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# 6

# Plain Words in Sophocles

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Writing a commentary on *Oedipus at Colonus* has made me think about how to do justice to the extraordinary poise and power of Sophoclean language, despite its seeming simplicity in this late play. Hence the 'plain words' of my title, but plain in the spirit of Shakespeare's Lear:

> Pray do not mock me.
> I am a very foolish fond old man
> Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less;
> And, *to deal plainly*,
> I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
> Methinks I should know you and know this man;
> Yet I am doubtful: for I am mainly ignorant
> What place this is, and all the skill I have
> Remembers not these garments; nor do I know
> Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;
> For, as I am a man, I think this lady
> To be my child Cordelia.
>
> (*King Lear* IV. viii. 60–71)

What I mean by 'plain words' or 'dealing plainly' is not artless naivety or homely colloquialism; I am well aware that Sophoclean discourse—like Shakespeare's—is typically artful in the extreme, relying on a range of vocabulary that includes many abstract nouns and many synonyms, often coinages, which make possible an elaborate use of *variatio*. This subtlety of variation is evident too in syntax, in word-order, sentence-structure, and the rhetorical shaping of arguments, not to mention verse rhythm, and there is a network of references to other texts that further enriches the

whole.[1] So it is an intricate plainness, *simplex munditiis*, and (to my mind) all the more appealing because of its austerity.

What I am looking for is a way of analysing the concentration and power of this language without falling back on overworked terms like ambiguity, irony, undercutting, deferral.

There are three images, or models, that I have found useful in trying to account for the depth of Sophocles' plain dealing, though all, of course, are makeshift: (1) the notion of the tension of opposites, or the holding together of contradictory forces; (2) the idea of oscillation, or shading between literal and metaphorical meaning; (3) the idea of the 'charging' of themes through concentration and the ever-varied use of repetition. Rough and sketchy as they are, they have the advantage of not being mutually exclusive, and at least they should not run the risk of being reductive.[2]

Lines 1–13 will serve as a convenient starting point:

> *Τέκνον τυφλοῦ γέροντος Ἀντιγόνη, τίνας*
> *χώρους ἀφίγμεθ' ἢ τίνων ἀνδρῶν πόλιν;*
> *τίς τὸν πλανήτην Οἰδίπουν καθ' ἡμέραν*
> *τὴν νῦν σπανιστοῖς δέξεται δωρήμασιν,*
> *σμικρὸν μὲν ἐξαιτοῦντα, τοῦ σμικροῦ δ' ἔτι* 5
> *μεῖον φέροντα, καὶ τόδ' ἐξαρκοῦν ἐμοί;*
> *στέργειν γὰρ αἱ πάθαι με χὠ χρόνος ξυνών*
> *μακρὸς διδάσκει καὶ τὸ γενναῖον τρίτον.*
> *ἀλλ', ὦ τέκνον, θάκησιν εἴ τινα βλέπεις*
> *ἢ πρὸς βεβήλοις ἢ πρὸς ἄλσεσιν θεῶν,* 10
> *στῆσόν με κἀξίδρυσον, ὡς πυθώμεθα*
> *ὅπου ποτ' ἐσμέν· μανθάνειν γὰρ ἥκομεν*
> *ξένοι πρὸς ἀστῶν, ἃν δ' ἀκούσωμεν τελεῖν.*

[1] Aspects of Sophoclean language, syntax, and style are analysed by Campbell (1879: 1–107); Bruhn (1899); Earp (1944); Long (1968); Easterling (1973); Moorhouse (1982). Sophoclean criticism over the last fifty years has given great emphasis to the thematic use of language. Goheen (1951) and Knox (1957) were early pioneers; Knox (1964), Winnington-Ingram (1980), and Segal (1981) have been particularly influential. But, as Michael Silk points out in an illuminating essay (1996: 458), direct 'attempts to elucidate tragic language' have been surprisingly few and far between. For Sophocles, Jebb's commentaries remain the richest resource. A couple of pages by Mackail (1910: 150–1) adumbrate the central concerns of this paper.

[2] It would be absurd, of course, to claim that *any* approach could be comprehensive.



Child of a blind old man, Antigone, to what regions, or to what men's city have we come? Who on this day shall receive Oedipus the wanderer with scanty gifts? I ask for little, and I get even less, but for me that is sufficient; for my sufferings; and the time that has long been my companion, and thirdly my nobility teach me to be content with it. But come, my child, if you see any seat, either near ground unconsecrated or near the precincts of the gods, stop me and let me sit there, so that we may find out where we are; for we have come as strangers, and must learn from the citizens and do as they tell us. (trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones[3])

1. *Contradiction.* The strongest contradiction within this speech is that between the *magnitude* of Oedipus' experience (*αἱ πάθαι*, (*ὁ*) *χρόνος ξυνὼν μακρός*, and *τὸ γενναῖον* (7–8), with *τρίτον* marking out this triad as offering three major clues to the understanding of the whole action) and the *smallness* of what he now asks for, receives, and accepts: *σμικρὸν μὲν ἐξαιτοῦντα, τοῦ σμικροῦ δ' ἔτι μεῖον φέροντα, καὶ τόδ' ἐξαρκοῦν ἐμοί* (5–6). As the play develops we shall find that strong emphasis is given to the question whether Oedipus' request to Theseus and the men of Colonus is *small or great*, and to the idea of the *little word* that can exert unexpected power for good or evil. But even at this stage the contrast between great and small is striking. The last word of his speech is worth noting, too: *τελεῖν*, 'perform', 'fulfil', is a word of some dignity, often used of carrying out ritual, as at 513, when Ismene offers to perform the rite of purification, or of the action of gods, supernatural forces or time 'bringing things to pass', as in Oedipus' famous words after his self-blinding, *Ἀπόλλων τάδ' ἦν . . . ὁ κακὰ κακὰ τελῶν ἐμὰ τάδ' ἐμὰ πάθεα* (*OT* 1329–30). Not what a helpless beggar might be expected to say of himself and his daughter, not (that is) if he were not also Oedipus (*τὸν πλανήτην Οἰδίπουν*, 3). The speaker, of course, is not any old anonymous wanderer: like Antigone, he is a famous character of the tragic stage. The meaning of Oedipus' identity is going to be at the centre of the play's meditations; what, if anything, he can fulfil is going to matter.

2. *Shading from literal to metaphorical*, an extremely familiar feature in poetry ancient and modern,[4] works particularly well in

[3] All passages of translation are taken from Lloyd-Jones (1994). It will be obvious throughout how much I have learned from Sir Hugh's penetrating analysis of Sophocles' text.

[4] On differing ancient and modern distinctions between literal and metaphorical meaning see Padel (1992: 9–10).

drama because everything in a play is in a sense metaphorical, in that it presents past and/or fictitious events *as if* they were happening here and now before the audience's eyes. When the audience watches Oedipus, the name can with equal propriety be used both of him as a character in the story and of the actor playing the part. Movement between literal and metaphorical is thus very easy: the journey of Oedipus, symbolized by the actor's movements on the stage, can be both his journey to Colonus and his passage from life to death.[5] In this speech the clearest example of such shading is in the idea of *teaching* and *learning*: at 7–8 the subjects of διδάσκουσι are all abstract nouns—Oedipus' 'teachers' are his sufferings, the passage of time, and his nobility. At 12–13 he envisages a more literally didactic process: he has come in order to learn from the citizens and to carry out what he hears from them. Even so, this is not the formal relationship of teacher and pupil, and the lesson is evidently to be more than a factual or practical one. So far, the process of learning seems to have been characterized by suffering, by experience over time, and by reliance on some inborn quality of mind and temper which has made him capable of grasping the lesson. The lesson itself has been 'endurance' (στέργειν, 7). But now he is ready to learn from these people and act on what he learns; there is thus a strong implication that Oedipus' quest is to be one of discovery leading to action, and there may even be a clue here as to how we as audience are to learn.

3. *'Charging'*. Everything I have mentioned so far turns out to belong to the set of strands or themes that are constantly reworked and elaborated as the action develops. These first thirteen lines introduce all the play's leading ideas: personal/social relationships (child (1, 9), strangers and citizens (13)); Oedipus as wanderer and exile, blind, old, dependent on others (1–6), (although the scanty gifts (4) that he receives will later be replaced by the gift of asylum and reciprocated by a great benefit to the Athenians, the protective gift of his body (578–9, 635)); the journey of Oedipus and his daughter (ἀφίγμεθ', 2; ἥκομεν, 12); the place they have come to (1–2; ὅπου ποτ' ἐσμέν, 12), which may be a city of men (2); the seat where O. will sit (θάκησιν, 9, an unusual word marking an important feature of the setting, which will turn out to be a suppliant's seat, ἕδρα, 45);[6] the question of hallowed or unhallowed ground (10) that

[5] Cf. Seale (1982: 136–8); Segal (1981: 368–9).

[6] On the seat, see e.g. Easterling (1967); Burian (1974).



is, the religious meaning of the place where Oedipus establishes himself. Oedipus knows how to endure (7), he asks for little and is content with less (5–6), but has been taught by great things (7–8). He has been taught by his experiences, and yet he has come to learn (7, 12) and also to fulfil (13). Later he will be found to be a teacher, too (593-4, 1518).

With these strands of thought in mind we can turn to Oedipus' famous speech on time and change (607–28), a passage of great solemnity but one also of seeming directness and simplicity, which might make a good test case for the application of these three models:

> ὦ φίλτατ' Αἰγέως παῖ, μόνοις οὐ γίγνεται
> θεοῖσι γῆρας οὐδὲ κατθανεῖν ποτε,
> τὰ δ' ἄλλα συγχεῖ πάνθ' ὁ παγκρατὴς χρόνος.
> φθίνει μὲν ἰσχὺς γῆς, φθίνει δὲ σωμάτος,
> θνήισκει δὲ πίστις, βλαστάνει δ' ἀπιστία,
> καὶ πνεῦμα ταὐτὸν οὔποτ' οὔτ' ἐν ἀνδράσιν
> φίλοις βέβηκεν οὔτε πρὸς πόλιν πόλει.
> τοῖς μὲν γὰρ ἤδη, τοῖς δ' ἐν ὑστέρωι χρόνωι
> τὰ τερπνὰ πικρὰ γίγνεται καὐθις φίλα.
> καὶ ταῖσι Θήβαις εἰ τανῦν εὐημερεῖ
> καλῶς τὰ πρὸς σέ, μυρίας ὁ μυρίος
> χρόνος τεκνοῦται νύκτας ἡμέρας τ' ἰών,
> ἐν αἷς τὰ νῦν ξύμφωνα δεξιώματα
> δόρει διασκεδῶσιν ἐκ σμικροῦ λόγου·
> ἵν' οὐμὸς εὕδων καὶ κεκρυμμένος νέκυς
> ψυχρός ποτ' αὐτῶν θερμὸν αἷμα πίεται,
> εἰ Ζεὺς ἔτι Ζεὺς χὠ Διὸς Φοῖβος σαφής.
> ἀλλ' οὐ γὰρ αὐδᾶν ἡδὺ τἀκίνητ' ἔπη,
> ἔα μ' ἐν οἷσιν ἠρξάμην, τὸ σὸν μόνον
> πίστον φυλάσσων· κοὔποτ' Οἰδίπουν ἐρεῖς
> ἀχρεῖον οἰκητῆρα δέξασθαι τόπων
> τῶν ἐνθάδ', εἴπερ μὴ θεοὶ ψεύδουσί με.

Dearest son of Aegeus, for the gods alone there is no old age and no death ever, but all other things are submerged by all-powerful time! The strength of the country perishes, so does the strength of the body, loyalty dies and disloyalty comes into being, and the same spirit never remains between friends or between cities, since for some people now and for others in the future happy relations turn bitter, and again friendship is restored. And if now all is sunny weather between Thebes and you, time as it passes brings

forth countless nights and days in which they shall shatter with the spear the present harmonious pledges for a petty reason. Then shall my dead body, sleeping and buried, cold as it is, drink their warm blood, if Zeus is still Zeus and his son Phoebus speaks the truth! But since there is no pleasure in speaking words that should not be touched on, leave me in the course I have begun, but only keep your word, and you shall never say that Oedipus whom you received into these regions was a useless inmate, if the gods do not deceive me! (trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones)

This is marked as one of the play's 'big speeches' by the formality of address[7] (*ὦ φίλτατ' Αἰγέως παῖ*) and its dramatic placing: it leads up to the moment when Theseus, the proto-democratic king, makes the right response to Oedipus' supplication—despite the unprepossessing appearance of the suppliant and his gift—and takes seriously his offer of a secret source of protection for the city. Theseus' acceptance of Oedipus as an Athenian 'dweller in the city' 637)[8] and promise to protect him, followed by the Chorus' song in praise of Colonus and Attica, make a solemn climax in the action so far.

How is Oedipus' speech presented in this significant place? It is identified as a lesson, in language already familiar from the opening of the play: at 575 Theseus has urged Oedipus to teach him so that he may learn (at 593–4 there has been some rather pointed play with these ideas of teaching and learning; the theme will be recalled at 1154–5, 1518–39, and 1643–4). Oedipus is explaining the Athenians' need for protection from friends (the Thebans) who may one day become enemies, and he bases his argument on truths about time and change in the natural world and (even more) in political life (especially 611–15). But if it is a lesson it is not an easy one: it also raises serious questions to which Oedipus can give only a

[7] 'Dearest son of Aegeus' is both intimate and formal: 'dearest' is echoed in Oedipus' words of farewell to Theseus at 1552 (*φίλτατε ξένων*, cf. *ὦ φίλον κάρα* at 1631), but the address of a character as a child of his or her father is always a marker of the importance of the dramatic moment, as at *Ajax* 134 and 331 or *Ant.* 211. (Not surprisingly, there are many instances in *Philoctetes*, a play which explicitly examines the nature of a son's inheritance from his father.) Two solemn moments later in *OC* are marked by the formula 'child (*τέκνον*) of Aegeus': at 1154, when Oedipus asks Theseus to 'teach' him (about the arrival of an unknown suppliant—the cue for the Polyneices scene), and at 1518, when he announces that he will 'teach' Theseus the future of his city. Creon, too, uses the expression (940) at the beginning of what he misguidedly hopes will be a dignified speech of self-defence.

[8] See Burian (1974: 416–17) and Easterling (1996: 34–6) on the interpretation of this passage.



conditional answer. The problem, as at *Ajax* 646–92,[9] can be simply put: if *everything* changes, how can you be sure that anything matters?

1. *Contradiction.* There is a powerful concentration of contradictions in this speech. On the one hand, all nature and all human activity, indeed the whole of human history, are subject to radical change, and even the strongest social bonds can be loosened: faith (*πίστις*) dies, faithlessness (*ἀπιστία*) flourishes (611), both between individuals and between communities. The process can be reversed, too: 'happy relations turn bitter, and again friendship is restored' (615). On the other hand, the promise that Oedipus is making to Athens depends on Theseus keeping his word (*τὸ σὸν μόνον | πιστὸν φυλάσσων*, 625–6). You can believe, and indeed must try to believe, the speech seems to say, in the power of human commitment in the matter of friendship and supplication, just as you can and should believe in the possibility that the gods have a benign purpose, but you can't *know*: the best you can do (and the best Oedipus ultimately can do, for all his prophetic conviction) is to wish and to pray. Four times in the play he prays for Athens, the last time in his solemn parting words at 1552–5; when he first hears that he has reached the grove of the Eumenides he twice prays to them for fulfilment of Apollo's oracle (86, 101–5).

This speech includes an extremely strong prediction of the posthumous power that Oedipus will one day exert on behalf of the Athenians against their present allies the Thebans. Its strength is intensified by the link between these aetiological references and promises made elsewhere in the play, which seem to foreshadow what the contemporary audience would recognize as hero cult.[10] The inner contradiction of the expression—Oedipus' *sleeping* and *cold* corpse will *drink* the *hot* blood of the fallen Thebans (621–2)—is another intensifying factor, but this confident assurance is immediately followed by a conditional clause, 'If Zeus (is) still

[9] It is hard not to detect an element of Sophoclean self-quotation in the wording of *OC* 607–23, particularly of *Aj.* 646–9 and 669–83. Cf. Seaford (1994: 136–7, 395–9) on the similarities between the two passages.

[10] The language here seems designed to evoke the familiar practice of making liquid offerings at the tombs of those whose bodies were thought to have talismanic power. For other references in the play to the coming power of Oedipus to help or harm after his death cf. 92–3, 287–8, 389–402, 457–60, 576–82, 787–8, 1489–90, 1508–9, 1518–55, 1760–5. For recent discussion see Edmunds (1981 and 1996), Henrichs (1983, 1993, and 1994); Burkert (1985); Kearns (1989); Krummen (1993).

Zeus and Zeus's son Phoebus (is) sure' (*σαφής*, 623).[11] And again, the claim (627–8) that Theseus will never have occasion to say that Oedipus has been a useless 'resident' (*οἰκητῆρα*)[12] is at once followed by the conditional 'if the gods are not deceiving me'.[13] How can one know, except through humanly limited processes and experiences, the correct way to interpret the enigmatic words of the gods?[14]

So there is a strong sense of precariousness here: Oedipus, and his secret, matter if—and only if—Theseus and his successors can maintain faith, and if the gods are understood well enough by the sufferer who has spent his life trying to learn their lessons. When he came to the grove, after all, he had to make a leap of faith in order to identify it as *the* place destined for his passing.

The same effect of precariousness is created by *τἀκίνητ' ἔπη* at 624. The secret (the precise location of Oedipus' passing) must stay a secret, 'words not to be stirred',[15] and yet the keeping of it will depend not only on Theseus holding to his side of the agreement (*τὸ σὸν μόνον | πιστὸν φυλάσσων*) but, after his death, on the loyalty of

[11] For this use of *σαφής* (meaning 'unerring', 'reliable') in connection with oracles cf. 791–3, quoted in n. 19 below.

[12] For the cultic resonance of *οἰκητῆρα* see Edmunds (1981: 223 and n. 8); Henrichs (1976: 278).

[13] As Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1990) point out ad loc., K's *ψεύδουσι* is more likely to be the original reading than *ψεύσουσι* in the rest of the MSS; and the sense 'are not deceiving me' is more appropriate than 'will deceive', given that Oedipus received the oracle long ago. The implication is almost 'have not all along been deceiving me'.

[14] There are some further instances in *OC* of *εἰ*-clauses used in the context of the divine purpose: at 664–5, Theseus encourages Oedipus to be confident, 'if it was Phoebus who sent you' (*Φοῖβος εἰ προὔπεμψέ σε*); at 1380–2 Oedipus declares to Polyneices, 'Therefore these curses overcome our supplication and your thrones, if Justice sits of old beside the throne of Zeus according to the ancient laws' (*εἴπερ ἐστὶν . . . ξύνεδρος*, where *περ* strengthens the confident tone); at 1480–1, in response to the claps of thunder, the Chorus pray to the *daimon*: 'Kindly, O god, kindly be your coming, if you are bringing something wrapped in darkness to the earth our mother!', where the *εἰ*-clause implies anxious foreboding rather than assurance. In all these cases the conditional phrasing deepens the impression that the divine will is not transparent; the phrasing at 623, with no verbs expressed, makes it even more elusive.

[15] For possible links with the language of mysteries cf. Seaford (1994: 397–8). Silence and secrecy are both important ideas in *OC*: cf. 128–33 for silence in the cult of the Semnai Theai and 1050–3 for the 'golden key' on the tongues of the initiates in the mysteries at Eleusis.



his successors from generation to generation, and we have heard at 610 ff. in language suggestive of the ineluctable processes of nature (death, growth, birth, the weather) that all human activities are subject to change and only the gods are exempt, enjoying eternal existence and (by implication) eternal knowledge. If the safety of Athens is to depend on words passed faithfully and secretly from one human generation to the next, there is no possibility of its not being vulnerable.

2. *'Shading'*. Much that is relevant under this heading is equally apposite under the next, since by this stage in the action many words have acquired a charge of complex associations. But it is worth looking at the verbs that carry the weight of the argument: time submerges, destroys (*συγχεῖ*, 609), the strength of the land and of the body perishes (*φθίνει*, 610), faith dies (*θνήσκει*), faithlessness comes into being, shoots forth (*βλαστάνει*, 611) and the same spirit does not persist for ever between friends, whether individuals or cities (612–13). 'Spirit' perhaps sounds too inward and abstract as a translation of *πνεῦμα*, while 'wind' might at first sight seem almost too metaphorical: the image of the inconstancy of the weather, with winds repeatedly changing direction, seems to have been a familiar one in Greek for human intercourse, as in our cliché 'see which way the wind is blowing'. Yet in this context, preceded by verbs suggestive of growth and death and followed by the stronger weather image of *εὐημερεῖ* (616) of the good relations between Athens and Thebes, the phrase *πνεῦμα . . . βέβηκεν* must contribute to the sense of a pattern of forces that shape the natural world and human society within it.[16] The most powerful of these forces, time, the destroyer at 609, is also the generator of new life: it gives birth to a countless succession of nights and days (618) in which the most unexpected events can happen;[17] in this case the day will come when 'they' will 'scatter with the spear' the present harmonious pledges, 'they' being the Thebans, currently in alliance with Athens. Spears are normally used to cause the scattering of troops, but here their victims are the solemn words of a treaty (*ξύμφωνα δεξιώματα*,

[16] In any case, as Ruth Padel has pointed out, we should be alert to the Greeks' more integrated perception of the world: 'Air is both wind—breath in the world—and breath within a human being. It is part of the patterned system within and without' (1992: 51).

[17] Solon's famous calculation for Croesus of the days in a typical human life-span (Herodotus 1. 32) makes a similar point: *πᾶν ἐστι ἄνθρωπος συμφορή*.

619). The absence of an expressed subject for διασκεδῶσιν contributes to the sense of violent irruption after the stately sequence of nouns with present indicative verbs, and the violence will be perpetrated 'on some minor pretext' (ἐκ σμικροῦ λόγου, 620), suggesting the force, randomness, and triviality of conflict. The idea of the cold corpse drinking hot blood continues the sense of distortion; but when Oedipus reaches the gods they have no verbs at all: εἰ Ζεὺς ἔτι Ζεὺς χὠ Διὸς Φοῖβος σαφής (623).

3. *'Charging'*. If the delicate oscillation between literal and metaphorical is hard to capture without simplification (or indeed over-elaboration), it is even more of a challenge to chart all the ways in which the words of this speech gain power from cumulative associations with earlier passages in the play, or give weight to newly developing themes. The resonances are no less strong because the words themselves are so plain: thus the emphasis on friends and enemies (607; especially 612–13) relates to one of the leading questions of the play: who are the φίλοι of Oedipus? Old age and death (608, 610, 611) are the context for thinking about what happens to him in the course of the action. Time, which destroys and brings to birth (609, 618) was identified by Oedipus at 7–8 as his teacher, and reciprocal teaching and learning characterize his dealings with Theseus and the Athenians. Land and body (610) are easily linked with the play's insistent stress on place (cf. 627) and on the body of Oedipus and its potential meaning (cf. 621); relations between cities are the immediate topic, both of this speech, in response to Theseus' question at 606, and of its sequel, in his promise to incorporate Oedipus into the city of Athens (ἔμπολιν κατοικιῶ, 637), and the matter of faith and faithlessness in the dealings between cities (611) will become the focus of close attention in the scenes between Oedipus, Theseus, and the representatives of the Thebans. The 'little word'[18] of 620, the trivial pretext that will spark hostilities between Thebes and Athens, recalls 443, Oedipus' allegation that the two brothers Eteocles and Polyneices forced him into exile 'for the sake of a little word', that is, by refusing to revoke the sentence of exile imposed on him. But if something one says (or refrains from saying) can do harm, a little word can also be creative and transformative, as at 1615–16 when

[18] On the 'little word' cf. Mackail (n. 1 above); Kirkwood (1958: 245); Segal (1981: 398–9).



(in the Messenger's report) Oedipus tells his daughters that just a single word (in this case φιλεῖν) relieves all the pain of caring for him. And the phrase σμικρὸς λόγος can also mean 'a short speech' as it does at 569–70, when Oedipus responds to Theseus' generous welcome by saying that the king's nobility, briefly expressed, has saved his suppliant the distress of making a long speech of self-identification. Theseus and Oedipus 'talk the same language', and only brief exchanges are needed between them, so secure is their understanding of one another.

At 623 Zeus and Phoebus are cited as the guarantors of Oedipus' predictions: Zeus, whose mysterious will, and Apollo, whose translation of that will into oracular messages, have shaped his life of suffering and learning. 'If Zeus (is) still Zeus and Phoebus (is) sure': σαφής recalls the whole story of Oedipus' relations with oracles and his struggle to interpret them.[19] Like Apollo's enigmatic oracles, Oedipus himself is a potential source of illumination: at 74 in answer to the man of Colonus who has asked 'And what help can be given by a man who cannot see?' Oedipus has claimed 'Everything I say will have sight' (πάνθ' ὁρῶντα λέξομεν). But for most of the action there is fear and anxiety on his part (e.g. at 652–6, 822–3, 1486–7), and the threat from the Thebans is soon shown to be real enough.

Even so, his words carry conviction. The Chorus tells Theseus that Oedipus has been making promises like these from the first and seems set to fulfil them (ὡς τελῶν ἐφαίνετο, 630). Theseus, too, is impressed, though he gives a range of reasons for accepting him: in addition to Oedipus' goodwill (εὐμένεια, 631) he singles out his status as ally and the religious obligation he imposes as suppliant.

The implication of these responses is that Oedipus' speech has indeed exerted power; and the play seems to invite audiences and readers to endorse the faith of Theseus and the old men in Oedipus' 'seeing' words. The power, I suggest, comes from the profundity of his teaching: his didactic speech makes clear that from the mortal point of view all structures entail mutability and therefore vulnerability, but at the same time it demonstrates the intense need for something or someone to trust.[20] Oedipus as human sufferer,

[19] Cf. esp. 791–3 (Oedipus to Creon): ἆρ' οὐκ ἄμεινον ἢ σὺ τἀν Θήβαις φρονῶ; | πολλῶι γ', ὅσωιπερ κἀκ σαφεστέρων κλύω, | Φοίβου τε καὐτοῦ Ζηνός, ὃς κείνου πατήρ.

[20] At 1518–19, in his final speech on stage, Oedipus begins his solemn account of the secret on which the safety of Athens will depend with words which strongly recall

teacher and learner, blind yet a seer, suppliant and saviour, outsider and indweller, can begin to fulfil the role of interpreter of the divine will. But what he can offer is (at best) a tentative reading of the meaning of his fate, and (as the play goes on to show) he can curse as well as bless: the little word can destroy as well as transform.

The end of the play, full of the 'wonder' of what has happened to Oedipus (1586, 1665), indeed offers something for the audience to trust, and to pray for, but in more literal terms it proves nothing. It leaves gaps in the 'evidence' for Oedipus' coming role as protector of Athens: the divine voice is reported, not heard; Theseus has seen the mystery, but his response is enigmatic (he is seen covering his eyes, and saluting both earth and heaven, 1654–5). The play ends in the daughters' desire for lamentation, which is forbidden, and in hopes of resolving conflict between their brothers, which we know will not be fulfilled. The Chorus may sing of 'confirmation' (*κῦρος*, 1779) but the audience is left with unresolved[21] plain words.

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this speech: *ἐγὼ διδάξω, τέκνον Αἰγέως, ἅ σοι | γήρως ἄλυπα τῆιδε κείσεται πόλει.* Oedipus' further stress on 'teaching', and his claim that his words will be 'without the pains of old age' address the same need for permanently reliable guidance.

[21] For different readings of the end of the play see e.g. Winnington-Ingram (1980: 275); Seaford (1994: 134–5); Easterling (1996: 174–7).




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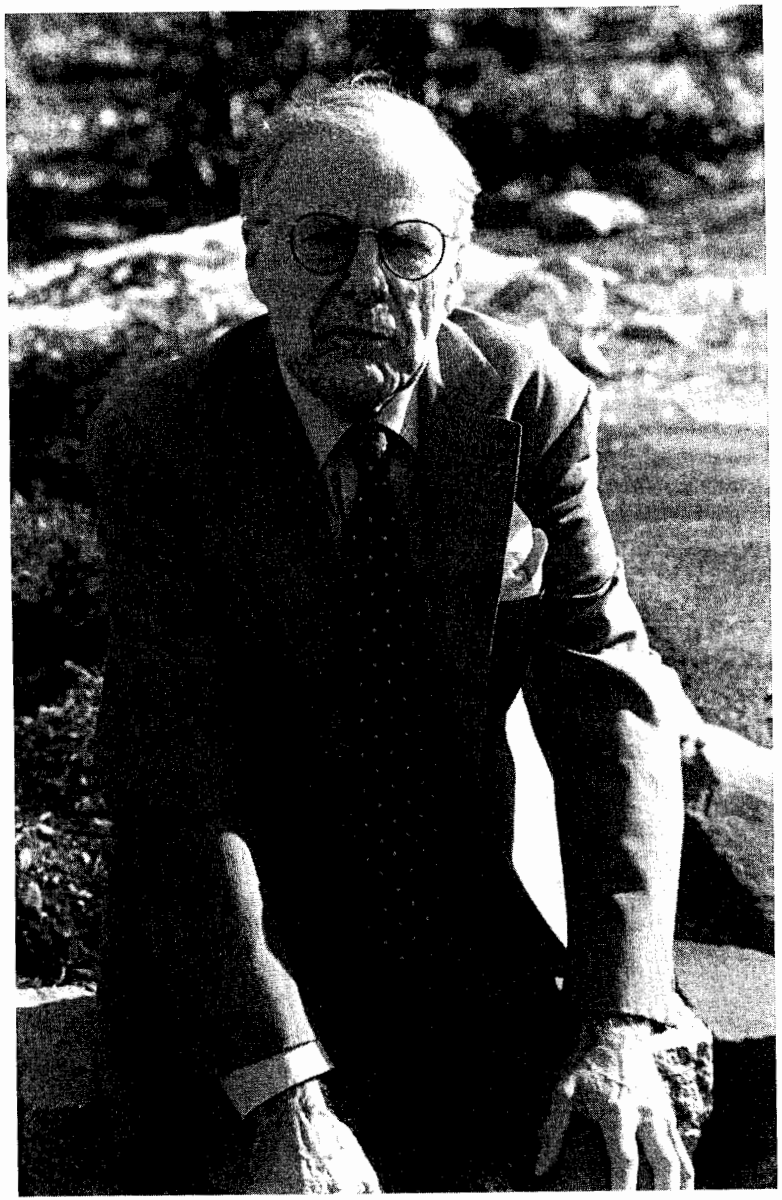

Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones

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