final unmitigated catastrophe.

And there is no attempt in the play to rationalize the irrational. The only echo of the old theodicy is Lichas' solemn explanation of the vengeance wrought by Zeus on Heracles for the guileful killing of Iphitus: "for the gods too do not love *hybris*" (280). But the story Lichas is telling when he makes this statement is, as we soon discover, wholly false. The Chorus sings in its parodos, "The all-ruling king, son of Cronus, has assigned to mortals no lot without pain; but suffering and joy come round to all, like the revolving paths of the Bear" (126-30). In such a universe what can the *sophrosynê* Athena enjoins upon Odysseus, the *euboulia* Teiresias recommends to Creon, avail? The Chorus ends this parodos by asking:

τίς ᾔδει
τέκνοισι Ζῆν' ἄβουλον εἶδεν;

"Who has known Zeus to be so ill-counseled with his children?" (139-40). And in a world where the god is ἄβουλος, human counsel is to no purpose. "It seems to us," the Chorus tells Deianeira as she hesitates before sending the fatal robe of Nessus to Heracles, "that you have not counseled badly" (589). Indeed the attempt to *learn*

which Haemon urged his father to make in the *Antigone* is a central theme of this play; and the issue is futility and disaster. Hyllus leaves at the end of the prologue with the words: "I will cease at nothing to learn the whole truth in these matters" (90-1). "The whole truth" — it is what Deianeira beseeches Lichas to tell her (453), for, she adds, "Not to learn — that is what would pain me. What harm is there in knowing?" (458-9). But Deianeira soon discovers, to her horror, that hers is a world engulfed by the unknowable — a world in which the best intentions reap bitter fruit. Coming back from the house in terror — verbs of fear, *δέδοικα, φοβοῦμαι, ταραβῶ*, recur again and again in this play — she tells the Chorus of the wool dipped in Nessus' blood which had crumbled to dust when the light fell upon it, and describes this as a sight "unintelligible for a man to learn" — *ἀξύμβλητον ἀνθρώπῳ μαθεῖν* (694). "I gain a knowledge (*μάθησιν*) of these things," she says, "too late, when it avails no longer" (710-1). So too, after Deianeira's suicide, the Nurse tells us that Hyllus was taught of her innocence too late — *ὄψ' ἐκδιδαχθείς* (934) — and adds that no man can know the morrow. Clearly good counsel is futile, and Deianeira's innocence is absolute. The pattern of *hybris* followed by *atē* which we have seen at work with Ajax and Creon has no place here. The concept of *hamartia* as an avoidable error, so pertinent to Creon's fall, has no bearing on Deianeira's, for she, as Hyllus insistently tells his unheeding father, *ἤμαρτεν οὐκ ἔκουσία* (1123), *ἤμαρτε χρηστὰ μωμένη* (1136) — "she erred unwillingly, she erred with good intention." Those who would find fault with Deianeira's character miss the mark altogether. It is true enough that with more prudence she might have avoided her dreadful error — true enough, in the abstract, and easy enough to say, but not, in this play, what matters. "Such things a man would not say who had a share of sorrow, but only one whose home had known no grief" (729-30). As we see this woman before us — this woman who pities even her rival Iole and who believes that "anger is not right for women of understanding" (552-3), this gentle spirit more in the line of Tecmessa and Ismene than of Ajax and Antigone — we do not think of faults. Obsessed by fear and deeply in love, she tries only to learn what is true and do what is good — and she fails. That alone is her *hamartia*. Heracles too might have avoided calamity by being other than he is, but as we hear him in the throes of his unbearable and incurable agony cry, "Let me, let me for the last time, ill-fated that I am, let me for the last time sleep" (1005-6), we can think not of his mistakes but only of his anguish. There is no rationale behind such suffering as this. Ajax and Antigone met their deaths with heroic

confidence that each was living up to his standards as an *εὐγενής*. If Antigone wavered, she did not repent. Now, Deianeira's determination, it is true, has a ring of Ajax about it still: "To live with a bad reputation is not to be endured by one who holds it in honor that she was not basely born" (721-2). But she dies knowing only that she is wretched and, for all her love and good intentions, has brought wretchedness on others. Ajax and Antigone shaped their own destinies; Deianeira's is thrust upon her. As she herself said of Iole, "Her beauty destroyed her life" (465). And when Heracles is borne off to his pyre he knows only that, in the height of his glory, he has been struck down. There is no consolation for either.

Hyllus too is sucked into the vortex of this play without a hero — the only extant Sophoclean drama named for its Chorus. His position shows to what an extent the bonds of kinship, so important in the *Ajax* and *Antigone*, are strained in his play. Believing that Deianeira has plotted his father's death he wishes, to her face, either that she were dead, or were called some other man's mother, or would change the heart she has for a better (734-7). He asks the Chorus, "Why should she vainly foster the dignity of a mother's name when she does nothing like a mother?" (817-8). Yet when he learns the truth he is left weeping over her body, kissing her lips, lying by her side (936-9). And Heracles, in imposing his will upon him, reminds him over and over of his obligations as a son. "O son, prove yourself my true-born son" (1064). "Beware lest you show yourself basely born" (1129). "You have reached the point where you will show what sort of man is called mine" (1157-8). The best of laws is "to obey your father" (1178); and if Hyllus disobeys, he is told to "find some other father and no longer call yourself mine" (1204-5). "The curse of the gods will await you if you disobey my words" (1239-40). He is charged to obey "if you wish to be reverent (*εὐσεβείην*)" (1222-3), for "there is no irreverence (*δυσσεβεία*) if you please my heart" (1246). Thus Hyllus, most notably *εὐγενής* as the son of Greece's greatest hero, receives as his patrimony only the wretchedness of leading his father to his death and marrying a woman whom he would rather die than live with. He finds no reason for performing these repugnant deeds, except that "you command and compel me, father" (1258). His noble birth has brought him only misery, as, in the end, has the even nobler birth of his father. For Heracles, as we are repeatedly reminded in the play, is the son of Zeus. The bitter arraignment of the gods with which the drama ends is also a personal indictment — by Hyllus, though not by Heracles — of Zeus as a father. And the arraignment is absolute. The power of the gods is as

evident here as in the earlier plays. But for the individual sufferer, who learns too late and acts at cross-purposes, there is no justice in heaven. Sophocles has fully expressed, for the first time in his tragedies, the irrationality of human misery; and the result is a play of the darkest imaginable colors. The question which Antigone asked in a very different play — “Why should I, in my misery, look to the gods?” — has ramified until its implications cannot be contained; and the very possibility of *euboulia*, good counsel, has been swallowed up in the maw of a cosmos which, whatever inscrutable order may lie behind it, is for man a chaos. The gods are not cruel, not vindictive, but impersonal, insensitive, remote — ἄβουλοι. “Lift him, comrades, granting me great indulgence for these things,” Hyllus says at the end:

and knowing the great insensitivity (ἀγνωμοσύνην) of the gods who have done these deeds — who bring forth children and call themselves fathers, yet look on such sufferings as these. No one may foresee the future; but the present is pitiful for us, shameful for *them*, and hardest for him, of all men, who bears this destruction (ἄτην). Maidens, you must not be left by the house where you have seen great deaths and many sufferings unknown before — and none of these things which is not Zeus.³⁵

(1264-78)

So the play ends. The old world-order which held together with such strain in the *Ajax* and *Antigone* — an order where the gods dispensed justice, where learning and wisdom were possible for men, and where birth was a guide to conduct — has flown apart from the center with the full impact of personal suffering and incomprehensible evil, and will never again be reconstructed as it was before. At this juncture, when mere anarchy threatened to be loosed upon the world, Sophocles had need, if he was to escape wandering in the labyrinthine paths Euripides thenceforth followed, to discover some principle of order different in kind from that grand theodicy which, in its long development, had served the centuries between Hesiod and Aeschylus with a coherent and ample vision of life and the gods.

Oedipus Tyrannus

The *Oedipus Tyrannus*³⁶ stands in every way at the center of Sophocles' achievement — at once the climax of all that had gone before and the matrix for all that would follow. The dark mystery of irrational suffering first felt in the *Trachiniae* pervades the *Tyrannus* with no less force; yet here the disjointed components of the old theodicy are forged together, as by a massive effort of intellect and spirit, into a new and more complex consistency. Two themes of the earlier plays, that of

learning and that of birth, are here fused. Ajax and Antigone had taken their own lives on the strength of a creed — the creed of living up to their birth, of loyalty to the sacred ties of family honor. Ajax could not be false to Telamon, nor Antigone to Polyneices. Deianeira, less heroic in temper and circumstances, had sought, in her uncertainty, to discover what was best, to learn what she must do; but in the face of an unfathomable universe her efforts brought not enlightenment but ruin, and for her, too, suicide was the one alternative. Like Deianeira, Oedipus strives to learn, but the object of his inquiry is, by the end, his own birth. As tyrant of Thebes, he bears many resemblances to the Creon of the *Antigone*: both are devoted to their city, but hot-tempered and quick to suspect a plot without cause, as their similar accusations of Teiresias show. Indeed, Creon in the later play accuses Oedipus of the same self-will, *αὐθαδία* (549–50), against which Teiresias had warned the Creon of the *Antigone* (1028). But whereas Creon there had resisted the pleas of Haemon and the warnings of Teiresias that he should learn good counsel, here Oedipus throws all his being into the search to learn, first the murderer of Laius, then his own origin; he stints at nothing in his quest. And whereas Creon was struck down for a clearly defined fault, an ill-counseled act in opposition to divine law, all his life is involved in Oedipus' fall. If Deianeira erred unwillingly in her gift to Heracles, Oedipus erred unwillingly in being born; and thereby his fate becomes an archetype, a *paradeigma*, as the Chorus says (1193), of all men's.

And his fate is inseparably enmeshed with the oracles of the gods. The prophecies of Calchas in the *Ajax* and of Teiresias in the *Antigone* served principally as reminders of the gods' power, but were peripheral to the plays' action; indeed, neither Ajax nor Antigone knew of them. In the *Trachiniae* the oracle reflected the play's central theme of human blindness: no one had understood the true meaning of the prophecy that Heracles would bring his toils to an end, for its meaning was that he would die. The oracles revealed an order which silently mocked men's endeavors to understand. But in the *Tyrannus* the truth of the oracle is intertwined with the destiny of Oedipus himself; we can no longer speak of a divine framework and a human action as we did in the *Ajax*, for the workings of the divinity are inseparable from the hero's actions. Conflicting attitudes toward prophecy run throughout the play. Oedipus, who strives to fulfill the oracle that Laius's murderer must be found and banished, had striven no less to frustrate the oracle that he must kill his father and marry his mother. Iocasta scorns the authority of prophecy and proclaims, "It is best to live at random, as

one can" (979); yet we see her come forth from the palace to sacrifice to Apollo, and we learn from the Shepherd, at the very culminating point when Oedipus is discovering his fate, that she had given him her child to be destroyed "from fear of evil oracles" (1175). Between the poles of Teiresias' godlike overview of the patterns working themselves out in human life and Iocasta's doctrine of the supremacy of Chance, *Τύχη* — the poles of the Chorus's wavering faith and Creon's non-committal caution ("In what I do not understand I am accustomed to be silent," 569, 1520) — Oedipus moves toward his discovery. It is only when Iocasta has realized the truth and rushed in to kill herself that Oedipus embraces her doctrine and calls himself the "son of Chance" (1080); it is only when he has coerced the unwilling Shepherd to tell him of his parentage that he at last knows the truth of Teiresias and the oracle — the truth of the gods which is also the truth of his own birth, of his destiny. He who had taunted Teiresias with blindness of eye, ear, and mind (371), and had so determinedly investigated the murder of Laius — he who was famed among all men for his vision and intellect — comes, only after he has blinded himself, to understand that, for all his vain efforts to annul the oracles, he had married Iocasta "neither seeing nor inquiring" (1484). He who had first thought himself son of the king of Corinth and then, at the height of his folly, the child of Chance and brother of the months, says at the last, "Now I am found to be base and of base parents" (1397).

Yet, though basely born, though wishing he had been left to die on the mountainside, Oedipus is a paradigm of something more than human blindness and misery. For, while the Chorus falters, Creon maintains prudent silence, and Iocasta lives at random, Oedipus, and he alone, dares, by the force of his intelligence and his will, to strive to mold order from this seeming chaos, and his very fall brings his vindication. It is this above all which sets the play apart. If we are as fully aware as in the *Trachiniae* of the irrationality of the individual's suffering from his own point of view, we are also aware both of a new stature and greatness which he achieves through the very process of suffering itself, and of a new sense of universal order which, without motivating, validates this suffering and places it in a larger perspective. If at the climax of the play Oedipus finds catastrophe, yet he also finds therein the object for which he has searched with intrepid courage, and proves the truth of the oracles he had himself come to doubt. In his very ruin he achieves a sort of triumph, not, like Ajax and Antigone, by heroic adherence to a rigid code of traditional ethics, but by the brutal discovery of what he is. The concept of "divine justice," in the

terms of the old theodicy, has no pertinence to this play. For in great part Oedipus' discovery is that the oracles concerning him were not the dictates of a controlling fate, but statements from a larger and more comprehensive vantage point of the nature of his own destiny, which the gods and Teiresias knew before, but which he himself has only now come to learn. In this merging of human destiny and divine will the play's reorientation is most clearly to be seen. The gods in the *Ajax* and *Antigone* were, in effect, conceived as being outside of a circle within which men moved; from their sphere outside that circle they dispensed justice to mortals. The god might, like Athena in the *Ajax*, make his will known to the world of men, but the circle remained. In the *Trachiniae* the figure has not changed, but the sense of separation has become acute: the gods look passively now on suffering and pain "shameful to them." But in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* divine providence and human destiny are conceived more nearly in the figure of that self-involving circle, the Moebius strip, whose outside, when traversed, becomes its interior. Here no separation is possible. The gods do not control and dispose, nor merely watch with unconcern; they are intricately involved in human destiny, and it in them. The terrifying irony of the play is that Oedipus can discover this only at the price of his downfall. But the elements of the later tragedies are here. Sophocles has composed for the first time a wholly unified drama with protagonist at center from beginning to end; and for the first time his hero achieves his greatness by the discovery of himself and of the eternally inscrutable order of those mysterious powers which, though beyond him, are inextricably entwined with his destiny.

Electra

Thus when we come to the *Electra*³⁷ we are in a different world from that of the early plays. Much more than a gripping piece of theatrical art, the *Electra* is, in terms of Sophocles' total work, a redefining of the individual's role in relation to his destiny. It is the play of triumph through endurance in time. Aeschylus has been called with penetration "the inventor of the ideas of meaningful time";³⁸ the trilogy itself, as we have seen, was the expression of a teleological pattern of human destiny, obscure at any one moment, but moving toward a significant goal through the long and intricate process of time. But Sophocles must struggle through his plays to discover how time can become meaningful, not for mankind, but for a man. Ajax rejected time, for time meant change. Antigone was outside of time; her action was of

the moment, as it would have been of any moment; it was innate in her character, and no process went into its making. It is in the *Trachiniae* that time first makes itself felt on a central Sophoclean character; for Deianeira, in her long and futile vigil, is ever aware of its corrosive passage. Heracles, she says in her opening monologue, “has stayed away unannounced for no small time, but already ten months on another five” (44–5). She greets Lichas as one “appearing after much time” (227–8), and when he tells her of Heracles’ sack of Oechalia, she asks: “Then was it for this city he was gone for a time beyond reckoning of the number of days?” —

ἢ καὶ τὴν ταύτην τῇ πόλει τὸν ἄσκοπον
χρόνον βεβῶς ἢν ἡμερῶν ἀνῆριθμον; (246–7)

Later she sadly tells the Chorus that Iole is the reward Heracles has given her “for keeping his house this long time” (542). But, like the revolving paths of the Bear which the Chorus sings of in its parodos, time in this play has no human meaning; all that it accomplishes is to raise and dash hopes and to prolong a woman’s suffering. Again the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is central: time, like the oracles, reveals its meaning in Oedipus’ fall. In that one day all Oedipus’ life is laid bare and finds its meaning: “This day,” as Teiresias told him, “will give you birth and destroy you” (438). Time as process and time as climactic moment, *χρόνος* and *καιρός*,³⁹ coincide in Oedipus’ discovery. Since Laius’ death, Creon tells Oedipus, “Long and ancient times would be measured” (561); and yet, “In time you will know these things for sure, since time alone points out the just man; but the base man you may know in one day” —

ἀλλ’ ἐν χρόνῳ γνώσει τάδ’ ἀσφαλῶς, ἐπεὶ
χρόνος δίκαιον ἄνδρα δείκνυσιν μόνος,
κακὸν δὲ κἂν ἐν ἡμέρᾳ γνώης μιᾷ. (613–5)

All Oedipus’ life has gone into showing him as a great and just king, yet all his life has led to the moment of his discovery — “the moment,” he tells the Corinthian Messenger, “for these things to be found out”: *ὁ καιρὸς ἠύρησθαι τάδε* (1050) — and the revelation of his base birth which follows. “All-seeing time has found you out against your will” (1213), the Chorus sings; and at the very last Oedipus asks his daughters to pray that he may live “where *καιρός* allows” (1513).

Thus in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* time is conceived as a process working toward fulfillment in a moment of discovery and revelation; it is this process which gives the play its form. Electra, however, is the first Sophoclean hero who, like Philoctetes and old Oedipus after her,

works *with* time by purposeful endurance, so that her climactic moment is one not of ruin but of triumph. Again, the *Tyrannus* was the watershed: there time was first, in the extant plays, seen as humanly meaningful, yet worked to the hero's destruction. In the unified tension of its action the *Electra* resembles the *Tyrannus*, and might, more truly even than its predecessor, be called the drama of suspended *καιρός*. The prologue establishes a mood of intense expectancy which finds issue only in the bloody conclusion. Three time in the opening seventy-five lines of the play the word *καιρός* is emphatically spoken. The Paedagogus ends his rapidly paced first speech by saying, "We are at the point where it is no longer the moment (*καιρός*) to hold back, but the occasion for deeds (*ἔργων ἀκμή*)" (21-2). Orestes bids the Paedagogus enter the palace "when *καιρός* leads you" (39), and ends his own speech by saying they must go, "for *καιρός* (ordains it), which is the greatest master of every action for men" —

*καιρός γάρ, ὅσπερ ἀνδράσιν
μέγιστος ἔργου παντός ἐστ' ἐπιστάτης.* (75-6)

Nothing could be more heavily underlined. After his reunion with Electra, Orestes tells her she must cut short her story because "it would obstruct the due limit of time (*χρόνου καιρόν*)" (1292); and when the Paedagogus summons him to kill Clytemnestra he says simply, *νῦν καιρός ἔρδειν* — "now is the moment to act" (1368). But this *καιρός* can be understood only as the issue of "long time" — *χρόνος μακρός* — a phrase which Orestes speaks in the prologue and which recurs in this play as it had in the *Trachiniae*. The entire central section of the play, from the *parodos* to the recognition scene, presents, intensifies, and reintensifies the impression of Electra's unbending endurance of almost unendurable sufferings through long time. "Are you not willing to be taught in long time," Chrysothemis begins by asking her, "not vainly to indulge your idle wrath?" (330-1). But Electra will not learn such submission to what she conceives as evil; she has suffered terribly and long, but she will die before she yields. That her endurance ends not in death but in the appearance of Orestes and the accomplishment of the vengeance she has longed for is the expression of a new sense of the human spirit's capacity to triumph by heroic perseverance in the face of adversity. The endurance becomes itself a trying and a proof of the individual's worth, so that when Orestes comes at last, "thinking it worthy to appear to me," as Electra sings in her *commos*, "after long time on this most welcome journey" (1273-3), she too has shown herself worthy of the event. Thus the prologue, by

anticipating the *καίρὸς* which is to terminate this trying process of time and vindicate Electra, makes bearable for the audience the prolonged laying bare of the heroine's soul which constitutes the greater part of the drama.

The prologue anticipates also another major theme of the later plays: the sharp awareness of contrast between appearance and reality — or, in the sophistic terms of fifth-century Athens, word and deed, *λόγος* and *ἔργον*. There was little sense of this disparity in the early plays, where the strain was rather, as we have seen, between the great man's intrinsic worth and his place in the cosmic order. Teucer, in the *Ajax*, had indeed said of the Atreidae, "They who seem well-born err thus in the words they speak" (1095-6); but their words, if in error, were wholly in accord with — and almost constituted — their deeds. Nothing could be more bluntly straightforward than Menelaus's "He hated me, I hated him; and you knew it" (1134). So too Creon's mistaken views in the *Antigone* were held with stubborn conviction; and to doubt, as some have doubted, Deianeira's innocence — to doubt that she "had no foreboding of these things" (841) — is to misconceive her tragedy *toto caelo*. Yet the disjuncture in the *Trachiniae* between intention and result — "I have wrought a great evil," Deianeira says in despair, "from a good hope" (667) — foreshadows the new disparity of the later plays, as does Oedipus' horrified sense of the "fairness festering with ills beneath" (*κάλλος κακῶν ὑπουλον*, 1396) which he, unwittingly, has proved to be. In those plays the disparity was one, not between word and deed, but between what men could know and what they were; in these last plays it is rather one within the characters themselves, dividing them into those like Clytemnestra, Odysseus, and Creon, who try to conceal their real motives with specious protestations, and the heroes themselves, Electra, Philoctetes, Oedipus, who, whether through vengeful hatred or through the indignity of rags and physical mutilation, may seem base in the eyes of the world, but are true to themselves, and are justified in time. "Ills pregnant with fairness beneath," we might say, again reversing the coin of the *Tyrannus*. Orestes plots in the *Electra* to die in word but be saved in deed (59-60); and the prevalence of deception in this play, culminating in the agonizing speech of the Paedagogus on Orestes' supposed death, mirrors from still another angle the absoluteness of Electra's single-mindedly sincere devotion to right as she sees it. The contrast between word and deed is not, however, one only of contrivance. "You," Electra tells her sister, "who hate while I am by, hate only in word, but in deed you consort with our father's murderers" (357-8). Chrysothemis herself —

it is this which differentiates her so distinctly from the Ismene of an earlier play — admits that justice lies not with her but with Electra; and yet, she says, she must obey her rulers (338–40). But the timid sister's disparity of word and deed is as nothing beside that of the audacious mother, "the woman noble in words" — ἡ λόγοισι γενναία γυνή (287). Electra's own words mercilessly penetrate Clytemnestra's façade of fair speech because, as she tells her, "You do the deed, and your deeds find words for me" (624–5). The stark contrast of the hypocritical mother and the burningly genuine daughter should make the play's central meaning unmistakably clear. Sophocles has taken the extreme instance of enmity toward a mother, treated in so different a spirit in Aeschylus' already classic version of the myth, and is showing that *even* here, even where all traditional sanction is violated, justice is with Electra. The matricide itself is played down and the murder of Aegisthus stressed to make the climax bearable, but there can be no doubt of the justice of both acts. Clytemnestra, in her sleepless life of fear (780–2), has been living a lie, a false pretence, as Electra says — σκῆψιν οὐκ ὄσαν (584) — and has become for her daughter not so much a mother as a mistress (597–8). Electra's repudiation of such a mother — "if indeed I must call her a mother who lies with such a man" (274) — is as final as Oedipus' rejection of Polyneices in the later play.

Thus a new attitude toward the inviolability of family ties seems also to have emerged from the experience of the *Tyrannus*. Electra, as much as any Sophoclean hero, upholds the code of the *εὐγενής* (257) as she sees it. "It is shameful," she says, "for those who are well-born to live shamefully" (989). She bases her resolution on loyalty to her dead father, and the Chorus pointedly calls her "wise and the best of children" (1089). But all this, important as it is, is counterweight to the central fact of the drama: that this girl is determined, if she must, to kill Aegisthus with her own hand, and will cry out, "Strike her twice if you have the strength" (1415) when her mother is slain. Only the extreme indignity and suffering we have seen her endure could succeed — if it does quite succeed — in making this seem not only forgivable but right. Electra's character, more perhaps than that of any other Sophoclean hero, is liable to misunderstanding. She is, as her reunion with Orestes shows beyond doubt, a girl of deep and tender passions. Thrice in the play she is compared to a nightingale (107–9, 147–9, 1076–7). This is her essential nature; she is hostile and harsh to her mother and sister because only thus, by actions she knows are in themselves wrong, can she be true to what she no less surely knows is fundamentally right. "Force compels me to do these things,"

she tells the Chorus at the outset: "pardon them" (256-7). To Clytemnestra she says:

Know well that I am ashamed of these deeds, even if I do not seem so to you; for I have learned that what I do is unseasonable and not suited to me. But my enmity for you, and your deeds, compel me by force to do these things; for shameful acts are taught by shameful circumstances. (616-21)

Thus we must not judge her more simply than she judges herself. Her deeds are necessary evils toward the fulfillment of a greater good. Both her character and her situation are more complex than Antigone's. The earlier heroine aligned herself with the gods by taking the course which she knew to be right in burying her brother; her reverence to him was the only reverence she claimed, and therein she was true to the unwritten laws of the gods. But Electra has been forced by events and time to find her integrity through her very opposition to conventional ethical and religious codes. Her seemingly cold-blooded determination to resist the mother who she feels is evil increases in the face of increased adversities throughout the play, and will not be shaken. She has chosen, rather than be untrue to her loved ones and herself, to "be badly minded (*φρονεῖν κακῶς*)" (345) in the eyes of the world; and she will not listen to Chrysothemis' appeal to "be well-minded (*εὖ φρονεῖν*)" (394), nor to her accusations of ill counsel — *aboulia* (398, 429). The vice of the *Antigone's* Creon has become her virtue.

But Electra is not, by her stubbornness, as Ajax and Creon were, opposing herself to the will of the gods. On the contrary, by adherence to the truth which, with time, she has found in herself, she is, despite appearance, and almost without her own knowledge, identifying herself with that will. This again is clarified in the prologue by Orestes, who is fully conscious of his divine mission: "I come as a cleanser in justice, urged on by the gods" (69-70), he says. The Chorus is confident that *Dikē* will come (475-9); and those dread Erinyes who in Aeschylus' trilogy had hounded Orestes are here invoked by both Electra (112, 1386-8) and the Chorus (489-90) against the murderers of Agamemnon. And, above all, the intimate correlation between divine providence and human destiny which we first saw in the *Tyrannus* is vital to the *Electra*. If the play is a redefining of individual responsibility to self, it is also, thereby, a redefining of reverence. This is a central and fully explicit theme; it is basic to the reconstitution of a vision of life which emerges from the white heat of the play. Any form of reverence for the gods of the *Trachiniae* would have been futile at best. In the *Tyrannus* the faith in

the gods which even the Chorus had been hard put to maintain in their great central stasimon (863-910) was confirmed only in Oedipus' fall. But in this play both Electra and the gods are vindicated in the victorious, if blood-curdling, finale. The very horror with which this assertion comes should warn against taking it for granted. Early in the drama Electra had concluded the parodos — the emphatic position should be noted — by singing that, unless her father's murderers paid for their crime, "respect and reverence — *eusebeia* — would be swept away from all mortals" (248-50). She ends her long description of her hardships by saying, "Under such circumstances, my friends, there is no room to be either moderate or reverent; but in evil circumstances there is strong compulsion to practice evils" (307-9). Yet as the play progresses, this word *eusebeia* is used consistently of Electra herself. It is she, not Chrysothemis, whom the Chorus praises for speaking "in accord with reverence" (464). Again, Electra proudly tells Clytemnestra that she and her brother and sisters, unlike the children born of the marriage with Aegisthus, were "reverent and from reverent parents" (589-90). She says to Chrysothemis that in killing Aegisthus they will "win reverence" from their dead father and brother. Once more in the most emphatic of positions, the Chorus concludes the stasimon which immediately precedes Orestes' entry by praising Electra for "winning the best repute of the greatest laws in being by your reverence for Zeus" (1095-7). And Electra, just before entering the palace, prays that Orestes will "show men how great a penalty for irreverence the gods award" (1382-3). These passages are vital to an understanding of the play. Electra, in being true to her own nature even at the price of defying the dictates of traditional piety, has labored with, not against, the gods. She has, in her unremitting hatred of her mother, placed her concept of right above the ties of blood; and in the end not only is she vindicated and the divine purpose achieved through her and Orestes, but also, as the Chorus says, the curse on her race and city is ended (1413-4). "O seed of Atreus," ends the play, "having suffered many things you have come forth, with difficulty, in freedom, consummated by this present effort" —

ὦ σπέρμ' Ἀτρέως, ὡς πολλὰ παθὼν
 δι' ἐλευθερίας μόλις ἐξήλθες
 τῇ νῦν ὀρμῇ τελεωθέν.

(1508-10)

The word *μόλις*, "with difficulty," is of great weight in these last lines. Electra's triumph has not been an easy one either for her or for her poet. Rather, it has been a baptism of fire whose intense experience

we must not dismiss or underestimate if we are to understand the resolution of the final plays. As Electra said (945), "Without suffering nothing prospers."

Philoctetes

The *Philoctetes*,⁴⁰ to judge from its production date of 409 B.C., must have been very nearly Sophocles' last play before the *Oedipus at Colonus*; and in both these dramas of the poet's old age there is a quality of resolution and finality found nowhere else in his work. Yet the play has affinities with the *Electra* as well; and if we conceive the *Oedipus at Colonus* as Sophocles' final statement, complete in itself, then this penultimate drama may be seen as a working toward that vision. The play pivots on Neoptolemus, the young son of Achilles, and his rejection of Odysseus for Philoctetes — of intrigue and deception for the heroic integrity which his own father, whom he had never known, had so uncompromisingly adhered to. In order to understand the consummate deception which Odysseus embodies, certain passages from the earlier plays are of relevance. There was deception of a sort from the beginning, in Ajax's speech on time and change which misled Tecmessa and the Chorus into thinking that he meant to yield to the Atreidae. But his speech, as we have seen, was comprehensible only as Ajax's ironical reckoning with forces which he understood all too well, but knew that he could not submit to. The deception, however great its dramatic effect, was for him almost incidental: he might as well have been speaking — perhaps was — to himself. Again, Lichas, the herald in the *Trachiniae*, had delivered a false speech to conceal Heracles' passion for Iole. But his motive, far from being deceitful, was of the best: "I myself, O queen," he had told Deianeira in confessing his previous falsehood, "fearing that by these words I might grieve your heart, erred, if you count this an error" (481–3). Like her, like everyone in that hopeless play, he erred with good intention. Another speech of importance, though not involving deception, is Creon's defence of himself in the *Tyrannus* (583–615), for it closely follows the pattern of the new sophistic disputation. No man who understands wisdom (*σωφρονεῖν ἐπίσταται*, 589), he says, arguing impeccably from probability, would desire the dangers of the ruler's name when he already enjoys the ruler's powers; "I do not happen to be so deceived," he contends, "as to desire other honors than those with profit" (*τὰ σὺν κέρδει καλά*, 594–5). This argument is only a more calculating restatement of Odysseus' position in the *Ajax*: "Do not rejoice, son of

Atreus, in profits which are not honorable" (*κέρδεσιν τοῖς μὴ καλοῖς*, 1350). But the terms are significantly reversed, and *κέρδος*, rather than *τὸ καλόν*, becomes for Creon the standard of the man of *sophrosynḗ*. And Creon, like the more sympathetic Odysseus in the earlier play, does, with his cautious self-interest, emerge from the play's catastrophes unscathed; his policy, by his own standards, is a success. In the *Electra* prologue, Orestes, explaining his intention to feign death, justifies himself by saying, "I think no word is bad which brings profit" (61). His dissimulation, through the Paedagogus's speech, does indeed accomplish his purpose with brilliant success. Yet as we watch its effect on the shattered Electra, it is hard to condone this cruel speech, whatever profit it may bring. Profit, however good its end, can be too dearly bought; for the end may not always justify the means.

In the central situation of the *Philoctetes* Sophocles, it would seem, has again faced up to the full implications of his ideas. The deceit which Orestes had employed to accomplish a given end we now see, in Odysseus, as a way of life. "When what you do brings profit, you should not shrink from it" (111) — that is his watchword. The cautious utilitarianism of Creon becomes, in this Odysseus, a subtle form of hypocrisy. And it is clearly as a sophist that he is presented. He will, he says at the beginning, capture Philoctetes by a sophism (*σόφισμα*, 14); thus the deed must be shrewdly contrived (*σοφισθῆναι*, 77). Neoptolemus reluctantly permits himself to be won over by Odysseus' appeal to profit, and acts as his instrument in the deception of Philoctetes. In one of his many unconscious ironies, reflecting his discomfort at the role he plays so well, he tells Philoctetes, "Even shrewd opinions (*σοφαὶ γνώμαι*) often trip themselves up" (431-2). Odysseus appeals also to the young warrior's sense of duty and desire for fame; and though Neoptolemus realizes that men "may become bad through the words of their teachers" (388), yet later, when Philoctetes learns he has been tricked and begs him to return his bow, Neoptolemus says, "It is not possible; obligation (*τὸ ἔνδικον*) and expediency (*τὸ συμφέρον*) make me obey those in power" (925-6). The appeal to submit to authority from obligation is one we have met before in Sophocles' plays, most baldly in Menelaus's speech to Teucer; the appeal to expediency and self-interest is particularly a sophistic one. In advancing it Neoptolemus is clearly, as Philoctetes bitterly charges, "a hateful contrivance of dreadful villainy" (927-8). Odysseus, by his deliberate choice of deceit and guile over action as instruments to his end, has placed himself squarely on the side of word at the expense of deed. "Now when I have undergone the proof (of experience)," he tells Neoptolemus, "I see that the

tongue, not deeds, rules men in all things" (98–9). Thus Neoptolemus, in submitting to him, has put himself under the sway of one for whom the motive of profit and the method of deception are the rules of life. And when finally he repudiates his error it is Odysseus' sophistry, his shrewdness, that Neoptolemus explicitly renounces. "Though born shrewd (*σοφός*), you speak nothing shrewd," he says. And when Odysseus answers, "Neither what you say nor what you intend to do is shrewd," the young man replies, "But if they are just, they are better than shrewd" (1244–6). There is a direct descent of sorts from the Odysseus of the *Ajax* through the Creon of the *Tyrannus* to this Odysseus and to the Creon of the last play. But whereas the generous moderation of the early Odysseus and the cautious prudence of the middle Creon had their place in a world where heroic greatness seemed to run counter to the order of things, here in these last plays, where the heroes can and do commit themselves, finally, to that order and find fulfillment through it in the end, the Odysseuses and Creons must be, and are, cast aside and left behind. When Odysseus backs down before the un-intimidated Neoptolemus and leaves with a threat to tell the army on him, the son of Achilles replies, with unsurpassable contempt, "You have shown *sophrosynē*" (1259). The gods of the *Philoctetes* do not, discernibly, love *τοὺς σώφρονας*.

It is not in the arts of the sophist but in truth to his own nature that Neoptolemus finds himself; and his discovery is made by the respect which he gains for the heroic endurance of Philoctetes. As the son of the greatest warrior of Greece Neoptolemus is, as Philoctetes reminds him, "well-born and from well-born parents" — *εὐγενῆς καὶ εὐγενῶν* (874). Yet at the beginning of the play he has no real comprehension of the potentialities of his own nature, and is a pawn in the hands of the opportunistic Odysseus. Odysseus artfully anticipates the young man's reaction to the scheme he is advancing — "I know, my son, you were not born to speak or contrive such things by nature" (79–80) — but stresses the honor he will win by complying. Neoptolemus does indeed recoil: "I was not born," he says "to do anything by evil contrivance — neither I myself nor, so they say, was he who begot me" (88–9). "I wish, prince, rather to err by doing well than to be victorious by evil" (94–5). Thus, though he is easily won over by Odysseus' cunning appeal to profit, Neoptolemus is instinctively aware from the first what his nature, his *φύσις*, is. He senses it, but cannot yet act upon it; he is torn from his natural ways by those other compelling values, obligation and expediency. The conflict between these ways of life preys on him. "All things," he tells Philoctetes in

anguish at his own deceitfulness, "are offensive when one deserts his own nature and does what is not suited to him" —

ἅπαντα δυσχέρεια, τὴν αὐτοῦ φύσιν
ὄταν λιπῶν τις δρῆ τὰ μὴ προσεικότα — (902-3)

and Philoctetes' appeal to him is eloquent in its simplicity: "Be yourself!" — ἐν σαυτῷ γενοῦ (950). As Neoptolemus wavers Odysseus enters and forestalls him; and, while Neoptolemus stands silently with the bow in his hands, Philoctetes, his own hands bound by two of the sailors, excoriates his old enemy and accuses him of teaching his companion "against his nature (*ἀφύνα*) and against his will to be shrewd in evil things" (1014-5). In rejecting Odysseus Neoptolemus, as Philoctetes tells him, is showing "the nature you were born from" (1310-1). And thus, like the old Oedipus, he is true to himself at the end: he is *γενναῖος*. The word recurs emphatically here as in the subsequent final play. Ironically, it is Odysseus who first tells Neoptolemus he must prove himself *γενναῖος* (51) by assisting in the plot to take Philoctetes' bow. For this accomplishment, he assures him, he will be called "most reverent (*εὐσεβέστατος*) of all men" (85). The master plotter's words will be fulfilled indeed, but precisely contrary to his intention. For it is Philoctetes who understands that "for those who are *γενναῖος* the shameful deed is hateful and the good one glorious" (475-6). Twice in the unspeakable anguish of physical pain he calls on Neoptolemus as *γενναῖος* (799, 801); and it is because Odysseus recognizes this quality in him that he bids Neoptolemus not look back on Philoctetes, "lest, being *γενναῖος*, you should ruin our fortune" (1068-9). Finally, when Neoptolemus, just before the epiphany of Heracles, at last consents to take Philoctetes to his home, his comrade calls his promise *γενναῖος* (1402). In repudiating Odysseus for Philoctetes, and in fulfilling, even at the cost of abandoning his hopes at Troy, the pledge of honor he had made, Neoptolemus has indeed proved true to his essential nature.

But there is change in Philoctetes, too, during the course of the play — change which manifests itself in his attitude toward the gods and toward his island. Neoptolemus had indeed, at the beginning of the play immediately before Philoctetes' scream, stated the cause of divine justice with a complacency unmerited by the situation he would soon see before his eyes (191-200). But Philoctetes, afflicted, like the old Oedipus, with a suffering wholly irrational in its origin (he had stepped on the sacred snake of the goddess Chryse), looks on his ulcerous foot and his ten-year exile on Lemnos with easily comprehensible bitterness,

and rages vindictively against the order of life. The good are punished and the evil rewarded: "How am I to consider these things, how praise them, since, in praising their deeds, I find the gods evil?" (451-2). He has not come yet to accept the irrationality of irrational suffering, nor has he yet learned the transcendent value of his own endurance. Further, just as Neoptolemus at first subordinated his nobler aims to the desire to win the bow, so is Philoctetes anxious for nothing so much as to leave his island at any price. "Take me and throw me where you will," he pleads, "in the hold, in the prow, in the stern, wherever I will least disturb your companions" (481-3). What he longs for here is escape, oblivion: "Let us go, for timely speed brings sleep and rest when suffering is over" (637-8). It is only when Neoptolemus reveals his ruse that Philoctetes is thrown back on himself and his island, and calls for support on the harbors, promontories, and mountain beasts (936ff). It is only when Odysseus tempts him with glory at Troy that he expresses his determination to stay on his island, and proclaims a faith in the gods transcending his own despair. Odysseus, he says, by hiding behind the gods makes them false; yet, though the gods "allot nothing sweet to me" (1020), he is certain Odysseus is hated by them (1031), and certain that they care for justice, that "some divine spur" has brought these men to his island (1036-9). And he ends by calling on those gods, whom he had previously accused of rewarding the evil, for vengeance, however late, on his enemies (1040-2). Thus, in his realization of some meaning in things beyond his personal suffering, and in his refusal to yield to his deceitful enemy, Philoctetes, too, even at the price of facing annihilation by the beasts of his own island, has proved true to himself.

The movement of the drama, then, is toward the discovery by both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes of what is essential in them. But though the point they reach is ultimately the same, the processes by which they reach that point are wholly diverse; and the diversity is closely bound up with the two aspects of time. If the *Electra* was the drama of "suspended *καιρός*," its tension steadily mounting toward the final climax, the *Philoctetes* might be called the drama of the displaced *καιρός*. Its action ascends continually to the point when the Chorus, while Philoctetes sleeps after his agonizing pain, urges Neoptolemus to steal away: "*καιρός*, which holds the key to all understanding, will often seize much power at a single stroke" (837-8). Yet at this climactic moment Neoptolemus, instead of accomplishing the goal to which all his efforts thus far have led him, proclaims in the meter of the oracle that Philoctetes himself, and not his bow, must be their prize: "His is the

crown, it is he whom the god said to bring; to boast of futility and lies is a shameful reproach" (841-2). This seems a moment of revelation, a *καιρός* of another sort: yet not decisively so, for, as the event shows, Neoptolemus is still not ready to reject the demands of obligation and expediency; he still submits to Odysseus' control. Yet the power of development in him, the ability to learn from what he has seen, the capacity for change — a change which is in reality a return to his true self — these forces are at work in him as in no Sophoclean character before; and when he suddenly returns it is, he tells the incredulous Odysseus, "to undo the errors I made (*ὄσ' ἐξήμαρτον*) in the past" (1224). "I shall attempt," he says, "to retrieve the shameful error I made" (*τὴν ἀμαρτίαν αἰσχρὰν ἀμαρτῶν*, 1248-9). Thus the process of time telescoped into this play for Neoptolemus has allowed him not only to learn from his experience, to develop, to discover himself, but also to correct his *hamartia*: time not only teaches but reconstructs him. For Philoctetes, on the other hand, as for Electra before him, "long time" (235, 306) has been rather a process of unremitting endurance. His long narration of his hardships in ten years of subsisting in hunger and pain on Lemnos (254-316) sets unforgettably before us — as before Neoptolemus — the extent of the nearly incredible sufferings this lonely, disease-wracked man has been through. Under these circumstances Philoctetes can scarcely be expected to listen to advice that he should return to fight at Troy; long endurance has developed in him, again as in Electra, a stubborn persistence which will not lightly be taught by others. Both he and Neoptolemus, indeed, have discovered their essential selves. But between the openness and responsiveness which Neoptolemus has learned and the bedrock of unalterable perseverance which Philoctetes has laid bare, there is still a chasm. Neoptolemus rightly tells his companion he is too harsh and unyielding in not listening to the good advice of a proved friend (1316-25). But Philoctetes, who has won his own integrity only at the end of long years of suffering such as the young man will never know, cannot now be true to himself by yielding even to the best advice. The impasse is total; there is nothing for Neoptolemus to do but agree to take Philoctetes home, even though this means the sacrifice of the glory of taking Troy.

It is the visitation of the god Heracles which fuses these two natures into one. The young Neoptolemus, under the shadow throughout the play of the mighty father he had never seen, had first submitted to the paternal tutelage of Odysseus — "I was young once myself," Odysseus had told him (96) — and then found not only a friend but a father in

Philoctetes, who had consistently called him "child" and "son." Yet now Philoctetes himself, in desiring only to return to his own father Poeas, whom in his despair he had assumed to be dead (1211-2), is failing to live up to the full potentialities of his own rediscovered nature. Heracles is the expression of the hero and god in Philoctetes himself; he summons Philoctetes to nothing less than the achievement of his own destiny. "Be certain," he says, "that for you too it is ordained to make from these sufferings a glorious life" —

καὶ σοί, σάφ' ἴσθι, τοῦτ' ὀφείλεται παθεῖν,
ἐκ τῶν πόνων τῶνδ' εὐκλεᾶ θέσθαι βίον. (1421-2)

Heracles, who had passed his unerring bow on to Philoctetes at his own funeral pyre, summons him back, now proved by long endurance, to the heroic life he had led before Chryse's noxious snake had bitten his foot: he recalls him finally to himself, as Philoctetes had recalled Neoptolemus. Thus again the paths of men and gods are seen, in the end, to be at one; and Heracles may command with the full authority of the man-god that *eusebeia* which looms so large in the vision of these last plays: "Remember this, when you ravage the land (of Troy), to reverence the gods; for father Zeus counts all else of less importance; reverence does not die along with men; among the living and the dead it does not perish" (1440-4). With this revelation the gap which divided Neoptolemus and Philoctetes has vanished, and they are seen as complementary and inseparable: "Like lions roaming together he guards you and you him" (1436-7). Both have progressed in the play to the discovery of their true natures, which are revealed at the end to be fundamentally one. This is the fulfillment toward which time has moved; now, Heracles says, "καίρός and the wind for sailing at your stern urge you on" (1450-1). Philoctetes calls on the now beloved island where he has suffered so long to grant him a fair voyage, and the play comes to its end. The vision is now complete. The blind, aged Oedipus of Sophocles' last play will combine in his one being the responsiveness of Neoptolemus and the endurance of Philoctetes to realize through their union an even fuller expression of that in man which is, in deed and not in word only, divine.

Thus between the *Ajax* and the *Oedipus at Colonus* has occurred a complex reorientation of Sophocles' vision of life. In the early plays, *Ajax* and *Antigone*, the heroic protagonists loom too large for the frame which would contain them. The pattern of *atē* requiting *hybris* motivates the fall of both Ajax and Creon; but for Ajax, as well as for the innocent

Antigone, this scheme of divine justice seems inadequate: the change of perspective which the new emphasis on the individual involves has taxed with too heavy a burden the theodicy which served Aeschylus so well. The hero, isolated from his fellow men — and set against or outside of the workings of time — by the stern code of the *εὐγενής*, the “well-born” man, here pits himself, when need arises, against the laws of the city or against the gods themselves, and achieves his greatness in the timeless finality of death. In the *Trachiniae* the disparity between human greatness and divine justice, latent in the early plays, has become an abyss: the gods watch now with unconcern as men are swept helplessly up in the current of time and led blindly to error by their efforts at good. In the *Oedipus Tyrannus* human destiny and divine purpose are somehow fused, and the process of time finds meaning in the terrible moment when Oedipus discovers the truth of his birth. This fusion becomes in the *Electra* the basis for the triumph of the determined human will, proved by suffering and endurance in long time, and working through and with the inexorable purpose of the gods. The final plays, *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, are the dramas of *eusebeia* and τὸ γενναῖον: of the discovery through that very process of time and suffering of the ties which bind men together in a union stronger than that of city or blood, and unite them finally with the gods.

It is easy to underestimate the complexity and diversity of experience distilled into these seven plays; indeed, even so discerning a critic as the late Werner Jaeger has spoken of Sophocles’ “unshakable but placid piety.”⁴¹ But Sophocles’ faith was not a given, and his development will be best conceived as a religious experience central to Western man. There is something of the Old Testament Jehovah in the Athena of the *Ajax*, before whom men are as shadows, and who chastens the wicked and watches over the righteous — even though righteousness be, for the Greek, *sophrosynē* — while the mysterious passing of the tainted Oedipus is more nearly analogous to the redemption of original sin through inner faith and the inscrutable grace of God preached by St. Paul. As in the Jerusalem of a later age men were beginning to turn, in the Athens of Socrates, away from the old Law, the old sanctions and codes, in their time of crisis, to a new probing of inner spiritual values. None explored these regions more profoundly than Sophocles in his last plays, yet — it is his unique achievement — he was able to see in the innermost man qualities at one with the divine powers holding sway in the universe beyond him. Thus man’s deepest self links him with the gods; thus may man achieve greatness through the

II—H.S.C.P.

fulfillment of his truest being. Not only inner worth but, finally, outward greatness, asserting itself in the teeth of contrary appearance, remains a prime article of Sophocles' fully evolved belief. In the time of Socrates and Euripides his heroes find still the stature of Homer's.

During the half century of peace and war, of triumph and calamity, in which Sophocles wrote, he faced with the utmost clear-sightedness and courage the issues and conflicts which presented themselves to him. His subject was no less than the place of individual man in his universe, and he explored the full implications of that staggering subject with a depth of insight given to the greatest poets alone. When we consider the immensity of his theme and the diversity of experience brought to bear on it, we must marvel most at the force of mind and spirit which enabled him to mold all this into drama of such vigorous clarity and intense power. His final glory — as it was his first — is the towering grandeur of his heroic men and women, the gripping interest of the dramatic action which informs his plots, and the balanced cadences of his dense and richly woven verse. It is small wonder that the developing pattern of his vision has been so easily obscured; for never has any poet conceived more harmoniously the multifiform complexity of man's state on earth, and possessed it of a form so intricately one.

NOTES

1. See in particular C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford 1944); Cedric H. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge, Mass. 1951); A. J. A. Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge 1951); H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, 2nd ed. (New York 1954), *Sophocles: Dramatist and Philosopher* (London 1958), and *Form and Meaning in Drama* (New York 1960); and Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven 1957), and *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley 1964).

Albin Lesky's *Die Tragische Dichtung der Hellenen* (Heft 2 of the *Studienhefte zur Altertumswissenschaft*, Göttingen 1956) is useful both in its own right and as a compendium of German Sophoclean scholarship.

Other works of interest on Sophocles include S. M. Adams, *Sophocles the Playwright* (Toronto 1957); G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama* (Ithaca 1958); F. J. H. Letters, *The Life and Work of Sophocles* (London and New York 1953); Georges Méautis, *Sophocle* (Paris 1957); J. C. Opstelten, *Sophocles and Greek Pessimism* (Amsterdam 1952); and Gennaro Perrotta, *Sofocle* (Messina and Milan 1935).

I must here gratefully acknowledge the invaluable advice and assistance of Professor Cedric Whitman, under whose tutelage at Harvard this paper was first written, and of Professor Bernard Knox, with whose help it was revised in the present form at the University of California.

2. In dating I follow the chapter on "Chronology" in Whitman, pp. 42-55. In the order which he assigns to the plays — the order followed also by Bowra and Lesky; namely *Ajax*, *Ant.*, *Trach.*, *O. T.*, *El.*, *Phil.*, *O. C.* — he seems to me almost certainly correct.

3. Whitman is almost the only writer on Sophocles in English in whose book the poet's development plays an important part. His threefold grouping into plays of "Tragic Arete," "Tragic Knowledge," and "Tragic Endurance" anticipates the central thesis of this paper. Bowra too (pp. 377-8) speaks of the "three stages" of Sophocles' "theology," but leaves this argument largely unexplored. Perrotta, earlier, saw a development of sorts: "Between the first two dramas and the other five there is a profound division. The poet has a more mature intuition of life and men. He knows now that not only the guilty are unhappy, but also the innocent" (p. 631); his further exploration of this theme was perhaps hampered by placing the *Trach.* among the last plays. Opstelten, whose early chapters in particular are of great interest, notes also (pp. 50-2) the greater weight given to the motif of guilt in the first two plays. See also Lesky, p. 144.

4. Bowra, pp. 365-6.

5. Whitman, p. 39.

6. Whitman, p. 40.

7. Whitman, p. 113. See also John A. Moore, *Sophocles and Areté* (Cambridge, Mass. 1938).

8. *Ajax* 617, 1357; *Trach.* 645; *Phil.* 669, 1420, 1425. At *Phil.* 669, where Philoctetes promises to let Neoptolemus handle his bow because of his *areté*, there are possible moral overtones; elsewhere a clearly martial virtue is called for.

9. Waldock, p. 158. He is here discussing the *O. T.*, but the statement sums up a central attitude of his book. His principal assumptions resemble those of Tycho v. Wilamowitz's influential *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles* (Berlin 1917), but the flavor is distinctly Waldock's own.

10. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, p. 151. This idea is presented with particular conviction in Kitto's *Sophocles*; see especially chap. III.

11. These two tragedies, separated among the extant dramas only by the *O. T.*, are a particular challenge to those who would deny significant change in Sophocles' outlook. Knox has written on neither. Kitto is excellent on the *Electra*, but rather at a loss with the *Trach.*, which he dates late.

12. Of major importance on the *Ajax* is Bernard Knox's article "The *Ajax* of Sophocles," *HSCP* 65 (1961) 1-37. Knox is particularly fine on the incompatibility of Ajax's heroic code with the values of a later time. See also Ivan Linforth, "Three Scenes in Sophocles' 'Ajax'," *Univ. of Cal. Pub. Class. Phil.*, 15 (1954) 1-28; and Kitto's article in *Form and Meaning*, pp. 174-98.

13. Whitman is particularly offended by Athena's dictum. He contends (p. 68) that Sophocles "put a moral of sorts in the prologue, but then in his apotheosis of the hero denied its meaning." Athena, he argues (p. 70), "is a kind of spirit of the hour" who "tells no great truth and exhibits no great power." Bowra, on the other hand, maintains of this speech (p. 38) that "we cannot but accept it as given *ex cathedra* by the poet," and Lesky (p. 109) considers its force valid "for all Sophocles."

14. See lines 123, 195, 304, 307, 363, 367, 643, 848, 976, 1061, 1088.

15. See Knox's article (p. 7): "Athena in the prologue is a minister of justice." Knox is excellent on Athena's relation to Ajax. Lesky (p. 112) sees

Athena “not only as punishing and teaching through punishment, but also as incalculable power, not answerable to, and not sparing, the human.”

16. Whitman, pp. 63, 68, 72. Yet Kitto’s conclusion in *Greek Tragedy* (p. 129) that “the end is rather the triumph of Odysseus than the rehabilitation of Ajax,” is at least equally exaggerated.

17. As Knox notes (p. 2), “The last half of the play shows us a world emptied of greatness.”

18. The irony of the speech is apparent, whatever precise interpretation is given. Bowra’s notion (pp. 39–46) that Ajax really has changed his mind and decided to yield, and then, afflicted by divine madness, forgets his lesson and kills himself, is untenable to the point of silliness. Whitman’s interpretation, on the other hand (p. 75), that “Ajax had to deceive his friends in order to get away unhindered,” assigns too simply utilitarian a motive to this complex speech. For other interpretations see Lesky’s discussion, pp. 112–113. More recently, Bernard Knox, in his *Ajax* article (pp. 12–14), has suggested that Ajax’s speech, up to line 684, is a soliloquy: “He is not trying to deceive but to understand” (p. 14). Knox’s cogent arguments are worth close attention, and his interpretation does far more honor to Ajax than either Bowra’s or Whitman’s. And yet, there is nothing of that balancing of alternatives in the speech which we might expect in a meditation on so important a matter; moreover, this reading does not fully account for Tecmessa’s later feeling that she has been “deceived” (807), or the Chorus’s sense that they were “deaf and unhearing in all” (911). Starting from Knox’s insights I would offer the following as a possible interpretation.

Ajax, in the previous scene, had turned a deaf ear to Tecmessa’s pleas and left no doubt in anyone’s mind of his intention to take his life. Yet now he emerges from his tent — that in itself is unexpected — and, as Knox stresses, begins abruptly and without addressing anyone present. Here indeed he is speaking to himself. “In all things long and unnumbered time brings forth what is obscure and hides what is apparent,” he begins. Likewise, Ajax will bring forth the obscure and hide the apparent, not because his resolve has changed, nor simply to provide a subterfuge to sneak away and take his life, but because his speech has been softened in consideration of Tecmessa. This is clearly the meaning of the words *ἐθελύθημι στόμα* / *πρὸς τῆσδε τῆς γυναικός* (651–2). In the context of the preceding metaphor, *βαφῆ αἰθιρος ὤς*, the word *στόμα*, as Jebb points out in his note, “necessarily suggests the sense of a sharp, hard edge.” But this in no way alters the basic meaning of the word, which is “mouth”: Ajax, in one of the speech’s many ambiguities, is at once suggesting that “the keen edge of my temper” has been softened, and stating that in reality it is his mouth, his words, that have been made womanly. (A similar play on *στόμα* occurs in *O. C.* 794–5: *ὑπόβλητον στόμα* / *πολλὴν ἔχον στόμωσιν*). To all appearances Ajax’s temperament has changed; in fact it is only his speech which has softened because of his expressed pity (652–3) for Tecmessa and Eurysaces.

Then with the phrase *ἀλλ’ εἰμι* (654) he addresses the others directly. By Knox’s interpretation these words can only mean, “I pity her but (nonetheless) I will go (to kill myself).” In this case, however, we should expect a construction such as: *οἰκτίρω μὲν . . . νῦν δ’ εἰμι* (compare *Phil.* 453–61: *ἐγὼ μὲν . . . νῦν δ’ εἰμι*). Otherwise the pity for Tecmessa would contradict the immediately subsequent determination to take his life. The phrase *ἀλλ’ εἰμι*, however, is

too abrupt to act simply as an adversative to the previous clause. In the three other places where I find the phrase in Sophocles (*Trach.* 86, 389; *O. C.* 503) it stands at the beginning of a section of dialogue; therefore is not adversative. Compare Aesch. *Pers.* 845-9, where Atossa, after hearing the ghost of Darius speak, first calls ὦ δαίμων, then turns to the Chorus with ἀλλ' εἴμι. So here Ajax's opening lines are meant for himself; then with ἀλλ' εἴμι he begins the speech to Tecmessa and the Chorus which fulfills his intention to soften his words, but not his resolution. Thus the double meanings with which the speech abounds. Ajax knows the impossibility that he should learn wisdom and reverence the Atreidae, but he had just said to Tecmessa, σωφρονεῖν καλόν (586). Now, in ambiguous words which couch his real intention to take his life, he suggests that he too has learned *sophrosyné*. Tecmessa's pleas have not educated his temper, but they have softened his speech. This the Chorus later realizes when Tecmessa tells them Ajax has buried his sword only to kill himself; their *κατημέλησα* (912) means that they had overlooked the real intention of Ajax's statement (658-9) that he would bury his sword in the earth. Now, too late, they understand.

Ajax, softened in speech by Tecmessa's pleas, has veiled his intention to die in language as misleading as that of the oracle in the *Trach.* which said Heracles would bring his toils to an end and live the rest of his life free from pain. The Chorus and Tecmessa, naturally, are deceived. But in Ajax's mind no doubt has entered. He is not "trying to understand"; rather, he understands all too clearly.

19. According to Waldock (p. 218), "problems of any kind are singularly absent from this work." Bernard Knox's discussion in *The Heroic Temper* is customarily exceptional. See also Ivan Linforth, "Religion and Drama in 'Oedipus at Colonus'," *Univ. Cal. Pub. Class. Phil.*, 14 (1951) 75-192 — an article vitiated by its central assumption that the gods "have no more religious quality than the humming wires of Thomas Hardy" (p. 183).

20. In Lesky's phrase (p. 131), expressing a commonly shared reaction, "einer der widerwärtigsten Gestalten, die Sophokles gezeichnet hat."

21. This scene is absolutely crucial to an understanding of the play, yet the elder Wilamowitz would have excluded it entirely (see Lesky, p. 132), and Waldock (p. 225) can still call it "a gripping *interlude*, or not very much more than that."

22. See Lesky (p. 132): "Wohl löst sich der Mensch Oidipus in diesem Stücke ebenso von seiner Polis wie, mit dem Flucke über Polyneikes, aus der schuldhaft zerstörten Familie."

23. The signs which Oedipus had been promised were ἡ σεισμόν, ἡ βροντήν τιν', ἡ Διὸς σέλας (95). The thunder comes at 1456; at 1606 Ζεὺς χθόνιος rumbles; and at 1650-2 Theseus is seen "holding his hand before his face to shade his eyes, as if some strange terror had appeared, not endurable for a man to see."

24. For a valuable discussion of the gods in Sophocles see Kitto's *Sophocles*, p. 46.

25. See Whitman, pp. 42-6, and John H. Finley, Jr., "The Origins of Thucydides' Style," *HSCP*, 50 (1939) 35-84. Finley's discussion of the style of the *Ajax* and *Antigone* (pp. 53-9) is worth close attention. Although, he maintains (p. 56), "the elaborate symmetry" of the *Ajax* debates is "remote . . . from anything in Aeschylus," yet (p. 58) the *Ajax*, because of "its numerous figures and generally grandiose utterance," must be placed in the earliest, or

"Aeschylean," period designated by Plutarch. For a penetrating discussion of Aeschylus and Sophocles see Opstelten's second and third chapters, pp. 24-72.

26. See Whitman (p. 63): "Sophocles was struggling here with the problem of evolving a single play out of the trilogic form used by Aeschylus."

27. See the chapters on Hesiod, Solon, and Aeschylus in vol. I of Werner Jaeger's *Paideia* (New York 1945), particularly pp. 140-1.

28. On Aeschylus and time consult John H. Finley, Jr, *Pindar and Aeschylus* (Cambridge, Mass. 1955), especially pp. 179-194.

29. On the *Antigone* Knox (in *The Heroic Temper*) is at his very best. See also Kitto's article in *Form and Meaning*, and, on the style, Finley's article, cited in note 25 above. Finley maintains (p. 58) that the *Antigone* is "in style the most antithetical not merely of Sophocles' but probably of all ancient Greek tragedies."

30. For Philoctetes threatens to kill himself only in desperate defiance of Odysseus (1001-2); thereafter, in his *commos*, he imagines the birds and beasts feeding on his flesh since he will be powerless to live without his bow (1155-62); and only in the frenzy of utter despair does he ask the Chorus for a weapon with which to take his life (1204-5). See my discussion of the play below.

31. It is Sophocles' use of *hamartia*, however, and not Aristotle's, which must concern us here. For consistency I have translated it "error" throughout, though clearly the "errors" of Creon and Deianeira are of wholly different orders. As will be seen, the error of Creon is an avoidable, but fatal, error of judgment; Deianeira's error is one made with good intention, in spite of her effort to find the best course of action; Oedipus' error in the *O. T.* is involved with the very fact of his birth; while in the *Phil.* and the *O. C.* the errors of Neoptolemus and Oedipus are subject, within the plays themselves, to redemption. Thus the concept of *hamartia* as it appears in Sophocles is an evolving one.

32. Compare *Ajax* 758-760: τὰ γὰρ περισσὰ κἀνόνητα σώματα / πίπτειν βαρείαις πρὸς θεῶν δυσπραξίαις / ἔφασχ' ὁ μάντις.

33. Whitman, always provocative, is perhaps closest to the mark on this play which has puzzled so many Sophoclean critics. His discussion of "late learning" is especially valuable.

34. With Lichas' σε μανθάνω / θνητὴν φρονοῦσαν θνητὰ (472-3) contrast Calchas on *Ajax* (761, 777).

35. Jebb is surely right in assigning these final four lines to Hyllus. Other explanations, that the Chorus Leader addresses the *other* Chorus members as παρθένε, or that Iole has suddenly reappeared on stage to be so addressed, are too far-fetched to carry conviction. These are efforts to make the play end as a Sophoclean drama "ought to end" according to preconception: too many writers have tried to make the last lines, in the mouth of the Chorus, somehow refute Hyllus's accusations. The *reductio ad absurdum* of such arguments is found in Méautis (p. 290): "La fin des *Trachiniennes* s'illumine donc de la lumière de l'apothéose d'Héraclès; après les ténèbres du jardin des Oliviers, de Golgotha, de la «nuit obscure» de l'âme, vient la claire lumière de la résurrection. Tout cela Sophocle ne le dit pas, mais chacun de ses auditeurs le savait."

36. Knox's *Oedipus at Thebes* is the nearest thing to a definitive discussion of this great and inexhaustible play.

37. Kitto is exceptionally good on the *Electra*, both in his chapter in *Greek*

Tragedy and in his *Sophocles* throughout. Whitman's discussion of *tlemosyne* in this and the last two plays is also to be recommended.

38. Finley, *Pindar and Aeschylus*, p. 181.

39. *καιρός* is a difficult word. From a basis meaning of "due measure" it came, during the course of the fifth century, to take on a temporal meaning of "occasion" or "opportunity" as well: the "moment" of accomplishment. In Odysseus' *πρὸς καιρὸν πονῶ*; (*Ajax* 38: "Do I toil to purpose?" in Jebb's translation) the earlier meaning clearly predominates. In the *Electra* and *Philoctetes*, however, the word has obvious temporal significance, though the phrase *χρόνου καιρὸν* of *Electra* 1292 shows that the temporal meaning was not the only one involved. "Opportune moment" is perhaps an adequate translation for most of the usages in these later plays. I am indebted for most of these observations to Professor Elroy Bundy of the University of California.

40. Edmund Wilson's essay in *The Wound and the Bow* (Boston, 1941) remains an intriguing comment on one aspect of this play. See also Knox's essay in *The Heroic Temper*; and Whitman's chapter, particularly his discussion of Heracles (pp. 187-8).

41. *Paideia*, I, 270.