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Through a Glass Darkly: Sophocles and the Divine

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Struggle against it though one may, it is hard in the end to talk about Sophocles without talking about his gods. In none of the surviving plays do the first twenty lines pass without a god or a religious practice being mentioned; in one a goddess makes the opening speech. Yet, saturated with the divine though the plays are, the Sophoclean gods remain distant and elusive. What follows will be an attempt to approach these familiar issues by a side path. The initial question will not be about the conceptions of the gods that may emerge from the plays but about the ways in which they emerge. Where and how in the tragedies do theological issues arise? How is the audience's understanding of them shaped, and how insistently? What is the spectator told about divine involvement in human affairs that can count as certainty, what as possibility, what possibilities or even certainties present themselves without being spoken of directly?

The most obvious and incontestable way in which the gods' involvement in the action of a play is revealed is their physical appearance on stage. The total of certain or highly probable cases of such epiphany in Sophocles now stands at six. To four long known—those of Athena in *Ajax*, Heracles at the end of *Philoctetes*, Demeter in *Triptolemos*, Thetis in *Syndeipnoi* (which may be a

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satyr-play)—two have been added from papyri published in 1971 and 1976 respectively. In *Niobe*, Apollo eggs on Artemis to shoot the children of the boastful Niobe, in *Locrian Ajax* Athena expresses furious anger to the Greek army over the rape of Cassandra.[1] Through the new discoveries we have a more varied picture of the ways in which tragedians present gods on stage. It is now too simple to distinguish merely between the participatory gods of early tragedy (such as Apollo and Athena in *Eumenides*), who take part in the main action of the play, and the framing gods so familiar from Euripides, who forecast events in prologues or direct them to an end in final speeches 'from the machine'. At least one and perhaps both of the new Sophoclean epiphanies seem to represent dramatic interventions by an angry god in mid-play (to add in fact to one or two such instances already known, such as that of Iris and Lyssa in Euripides' *Heracles*[2]). Almost equivalent in effect to an epiphany is the messenger's report in *Oedipus at Colonus* of the divine voice which so ennobles Oedipus by associating him with itself in a first person plural: 'Hey there, Oedipus, Oedipus, why are we delaying?' (1627–8). The reactions of the various characters to this and other signs[3] create just as palpable a sense of divine presence as if a god had appeared on the stage.

[1] *Ajax* 1–90; *Phil.* 1409–44; frs. 598; 562; 441a; 10c. I relegate this 'dark stranger' of *Inachus* to a note, given the majority view that the play is satyric (see West (1984: 292–302) who dissents). For further possibilities in Sophocles see Mueller (1910: 47–61). v. Blumenthal (1929) postulates *dei ex machina* for *Epigoni*, *Tereus*, *Tyro*, very questionably.

[2] Itself reminiscent of that of Lyssa in Aesch. *Xantriai* fr. 169 Radt. Other misfits are Athena in Soph. *Ajax*, who is part framing (she opens the play), part participatory (she engages in dialogue with the characters), and Athena in [Eur.] *Rhesus*, who makes an epiphany in mid-play but then participates for about 80 lines. A further traditional type is the disguised god (Dionysus plays of Aeschylus and Euripides; Aeschylus' Hera, in a Dionysiac play, fr. 168 R.: cf. Oranje (1984: 124–30)). Other divine characters certainly attested in tragedies of Aeschylus are: Aphrodite in *Danaides*, fr. 44; Hermes in *Φρύγες ἢ Λύτρα*, p. 365 Radt; Boreas in *Oreithyia*, fr. 281; Zeus in *Psychostasia*, p. 375 Radt (doubted by Taplin (1977: 431–5)—but there are two independent testimonia); Dike in fr. 281a (satyric?); Thetis in *Ὅπλων κρίσις*, cf. fr. 174, and various in the *Prometheus* plays. See further Mueller (1910: 1–46). The possibilities among lost plays of Euripides are very numerous (cf. Oranje (1984: 118)), and on Zeus in *Alcmene* West (1984: 294–5): divine speeches survive from *Antiope*, p. 68 Page *GLP*; *Erechtheus*, frs. 39, 65, 55 ff. Austin.

[3] Beginning with the thunder of 1447 ff. Note esp. Theseus' reported reaction to what he saw, and we did not, in 1649 ff.

Within the world of the play, the actions, directly experienced, and the remarks of the gods surely have unique authority as revelations of divine will. But in the admittedly small sample the gods prove very economical as to how much they will or can reveal. Athena's dealings with Ajax have a prehistory, but we learn of her two complaints against Ajax not from her own mouth but from the seer Calchas later in the play (756–77): she herself takes Ajax's guilt for granted, and all her emphasis lies on the moral lesson to be drawn from it (127–33). In *Philoctetes* Heracles appears in order to convey the plans of Zeus (*Διὸς βουλεύματα*, 1415)—the only reference in extant Sophocles to such plans[4]—but what he reveals of them is rather limited. He tells his listeners what is destined to happen at Troy and what they must do; he hints that the moral balance will be restored, with death for Paris and glory for Philoctetes; but he does not attempt to explain to Philoctetes in any detail how or why his long sufferings were necessary within Zeus' plan. 'Never apologize, never explain' might seem to be the divine motto. Instead Heracles gives his listeners a solemn warning against committing impiety at the time of the sack of Troy[5]—a warning which we know that one of them, the good young Neoptolemus, will fail to observe.[6] The unnamed, invisible god of *Oedipus at Colonus* reveals nothing at all about the meaning of the summons to Oedipus that he bears. We are left only with the view of characters in the play that it might represent a form of compensation offered to the all-suffering man by a 'just god'.[7]

[4] Note, however, the oracle from Zeus in *Tr.* 1157 ff.

[5] Cf. Pl. *Clit.* 407a on Socrates ἐπιτιμῶν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ὥσπερ ἐπὶ μηχανῆς τραγικῆς θεός. The grim austerity and moralism of Sophocles' gods in epiphany, in contrast to those of Homer, is stressed by Pucci (1994: 15–46). For a similar tone in Euripides see *El.* 1354–6, *Tro.* 85–6, *Hipp.* 1339–41; and on the things said by *dei ex machina* in general Mikalson (1991: 64–8).

[6] There may be a similar effect in Plato's *Charmides*, where that evil politician (as many judged him) appears as an attractive young man, whose moral choices are still to be made.

[7] 1565–7 (with the note ad loc. of J. C. Kamerbeek, whose criticism of Linforth's minimizing interpretation I accept); cf. 385–95. Oedipus himself initially reacts caustically to Ismene's optimism (395); but that is not his last word, or the play's. Blundell (1989: 254) points out that mutability (including change for the better) is often seen in Sophocles as a kind of natural, amoral cycle; but the direct divine involvement surely makes a difference here. Winnington-Ingram (1965: 43) comments that the gods by honouring Oedipus endorse his 'vindictive justice'. But would we like them better if they abandoned him?

A second window on the divine is a very obvious one, that opened by divination and oracles. Here too we have evidence that is beyond question. All Sophoclean characters are temperamentally disposed to accept the validity of divination,[8] highly controversial at the time. Particular circumstances may push one or two into sceptical positions, but their doubts are immediately confuted by events. And it is central to the effect of *Oedipus Tyrannus* that the confutation, which establishes that it is not, after all, best to 'live at random' as Jocasta suggests (979), brings with it a grim relief, even though it is achieved at the expense of the largely innocent Oedipus.[9] The authority of prophecy seems to extend to the interpretations that characters occasionally offer of prophecies concerning themselves—Heracles in *Trachiniae*, Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and perhaps Neoptolemus in *Philoctetes* all seem in the world of the play to enjoy a kind of vicarious inspiration.[10]

But there are strict limits to what is actually revealed even through the especially authoritative medium of prophecy. You will kill your father and marry your mother, Oedipus is warned; neither he nor we learn why. No more is Heracles in *Trachiniae* told why at the end of fifteen months he will either die or find release from his labours. Backward-facing divination, that which identifies past causes of present afflictions, can be more revealing in pinpointing particular causes of divine anger. We learn in this way why Thebes is plague-ridden at the start of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, what Athena's ground of anger is against Ajax, what Creon's offence is in *Antigone* and what it will lead to.[11] The longest causal chain is that which can be put

[8] On Jocasta, the apparent counter case, see Perrotta (1965: 249) or Reinhardt (1947: 130 = 1979: 120).

[9] See esp. Burkert (1991). One critic has even described Sophocles' masterpiece as 'a powerful paradigm of theocratic and prophetic rhetoric in need of exposure': Peradotto (1992: 12–13).

[10] See *Trach.* 1174–229; *OC* 576–82, 616–23, 787–93, 1518–37, also 1370–96 (where prophecy is blended with curse) and other characters' allusions to Oedipus 'prophesying' (*μαντεύματα*, *θεσπίζω*, 1425, 1516); *Phil.* 839–42 (in 'prophetic' hexameters). In these passages it is often unclear, but scarcely important, whether the speakers are merely revealing, or also elaborating and extending, past prophecies concerning themselves. Richard Rutherford reminds me of what he calls 'Oedipus' memorable though enigmatic lines' in *OT* 1455–9.

[11] *OT* 96–107; *Ajax* 756–77; *Ant.* 998–1032, 1064–83. Professor Easterling (in conversation) queries whether the second-hand report of Calchas' views which is all we have in *Ajax* deserves the trust I put in it. But it seems to square with Athena's own hints in 127–33.

together from the various partial revelations in *Philoctetes.* Philoctetes' illness is his own fault, a punishment for trespassing on the sacred precinct guarded by the sacred snake that bit him, but also a retarding device to prevent Troy being sacked once again with weapons of Heracles before its destined time.[12] But even this explanation, in its way quite full, makes appeal to certain crucial propositions—the time at which Troy must be sacked, the necessary role of the weapons of Heracles—that are not explained but presented as unquestionable facts of the situation.

A third context where the purposes of gods are sometimes explicitly mentioned is the speech of characters who neither are prophets nor have access to prophecy. It is necessary to speak in this clumsy way of 'a context where the purposes of the gods are sometimes explicitly mentioned', rather than of a third mode of access to the divine, because all interpretations of divine motive by characters are in principle unreliable, and in practice may demonstrably be products of anger or passion or incomprehension. When, for instance, Tecmessa blames the suicide of Ajax on an intervention of the 'terrible daughter of Zeus, Pallas' made 'for the sake of Odysseus' (*Ajax* 953–4) we can recognize it for an embittered distortion: Athena was indeed at work, but unless we are to disbelieve Calchas (756–77) mere favouritism for Odysseus was not her motive.

Interesting instances falling under this rubric are not in fact very numerous. Confident statements about the attitudes of the gods in general, or about their presumptive attitude to particular situations, are, of course, common. Characters in Sophocles regularly make much more optimistic assumptions about the gods' concern for justice than do Sophoclean critics, and 'I am just, the gods are aiding/will aid me' is a proposition to which almost all parties to a dispute will normally subscribe.[13] The whole debate between Creon and Antigone is conducted in these terms, and Antigone displays a certitude (at least at this point, face to face with an antagonist) that contrasts sharply with the tentative way in which, as we shall see, characters often speak of the divine world. But she is not claiming that she can explain the interaction of god and man throughout the

[12] 191–200, 1326–42, 1421–40.

[13] For various forms of such speech see e.g. *El.* 459–60, 1379–83; *Phil.* 601–2, 1035–9; *OC* 279–81, 1380–2. For recognition of divine aid or favour see *Tr.* 200–1, cf. *OT* 38.

history of the house of Labdacus. All she knows is that, since the gods uphold the just, they must most certainly in the present case be on her side.

Various other rather unremarkable forms of divine involvement are also recognized by characters: that of Eros in love affairs (*Trach.* 354),[14] for instance; of Zeus Agonios in contests (*Trach.* 26); of 'one of the gods' in events that are peculiarly extraordinary, catastrophic or (by contrast) propitious.[15] Such cases aside, it is not common for characters to speak of the involvement of a specific god in a particular situation, present or past. Where such claims do occur, they are often products of extreme emotion, usually anguish: this is true of Tecmessa's exclamation about Athena just mentioned, of Oedipus' declaration that 'it was Apollo, friends, Apollo' who brought about his blinding, and of the several statements by the penitent Creon that '(a) god' or (a) deity' has leapt upon his head.[16] In calmer moments, we normally find language that is much vaguer and more tentative. 'I was born of a free man, the richest of the Phrygians, but am now a slave: such I suppose was the gods' will (θεοῖς γὰρ ὧδ' ἔδοξέ που)', says Tecmessa (487–90), softening her claim by a use of the indefinite adverb που, 'I suppose', that was long ago identified as a characteristic feature of Greek statements about the divine.[17] Similarly Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus* (964–5) says of his abominable past actions: 'such was the will of the gods, who were perhaps angry against my race from long ago.' Later in the play Polyneices goes no further than to identify his father's Erinys as the 'chief cause' of his afflictions.[18] Electra merely 'believes', though with great vehemence, that the ill-omened dreams afflicting Clytaemnestra have come from Agamemnon (*El.* 459–60).

Even the more specific claims mentioned earlier are not stabs in

[14] More commonly it is the chorus that detects Eros: *Trach.* 497–530, 860–1; *Ant.* 781–800.

[15] *OT* 1258; *Ant.* 376, 421; *OC* 371, 1505–6. Antigone's ascription of the troubles of the house of Oedipus to Zeus (*Ant.* 2) is a little more specific.

[16] *OT* 1329 (for similar language of divine attack around here see 1301, 1311, with Mikalson (1991: 28–9)); *Ant.* 1273–5, 1345–6. These last are indefinite, but much less so than 'some god'. Note too the emphatic claim made by Odysseus, in a state of feigned passion, that he is fulfilling the will of Zeus (whose name he repeats three times): *Phil.* 989–90.

[17] See the citation of Wackernagel (1895: 22 = 1979: i. 700) in Fraenkel's note (1950) on Aesch. *Ag.* 182 f.

[18] 1298–9; cf. 1434.

the dark but are based on what in the world of the play are realities. Athena's involvement with Ajax is for Ajax and his circle a fact, grounded in the hero's direct experience of contact with the goddess;[19] so Tecmessa is going beyond what she knows only in ascribing to Athena a motive. The main reason why 'it was Apollo' for Oedipus is simply that, as no one could deny, what Apollo had decreed had come to pass. Creon speaks more vaguely of 'god' or 'deity' because he knows from Tiresias' speech of divine anger, not of a specific offended deity.

There are two clear exceptions to this account, instances of characters who make concrete and confident claims about divine motivation neither in passion nor on the basis of facts already presented in other ways within the world of the play. When Electra defends to her mother Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice Iphigeneia, she tells of the king's offence against Artemis and Artemis' subsequent anger against him, but gives as the basis for her knowledge a vague 'as I hear'(*Electra* 566–72). In *Trachiniae*, the messenger Lichas declares confidently that Heracles' enslavement by Omphale was a punishment imposed by Zeus for the treacherous murder of Iphitus (274–9). But neither case proves at all difficult to explain. In other accounts of the same events, it is said explicitly in both cases that the divine element in the situation was diagnosed by an oracle or prophet.[20] The natural assumption of any hearer who worried about the matter at all would surely have been that the ultimate if undeclared basis for the confident claims of the Sophoclean characters was prophecy. Unaided by divination, we conclude, humans in Sophocles neither know nor claim to know anything much about the divine world except in general terms.[21]

There remains the chorus. If one turns to the sung parts of the plays with these questions in mind, a first impression must be of the omnipresence of the gods. The chorus, it seems, never stop invoking gods or singing about them. This is one manifestation of the way in which the chorus in tragedy is not just a collective voice within a play but also, precisely, a Greek chorus, a relative of all those

[19] 401–3, 450–2: contrast the vaguer earlier language of Tecmessa and the chorus, 172–86, 243–4, 278, still used by Menelaus in 1057, cf. 1128.

[20] See Proclus' summary of *Cypria*, *EGF* p. 32. 58–9 Davies; Pherecydes *FGrH* 3 F 82 and e.g. Apollod. 2. 6. 1–3. The role of Apollo in the death of Achilles (*Phil.* 334–5) was presumably visible to all.

[21] Cf. the excellent remarks (apropos of *OT*) of Buxton (1996: 42–3).

choruses that hymn the gods in numerous extra-dramatic contexts.[22] They speak therefore of certain general theological truths such as the powers of Zeus Morios or of Poseidon[23] with a freedom and confidence untypical of individual characters. They are also in different degrees involved in the action of the play, and where their sympathies are engaged they claim divine favour for their own side just as we have seen characters to do: the chorus of *Electra* is particularly clamorous in this regard.[24] When less involved emotionally, they may celebrate the values of piety in more general terms.[25]

What they are chary of doing is to assume the stance of commentators with the authority to trace the workings of divine will in any precise way.[26] The kind of weaving of the particular action of the play into a long pattern of divine purpose so characteristic of Aeschylean choruses is far less common in Sophocles, and where it does occur far less insistent. In *Electra*, the chorus once look back briefly to the origins of sufferings for the house of Atreus: ever since Myrtilus, Oenomaus' charioteer, was hurled into the sea by Pelops, trouble and affliction have never left the house (502–515). No moral conclusion or interpretation is offered; Pelops' treatment of Myrtilus is, it is true, presented as an outrageous act, but emphasis lies not on the idea of crime and punishment but simply on the continuity of trouble since that time. The case is similar on a larger scale with the famous meditation in *Antigone* on the sufferings of the Labdacid house (582–603). Though the disasters of the Labdacids in successive generations are indeed ascribed to divine agency, no specific god is named—only 'one of the gods'—and the matter at issue between gods and Labdacids is never made explicit.[27] Later in the play in a sung exchange the chorus allude again to the burden of the past upon Antigone: 'You are paying for some crime of your forebears' (*πατρῷον δ' ἐκτίνεις τιν' ἆθλον*, 856). Here the idea of inherited guilt is for once explicitly present, but still in the vaguest terms. In regard to ancestral

[22] See Henrichs (1995) and (1996).
[23] *OC* 704–19: cf. e.g. *Phil.* 726–9, on the divinization of Heracles.
[24] *El.* 174–83, 472–501, 823–5, cf. *Ant.* 127–33.
[25] e.g. *Ant.* 368–75; 1103–4; *OT* 863–910.
[26] I approach here, with a different emphasis, matters treated in Lloyd-Jones (1983: 111–28).
[27] Cf. Easterling (1978: 142).

affliction the chorus are as it were plain persons, observers of symptoms, not specialists skilled in diagnosing causes.[28] In *Seven against Thebes* Aeschylus had used the chorus to recall both Apollo's original prophecy to Laius and Oedipus' subsequent curse on his sons.[29] Sophocles never gives his chorus this vicarious authority as a mouthpiece for inspired utterance. In *Philoctetes* Neoptolemus, not the chorus, is the repository of Helenus' crucial prophecy about the final sack of Troy.[30] There is anyway a question about the authority to be allowed to the voice of the Sophoclean chorus, that sometimes fallible organ;[31] but the question is less urgent than one might expect, because that voice says so little.

It may seem that the argument thus far can be summed up as 'cherchez le *mantis*': real insight into the will of the gods in Sophocles comes only from the interpretation by oracles and seers embedded in the plays. But there is one further way for the spectator not exactly to learn particular divine purposes but to learn about the divine. This is what one might call, inelegantly, the mechanism of triggered responses: necessary reactions by the audience, sometimes involving its prior knowledge of myth, to structural features of the plays, or to words spoken, or to both. By eliciting such responses the text irresistibly suggests certain ideas about the divine, even if these are never made explicit in words. We will approach this issue too by way of what may seem a side path. A few words must be said first about 'complaints against the gods' and even theodicy.

The word 'theodicy' was apparently coined by Leibniz, who used it in the title of a work published in 1710, *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu,. la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*;[32] and

[28] When the Labdacids speak of themselves, it is often in a similarly pragmatic way, as a family in which trouble and rash anger are hereditary: *Ant.* 2–6, 49–60; *OC* 369–70.
[29] 720–91, 822–47; note too e.g. *Ag.* 126–55, where the chorus repeat a prophecy of Calchas at length. Jasper Griffin reminds me how hard it is to separate these issues of theology from issues of literary form. Sophocles' single-standing plays with reduced choral role lack space for the Aeschylean presentation of the legacy of generation to generation.
[30] 1326–42; cf. 839–42. The chorus do not go beyond hints, 176 and 1116.
[31] See Müller (1967: 212–38). On the question whether choruses in general are to be interpreted as embodying a 'civic voice' see the interchange of Gould (1996) and Goldhill (1996: 217–56), and the comments of Taplin (1996: 193–4) and Gredley (1996: 211–12).
[32] Leibniz (171), available in Gerhardt (1885), trans. Huggard (1985).

theodicy as we know it is a product of a Christian and a scholastic tradition to which Sophocles unquestionably did not belong.[33] Zeus did not create the world and so is not answerable for its imperfections as is the Christian (or indeed the Stoic) god. None the less, he controls it, and when things go wrong in it they can be blamed on him, however little direct involvement in the unfortunate events he may seem to have had. The mere existence of the scorpion is, perhaps, not a reproach to Zeus. But as soon as a just man dies of a scorpion's bite, Zeus has a case to answer.[34] He is blamed too for the consequences of the actions of unjust men, and does not have the Christian argument about the necessary hazards of free will to shelter behind. As a result there is ample scope for a kind of theodicy. Not as a word but as a practice, it goes back to the earliest Greek literature, and its first practitioner is the Zeus who defends himself against mortal complaints in the divine council at the start of the *Odyssey*: 'How mortals blame gods! They say that evils come to them from us; but they themselves by their own follies incur suffering beyond their lot.'[35]

Both things—complaints and rebuttals—continue to occur for most of antiquity. One of Plato's objections to tragedy is that tragic man blames the gods when he should rather blame himself, or simply endure.[36] Paul Veyne has argued that god-faulting remained popular religion's characteristic response to blows of fortune until the rise of a 'new paganism' in the second century AD: thenceforth the approved response to blows of fortune was to be one not of protest but of submission and wonder. That interested hypothesis perhaps underestimates the extent to which moralists, the Stoics in particular, had always spoken up in the gods' defence—or rather in denunciation of the weakness of man.[37] And it has often been recognized that Plato is grossly

[33] For a historical account see Hick (1966), and for the recent debate, e.g. Swinburne (1991: 200–24); McNaughton (1994: 329–51).

[34] As one example out of many, take Hyllos' complaints against Zeus in *Trachiniai*, discussed below.

[35] *Od.* 1. 32–4. This is a central text in *Justice of Zeus*, that classic exercise in *théodicée à la grecque*.

[36] *Resp.* 379d–380c, 603e–606b, with the enlightening study of Halliwell (1996: 332–49).

[37] Veyne (1991: 281–310), which builds on Versnel (1981: 37–42). On Stoic and other moralizing protests (many in fact mentioned by Veyne himself) see Rutherford (1989: 213 n. 96).

unfair in presenting tragedy as simply a vehicle for τὸ ἀγανακτητικόν, whingeing.

On the contrary, complaints against the gods in tragedy are normally products of what turns out to be ignorance, and, it can be argued, such a complaint when uttered in the tragic theatre is not a thing that can pass away unregarded. It creates an expectation that the god will be in some way vindicated, even if that vindication brings only cool comfort to the humans involved; it is a sore spot that looks for a salve. (The effect of a complaint left genuinely unanswered, as apparently in *Troades*,[38] is rare and extremely powerful.) We owe to Plato the preservation of a lovely fragment of Aeschylus that he wished to suppress: 'We shall not praise Aeschylus when his Thetis tells how Apollo sang at her wedding and dwelt on her fair offspring "free from disease and long in life . . . and I thought that Apollo's sacred mouth, full of prophetic skill, was infallible. But he who sung this himself, he who was present at the feast himself, who said all this himself, is himself the one who killed my child".' Apollo's guilt appears so blatant that a later poet pointedly excluded him from the wedding feast.[39] But did Apollo have the capacity to speak untruth, even if he had the will? It is more likely that Thetis had misunderstood the god's riddling words (in which, certainly, she deserves all our sympathy).[40]

The pattern is one that is seen several times among the so-called tragi-comedies of Euripides (*Iphigeneia in Tauris*, *Helen*, and *Ion*), where in the early part of the play mortals with their deficient knowledge heap upon a god reproaches which the conclusion

[38] On this see the references given in Pelling (1997: 154–5). Other problematic cases: the criticisms of Apollo's oracle in Eur. *El.*, which are even endorsed by Castor speaking *ex machina* at the conclusion (1245–6); of Hera's jealous malice in Eur. *HF* (1308–10, cf. 822–73, 1127, 1189, 1253, 1263–5, 1392–3: Yunis (1988: 150–1)); of Apollo's vindictiveness in Eur. *Andr.* 1161–5 (cf. 51–5, 1147–9, and, for other doubts about Apollo's conduct, 1009–36: cf. Yunis (1988: 88–93)). In these last three cases, the fault is said to lie not with 'the gods' in general but with an individual Olympian other than Zeus. In Euripides, polytheism lacks, it seems, any mechanisms to control the excesses of rogue deities (whence indirect blame can fall on Zeus: *HF* 1087–8, 1127, 1263–5).

[39] Aeschylus fr. 350 R. *ap.* Plat. *Resp.* 383a: Catullus 64. 299–302. On the part of Catullus, more a conundrum for the reader, no doubt, than a symptom of theological anxiety.

[40] See Gantz (1981: 18–32), who suggests that Achilles' 'long life' was *post mortem*. Apollo's white lie in Eur. *Ion* 69–73 is scarcely a sufficient parallel for the supposed deception in Aeschylus.

proves to be misguided.[41] Plays of Sophocles never reach happy endings in that way, but the mortal impulse to 'blame the gods' is none the less often deprived of its foundation. Early in *Philoctetes*, for instance, Philoctetes questions Neoptolemus about affairs at Troy, and on learning that Ajax and Antilochus are dead, but Odysseus and Thersites and the Atreidai alive and flourishing, concludes: 'Of course! Nothing bad ever perishes, but the gods take good care of it . . . how can I explain these things, how praise them, when I look at the gods' doings and find the gods evil?' (446–52). But near the end of the play the interaction of the three human characters leads to impasse, and Philoctetes in spite of the oracles which promise him health and glory at Troy is about to sail home to Malis, unbowed indeed but inglorious and unhealed. Only the intervention of Heracles, dispatched by Zeus, allows the action to reach the ending which the audience, if it wishes the well-being of Philoctetes, must strongly desire.[42] This easy loosing by a god of the knot which the mortals have inadvertently tied so tight is sometimes seen by critics as obtrusively artificial, almost a brief moment of theatre of the absurd.[43] But from a different perspective one might

[41] See *IT* 143–235, 475–7, and esp. 560, 570–5, 711–15; *Helen* 357, 609–10, 674–83, 711–19, 1093–106, 1137–50 (but for reservations about 'theodicy' in *Helen* see Matthiessen (1964: 181–3)); *Ion* 232–4, 384–91, above all 436–51 and 859–922, 952, 960, etc. The surface movement in *Ion* is certainly as described; whether there is any residual inadequacy in Apollo's conduct is disputed: see the doxography in Yunis (1988: 137 n. 69), and for a brisk theodicy Heath (1987: 55 f.). On similar issues in 17th-cent. drama see Gethner (1983: 39–51). The apparent optimism of many Euripidean endings is regularly interpreted, often with particular reference to the role of the *deus ex machina*, as irony: v. Fritz (1956: 64–7 = 1962: 312–16); Romilly (1961: 108 n. 2, 137 n. 2); Reinhardt (1960: 233, 256); Schmidt (1963); Rohdich (1969: 42–3). For a non-ironic view of the optimism of *IT*, *Helen*, and *Ion* see Whitman (1974: 138); and of the *deus ex machina* in general, Spira (1960) (cf. Lloyd-Jones (1983: 155)). Sourvinou-Inwood will present a full non-ironic interpretation in her forthcoming Jackson lectures. Cf. n. 43 below.

[42] So Easterling (1983: 217–28) at p. 225; cf. Winnington-Ingram (1980: 295). Critics have rightly stressed that Heracles appears as an old comrade of Philoctetes, and that he offers no general theodicy (Winnington-Ingram (1980: 299–301); Blundell (1989: 222)); but he is also a representative of Zeus (1415), and the absence of a general theodicy does not devalue the particular restitution made to Philoctetes. For positive views of the role of the divine in the play see Segal (1977: 133–58); Gill (1980: 137–46).

[43] For such views see Easterling (1983: 224–5) (who dissents), and the nuanced position of Pucci (1994: 43–4). Such an argument is regularly applied to the Euripidean *deus ex machina* (see the works cited in n. 41 above, esp. Schmidt (1963)), with some plausibility in regard to the bizarre reversal engineered by Apollo at the end of *Orestes*, but none at all in the case of patriotic plays such as *Supplices* or *Erechtheus* (whence the view of Patzer (1983: 31–3) that the device only becomes ironic in late Euripides).

apply to this passage, as perhaps to no other in Greek tragedy, the words, 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends | Rough hew them how we will.' This turn of events picks up and more than cancels Philoctetes' earlier denunciation. Much remains unexplained—we do not in fact learn, for instance, why Achilles is dead and not Thersites[44]—but the impression of divine indifference to human desert has been effaced.[45] What is not wiped out but underlined, through Heracles' warning against impieties at the sack of Troy, is the tragic potential for badness inherent even in good men. The plays of Sophocles, it is often supposed, exalt heroic individuals who surmount the worst that can be put upon them by gods indifferent or cruel.[46] But there is much to be said for a more Aristotelo-Bradleian view, whereby Sophocles' world is one marred, above all, by the disastrous flaws endemic in human personality.

The most conspicuous complaints against the gods in Sophocles are those relating to the death of Heracles in *Trachiniai*. Seized with hideous pains in the very act of consecrating a new altar to his own father, Heracles complains bitterly of the 'favour' (χάρις) he has got in return for his offerings (994–9). The point is a serious one for a religion based on the exchange of favours between man, with his sacrifices and dedications, and the gods, the 'givers of good things'.[47] At the end of the play Hyllus makes a direct charge of great heartlessness (ἀγνωμοσύνη) against the gods, they who 'beget offspring and are called fathers, but look on at sufferings such as this' (1266–9). This contrasts with and apparently overthrows an earlier assurance by the chorus to Deianeira that she should be of good heart, since Zeus always stands by his children (139–40). But Hyllus goes on at once to say that 'the future none can see', and it

[44] Possibly Neoptolemus' tentative statement that Thersites was still alive is not true; it certainly runs counter to the tradition that Thersites was killed by Achilles, as the Σ on *Phil.* 445 notes.

[45] Jasper Griffin comments, however: 'But the substance of the earlier criticism still stands; I'd take a cooler view—some of the divine purpose looks explicable to us; some doesn't (like what happened to Oedipus).'

[46] See e.g. v. Fritz (1962: 18–19, 254) with excellent remarks on the 'schonungslose Härte' of Sophocles; Reinhardt (1947: 10 = 1979: 2).

[47] See Parker (1998: 105–25).

has been argued with irresistible force in recent years that the future for Heracles is apotheosis and that certain features of the text act as triggers to evoke the audience's knowledge of the relevant myth—a myth that is no obscure variant but the foundation of a large part of everyday religious reality in Attica, with its innumerable cults of Heracles.[48] The complaints against Zeus' apparent injustice are themselves among the triggers that work in this way. The characters in the play, ignorant, rub at a sore point; but, since a salve exists, the audience are encouraged to apply it.

The question remains why Heracles had to attain immortality by such an anguished route, and it may be that no answer is available other than that the favour of Zeus can indeed be violent. But a serious and otherwise unpunished crime by Heracles is mentioned in the play: he sacked Oechalia out of lust for Iole, 'having fabricated a trivial complaint and excuse' (359–65). 'May I not be a city-sacker' and 'the gods observe those who kill many', sing the chorus in *Agamemnon* (472, 461–2), magnificently. The idea that Zeus might punish Heracles for misdirected violence was explicitly raised earlier in the play, when Lichas declared that the hero's enslavement to Omphale was punishment for the murder of Iphitus (274–9). So there is perhaps another item of implicit theodicy to be noted here.[49]

The stricken Oedipus barely complains against the gods, much though moderns have complained on his behalf.[50] The emphasis of *Oedipus Tyrannus* would be very different, the problem of theodicy much more urgent, if he had repeated after the final revelation (or in *Oedipus at Colonus*) the kind of complaint that he raised, hypothetically, before it: if I turn out to be the victim of my own curse, 'would not anyone who judged this the work of a cruel destiny against me be right?' (828–9). The final speech of Antigone, by contrast, ends with a magnificent complaint—which is also, since the real culprit is Creon, an excellent example of the way in which gods can be held co-responsible for injustice inflicted by mortals. What god can she look to now for aid, she asks, when it is her piety that has brought her to disaster (921–8)?

[48] See Lloyd-Jones (1983: 126–8) and, for the subsequent debate (especially the important contributions, on opposite sides, by Easterling (1983) and Stinton (1986)), Holt (1989: 69–80).

[49] So Lloyd-Jones (1994: 1–2).

[50] Nor does Ajax, though he does declare that he 'owes nothing to the gods' (589–90).

Critics sometimes speak as if these complaints go unanswered; thus it has been said that Antigone's fate poses the acutest problem of theodicy in all Sophocles.[51] If we believe the chorus—and this is the main case where it matters theologically whether we do nor not—she has brought her troubles on herself, and is also the luckless heir to inherited guilt.[52] But the main answer to Antigone's complaints surely lies in neither of these factors but in the immediate punishment, which fulfils her final curse, of her persecutor Creon.[53] The punishment occurs not by direct divine intervention, but via a credible chain of human responses, but we know from Tiresias—know therefore for sure—that the human mechanism is also a divine one.[54] The downfall of Creon does not mitigate the pathos of Antigone's own destiny one jot; but it shows that her cosmic despair, as if the gods had forgotten their own rules, is misplaced.

We have luxuriated in theodicy for long enough, and must now revert to the original theme of ways of knowing the will of the gods. It was stressed earlier how few and weak these were, how little is in fact revealed or explained, and the subsequent discussion of theodicy has not been intended to alter those conclusions. What vindication of the gods amounts to in Sophocles is very far from a Leibnizian demonstration that we live in the best, or even the justest, of all possible worlds, with all that such an argument implies about the possibility of a full and rational understanding of the purposes of the gods and of the workings of the world. On the contrary, the logical structure of theodicy in Sophocles frequently seems to be of a restricted and negative form: in *Trachiniai* 'it is not the case that Zeus abandoned his son for no reason to a horrible death', or in *Oedipus at Colonus* 'it is not the case that the gods let Oedipus die unregarded', and so on. What is adduced, in a way found in the other tragedians too,[55] is a mitigation or limitation of

[51] See Winnington-Ingram (1980: 148–9), who cites (149 n. 89) but rejects what seems an appropriate response by Kitto (1956: 170).

[52] 853–6: cf. Lloyd-Jones (1983: 117); Burton (1980: 120–3); Sourvinou-Inwood (1989: 139–40).

[53] For a similar restoration of balance through τίσις in Herodotus, see e.g. 1. 13. 2, 3. 109. 2, 3. 126. 1. For the Erinyes avenging wrongs in Sophocles, see *Aj.* 835–44, *El.* 110–17.

[54] 1064–86; cf. already the suggestion of 278–9.

[55] See e.g. Aesch. *Suppl.* 571–89, 1064–7; Eur. *Hipp.* 1416–30 (cf. Yunis (1988: 120)); *El.* 1291, 1340–2; *Andr.* 1231 ff., esp. 1250–2 (contrast 1010–27); *Bacch.* 1339

suffering or a compensation for it, and these mitigations and compensations serve to blunt the sharpest of men's complaints of divine cruelty and neglect. But too much remains unexplained and unknowable for strong positive claims about divine justice, still less about divine benevolence,[56] to be possible.

Sensitive critics have always been struck by these silences of Sophocles' text, of which the most famous is doubtless the apparent silence in *Oedipus Tyrannus* about the ultimate motivation for the destiny prophesied for Laius and Oedipus.[57] In a sense the central problem for any study of Sophocles' presentation of the divine is that of responding to these silences: at all events, it is at this point that the paths of even the best critics diverge. Does Sophocles leave the divine will unexplained because to reason about it would be a distraction from the true human centre of the plays?[58] Or is the point rather the ultimate incomprehensibility to mortals of the divine world? And if so, if the ways of the gods are incomprehensible, is that because those ways are good, but human comprehension weak?[59] Or because mortals seek justice where none is to be found?[60] This is a maze where criticism may well wander bewildered. 'I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures,' said John Stuart Mill in protest against the God of Hell.[61] But do we know enough about the Sophoclean gods to determine whether to call them good, by Mill's standard or any other? Language, modern theoreticians never weary of insisting,

(which Winnington-Ingram (1948: 145, 147) discounts too readily); fr. 446 N. (from the first Hippolytus); [Eur.] Rhes. 962–79.

[56] Note that, unlike Aeschylus (*Septem*, *Eumenides*), Sophocles seems never to look beyond individual suffering to future collective well-being (there is very little well-being at all in Sophocles, though as in the *Aeneid* there are brief deluded hopes). The forward vision even of *OC* is not of Athenian felicity but of Theban suffering.

[57] On this contrast Lloyd-Jones (1983: 119–23) and Stinton (1986: 72–4 = 1990: 461–4). Winnington-Ingram (1980: 173–8) sees Apollo cruelly at work in the play; even were he right, we would still be unsure of the god's motive.

[58] So Reinhardt (1947: 144 = 1979: 134). Contrast Halliwell (1990), an admirable essay which emphasizes the 'inconclusiveness' of the tragic presentation of the divine but also the religious power of this very inconclusiveness.

[59] So Lloyd-Jones (1983: 128); though note his slightly different emphasis: 'In Sophocles, the difference between gods whose ways are inscrutable to men and gods who deal with men in an arbitrary fashion often appears minimal' (1991: 47).

[60] So Dodds (1973: 64–77) and many predecessors cited in Lloyd-Jones (1983: 108–9).

[61] See Rowell (1974), 3.

defies stable interpretation. But how much more inscrutable is silence! As mortals we see the Sophoclean gods through a glass darkly, and we shall never see them face to face.

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3

Ancestral Curses

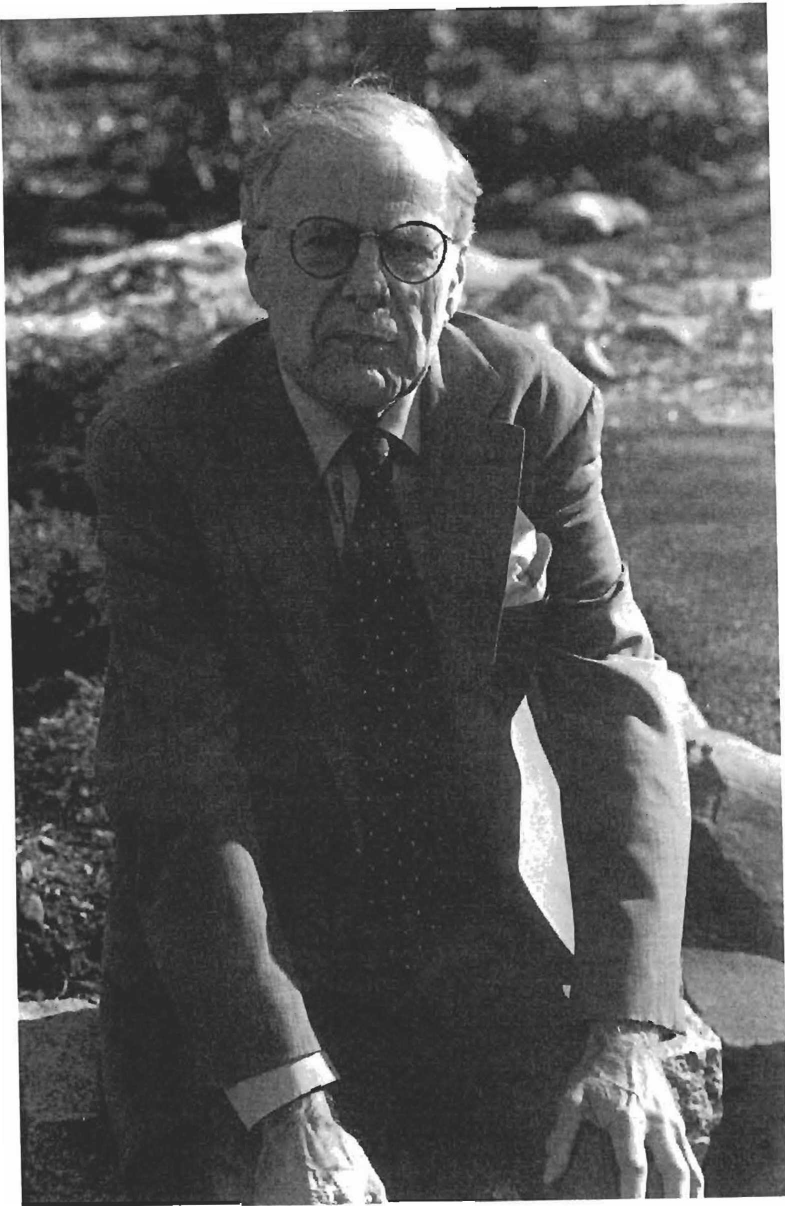
MARTIN WEST

The Greek word for 'curse' is ἀρά or ἐπαρά or κατάρα. This suggests that a curse is a sort of prayer, ἀρή being one of the ordinary Homeric words for a prayer. It is still found with that general sense in Pindar and Herodotus, though in the fifth century it has mostly become specialized in the sense of 'curse'. A curse is a prayer that harm may befall someone.

But it is not as simple as that. Already in Homer we can see a distinction between a simple prayer for someone's harm and the curse proper. When, at the outset of the *Iliad*, Chryses prays to Apollo that the Danaans may pay the price for the distress they have caused him by taking his daughter, we cite this as a fine illustration of Greek prayer form, and we do not at all think of it as a curse. It stands in clear contrast to the two parental cursings recalled in book 9: the one where Phoenix's father Amyntor invoked the Erinyes to see to it that Phoenix should never have a son, and his prayers were answered by Zeus of the Underworld and Persephone;[1] and the other where Meleager's mother prayed to the gods for his death, crouching and sobbing and beating the earth with her hands as she called upon Hades and Persephone, and the pitiless Erinys heard her prayer from Erebos.[2] In both these cases the Erinyes, the powers of vengeance, and the gods of the Underworld are involved.

[1] *Il.* 9. 454–7, *πολλὰ κατηρᾶτο, στυγερὰς δ' ἐπεκέκλετ' Ἐρινῦς, | μή ποτε γούνασιν οἷσιν ἐφέσσεσθαι φίλον υἱόν | ἐξ ἐμέθεν γεγαῶτα· θεοὶ δ' ἐτέλειον ἐπαράς, | Ζεύς τε καταχθόνιος καὶ ἐπαινὴ Περσεφόνεια.*

[2] *Il.* 9. 566–72, *ἐξ ἀρέων μητρὸς κεχολωμένος, ἥ ῥα θεοῖσιν | πόλλ' ἀχέουσ' ἠρᾶτο κασιγνήτοιο φόνοιο, | πολλὰ δὲ καὶ γαῖαν πολυφόρβην χερσὶν ἀλοία | κικλήσκουσ' Ἀΐδην καὶ ἐπαινὴν Περσεφόνειαν | πρόχνυ καθεζομένη, δεύοντο δὲ δάκρυσι κόλποι, | παιδὶ δόμεν θάνατον· τῆς δ' ἠεροφοῖτις Ἐρινύς | ἔκλυεν ἐξ Ἐρέβεσφιν ἀμείλιχον ἦτορ ἔχουσα.* Cf. also *Od.* 2. 135, where Telemachus fears his mother's curse if he sends her away against her will.



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