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SKĒPTRON IN SOPHOCLES' *OEDIPVS REX**

I

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus*, after laying hands on Antigone and Ismene, Creon ridicules Oedipus by saying these words (*OC* 848–9):

> οὔκουν ποτ' ἐκ τούτοιν γε μὴ σκήπτροιν ἔτι
> ὁδοιπορήσῃς.

Then you shall never more walk with the aid of these two props![1]

It is possible that Creon is here alluding to Oedipus' actual appearance throughout the play. As far as we know, Oedipus comes on stage with no walking stick,[2] and uses Antigone and Ismene as a crutch while walking. Creon's comparing Oedipus' daughters to a crutch, however, is also metaphorical. Such a metaphor is quite common in some modern languages (for example in Italian, 'bastone della vecchiaia', or in French, 'bâton de vieillesse'), but was known by ancient Greek poetry as well. In Euripides' *Hecuba*, for instance, Hecuba depicts her daughter Polyxena as her crutch (281 βάκτρον).[3]

In this case, however, Creon's choice of words seems significant. Instead of using βάκτρον—as we will see, the most common term to define a walking stick in tragedy—or one of its cognates, Oedipus' brother-in-law chooses σκῆπτρον, a word highly relevant in this context.[4] σκῆπτρον is not just a common staff but the staff of the king and, by extension, the symbol of his power. Throughout the tragedy, the term recurs with this metaphorical value: the plural σκῆπτρα defines the power which Eteocles and Polyneices are fighting for (Soph. *OC* 425, 449, 1354). By defining

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[1] The text of Sophocles, except for *Oedipus Rex*, is quoted from H. Lloyd-Jones and N.G. Wilson, *Sophoclis Fabulae* (Oxford, 1992[2]); the translations are quoted from H. Lloyd-Jones, *Sophocles* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1997–8). Unless otherwise specified, the text and translation of Soph. *OT* are quoted from P.J. Finglass, *Sophocles Oedipus the King* (Cambridge, 2018). For other authors, see M.L. West, *Homerus Ilias* (Stuttgart, 1998–2000); M.L. West, *Homerus Odyssea* (Berlin and Boston, 2017); J. Diggle, *Euripidis Fabulae* (Oxford, 1984–94).

[2] An actual walking stick is never mentioned among Oedipus' props throughout the drama, and as a consequence the most recent overview of the staging (G. Guidorizzi, *Sofocle Edipo a Colono* [Milano, 2008], 199 on vv. 1–116) does not include any walking stick in the description of Oedipus' outfit.

[3] In their commentaries, K. Matthiessen, *Euripides Hekabe* (Berlin, 2010), 291 and C. Collard, *Euripides Hecuba* (Warminster, 1991), 135 on v. 80 point out that a similar metaphor is applied to Polydorus at *Hec.* 80. In terms of imagery, however, the two metaphors differ significantly (at *Hec.* 80, Polydorus' strong support is described as an anchor, ἄγκυρα, and not as a staff).

[4] Cf. P.E. Easterling, 'Oedipus and Polynices', *PCPhS* 13 (1967), 1–13, at 5; S. Saïd, *La faute tragique* (Paris, 1978), 374; J.C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles. Commentaries* 7 (Leiden, 1984), 126; Guidorizzi (n. 2), 310–11; P. Demont, 'Tyrannie et royauté dans l'*Œdipe à Colone* de Sophocle', *Ktèma* 40 (2015), 105–13, at 113.

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Oedipus' daughters as metaphorical σκῆπτρα, then, Creon seems to allude maliciously to Oedipus' former status of king and to his subsequent downfall.[5] Oedipus, as king, once had an actual sceptre, while now he has only his two daughters acting as a beggar's walking sticks. This ambivalence will be reiterated by Oedipus himself later, when the former king addresses his daughters with the phrase ὦ σκῆπτρα φωτός, 'staves that support a man' (Soph. *OC* 1109). Oedipus is again comparing his current status to his former power, although with a more gentle tone than Creon's, implying that Antigone and Ismene are his true sceptres, and that this is what counts most to him now.[6]

II

This particular case from *Oedipus Coloneus* illustrates the lexical as well as the metaphorical flexibility of the term σκῆπτρον in classical Greek. In its most generic meaning, the term designates a staff; from Homer onwards, however, it begins to become specialized, and soon becomes the prerogative of kings, the badge of their command.

In the Homeric poems σκῆπτρον can designate a beggar's or a lame person's walking stick.[7] This meaning is strictly linked with the derivation of σκῆπτρον from the verb σκήπτομαι, 'lean on', with the -τρον suffix denoting an instrument.[8] However, there are points of contact between σκῆπτρον as the beggar's walking stick and σκῆπτρον as the king's sceptre. The act of leaning on a σκῆπτρον characterizes not only the beggar but also the king speaking to the assembly.[9] In most cases, actually, σκῆπτρον designates the king's staff. Sometimes, Homer employs the term to designate the king's authority in a metaphorical way: to have the σκῆπτρον means 'to be in power' (*Od.* 3.411–12), and to be ὑπὸ σκήπτρῳ means 'to be under someone's power' (*Il.* 6.159, 9.156, 9.298). More often, however, σκῆπτρον is a material sign of regal authority:[10] see, for example, the test of the army in *Iliad* Book 2, which revolves around Agamemnon's sceptre as an instrument of his authority.[11] Such a value is vividly conveyed by its several uses in the exercise of power.[12] It can be delivered in a genealogical succession (Hom. *Il.* 2.101–8);[13] handed around in assembly (Hom. *Il.*

[5] Cf. Guidorizzi (n. 2), 311.

[6] Cf. Easterling (n. 4), 5: 'The implication here, of course, is that Oedipus' σκῆπτρα are far more worthwhile than the σκῆπτρα fought for by Polynices and Eteocles.'

[7] Hephaestus walks with a 'thick σκῆπτρον' (Hom. *Il.* 18.416); in the *Odyssey*, the walking stick is part of Odysseus' disguise as beggar (Hom. *Od.* 13.437, 14.31, 17.199–203).

[8] Cf. P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots* (Paris, 1968), 1016 s.v. σκήπτομαι; R.S.P. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden and Boston, 2010), 2.1350 s.v. σκήπτομαι. Homer himself plays on this etymology (Hom. *Od.* 17.199–203).

[9] Hom. *Il.* 2.109. Cf. G.S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume I: Books 1–4* (Cambridge, 1985), 124 on Hom. *Il.* 2.86; S. Hornblower, 'Sticks, stones, and Spartans. The sociology of Spartan violence', in H. van Wees (ed.), *War and Violence in Ancient Greece* (London, 2000), 57–82, at 62 (= id., *Thucydidean Themes* [Oxford, 2011], 250–74). See also *Od.* 18.103–7.

[10] Cf. L. Gernet, '"Value" in Greek myth', in R.L. Gordon (ed.), *Myth, Religion and Society. Structuralist Essays by M. Detienne, L. Gernet, J.P. Vernant* (Cambridge, 1981), 111–46, at 138.

[11] Cf. P.E. Easterling, 'Agamemnon's *skēptron* in the *Iliad*', in M.M. Mackenzie and C. Roueché (edd.), *Authority. Papers Presented to Joyce Reynolds in the Occasion of her Seventieth Birthday* (Cambridge, 1989), 104–17, at 110–14.

[12] Cf. e.g. Kirk (n. 9), 128–9 on *Il.* 2.109.

[13] Cf. J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), 10–11; Easterling (n. 11).

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2.186, 23.567–8; *Od.* 2.37–8); held in the administration of justice (Hom. *Il.* 1.237–9);[14] or thrown to the ground to denounce an abuse of power (Hom. *Il.* 1.245–6; *Od.* 2.80).[15] Therefore, the authority of the sceptre can be shared among the chiefs in the assembly,[16] as it is the symbol of both regal authority and the administration of justice.

III

By the fifth century B.C.E., then, the link between σκῆπτρα and the power of kings is clearly established. To quote an example, in Sophocles' *Electra*, when Clytemnestra dreams about Agamemnon coming back to life, her vision shows her former husband recovering his old σκῆπτρον, which is now in Aegisthus' hands (Soph. *El.* 420–1 σκῆπτρον οὑφόρει ποτὲ | αὐτός, τανῦν δ' Αἴγισθος, 'the staff which he used to carry, and which Aegisthus carries now').[17] The succession among kings is described through the actual delivery of the royal sceptre: the σκῆπτρον itself, then, symbolically designates the function of the king.[18] Moreover, in tragedy, σκῆπτρον (or, more frequently, its plural form σκῆπτρα)[19] illustrates mostly the abstract concepts of 'sovereignty', 'authority' (for example Eur. *Phoen.* 591 σκήπτρων κρατοῦντα; 1253 σκήπτρων κρατεῖς).

Therefore, in the language and imagery of ancient Greek theatre, the σκῆπτρον is an object and a powerful symbol of—and ultimately a common metaphor for—monarchic authority. However, passages from extant Greek plays where a sceptre is mentioned only as an object, or even brought on stage as an actual prop, are far rarer.[20] The only cases seem to be found in two Euripidean plays, *Andromache* (588 σκήπτρῳ γε τῷδε σὸν καθαιμάξας κάρα, 'having blooded your head with this sceptre') and *Iphigenia at Aulis* (311 σκήπτρῳ τάχ' ἆρα σὸν καθαιμάξω κάρα, 'I shall blood your head with a sceptre at once'). In both cases, a king (Peleus and Menelaus respectively) threatens to use his σκῆπτρον to do violence against an enemy (as Odysseus does with Agamemnon's sceptre against Thersites in Hom. *Il.* 2.265–6). The royal status of both characters makes it plain that the σκῆπτρον they mention is not just a generic

[14] Its link with θέμις makes σκῆπτρον an instrument to take an oath upon (Hom. *Il.* 1.234–9, 10.321, 10.328) or to mark a solemn statement (Hom. *Il.* 7.412). Cf. F. Ruzé, *Déliberation et pouvoir dans la cité grecque de Nestor à Socrate* (Paris, 1997), 50–2; S. Pulleyn, *Homer Iliad I* (Oxford, 2000), 192 on Hom. *Il.* 1.239; D. Bouvier, *Le sceptre et la lyre. L'*Iliade *ou les héros de la mémoire* (Grenoble, 2002), 273–4.

[15] Cf. Griffin (n. 13), 11–12; G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore and London, 1979), 179–80; Easterling (n. 11), 112–14; Bouvier (n. 14), 274–9.

[16] Cf. L. Gernet, *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique* (Paris, 1968), 240 (with particular emphasis on the sceptre as instrument of shared sovereignty).

[17] For the Homeric resonance of these lines, see Easterling (n. 11), 115–16.

[18] Cf. P.J. Finglass, *Sophocles Electra* (Cambridge, 2007), 217 on Soph. *El.* 420–1; M. Mueller, *Objects as Actors. Props and the Poetic of Performance in Greek Tragedy* (Chicago and London, 2016), 44–6 (see also 204 n. 10 on the visual importance of the token).

[19] Cf. A.C. Moorhouse, *The Syntax of Sophocles* (Leiden, 1982), 5; cf. V. Bers, *Greek Poetic Syntax in the Classical Age* (New Haven, 1984), 44–6.

[20] Cf. V. Di Benedetto and E. Medda, *La tragedia sulla scena* (Torino, 2002), 184. To picture the exact shape of a king's sceptre, we might turn to vase-paintings (though frequently from a later period than the first performances of classical tragedy): cf. e.g. O. Taplin, *Pots & Plays. Interactions Between Tragedy and Greek Vase-Painting of the Fourth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2007), 159–60 and 167. See also 'scepter' in Taplin (this note), 295.

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staff but the king's staff, that is, the sceptre.[21] Another specific use of σκῆπτρον can be found at Aesch. *Ag.* 1265, where Cassandra carries the σκῆπτρα as symbol of her mantic activity.[22]

Greek theatre used generic staffs too, which must have been a common feature in the staging of old characters,[23] travellers, beggars and blind people—categories well-represented in ancient Greek drama. However, on these occasions the staff is called a σκῆπτρον only twice: at Aesch. *Ag.* 75 (the chorus of old Argives come on stage leaning on their staffs) and Eur. *HF* 254 (the chorus of old Thebans try to persuade themselves not to assail Lycus by means of their staffs). When a staff is mentioned, the term employed is usually βάκτρον or one of its cognates (βακτήριον, βάκτρευμα).[24] Though mainly prose terms, these nouns are also well known and frequently used by dramatic poetry: cf., for example, Eur. *HF* 108, *Tro.* 276, *Ion* 743, *Bacch.* 363 and Ar. *Vesp.* 33, 1296. The same term describes the beggar's staff, as in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, where Dicaeopolis asks Euripides for a πτωχικὸν βακτήριον (488). Lastly, βάκτρον also refers to the walking stick used by blind people to detect objects on their path. Oedipus carries such a prop in Euripides' *Phoenissae*, and he repeatedly mentions it—and when he does, he always does so by reference to βάκτρον or similar: cf. 1539–40 (βακτρεύμασι τυφλοῦ | ποδός); 1548–9 (παραβάκτροις | … θεραπεύμασιν);[25] 1719 (βάκτρα).[26] Greek drama seems then to have drawn (at least in its lexicon) quite a clear distinction between σκῆπτρα and βάκτρα: the former almost invariably designating the king's staff (and the king's power), the latter describing every other kind of walking stick, including the one used by blind people.

IV

In light of all this, two passages from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* stand out as particularly significant. After arguing with Oedipus, Tiresias prophesies the complete upturning of the king's destiny (*OT* 454–6):

> …τυφλὸς γὰρ ἐκ δεδορκότος
> καὶ πτωχὸς ἀντὶ πλουσίου ξένην ἔπι
> σκήπτρῳ προδεικνὺς γαῖαν ἐμπορεύσεται.

[21] Some scholars have interpreted Peleus' σκῆπτρον at Eur. *Andr.* 588 as a generic crutch: see G.W. Bond, *Euripides Heracles* (Oxford, 1981), 130 on Eur. *HF* 254; M. Lloyd, *Euripides Andromache* (Warminster, 1994), 136. However, the sceptre appears again at 1222–3, when Peleus shouts: 'No longer do I have a city, away with this sceptre (σκῆπτρα … τάδε)'. As τάδε clarifies, Peleus is referring to the staff he was using at 588. Peleus is here refusing his prerogatives as king: therefore, the σκῆπτρον that he brandished at 588 and he is now carrying is not a generic staff but his sceptre.

[22] Cf. E. Medda, *Eschilo Agamennone* (Roma, 2017), 3.252–3. Cassandra and other seers might carry σκῆπτρα in other dramas as well (Cassandra in *Trojan Women*, Tiresias in *Oedipus Rex*). However, in no other extant play is such a prop mentioned or implicitly needed.

[23] Cf. Medda (n. 22), 2.56 on Aesch. *Ag.* 75. This was probably true for comedy as well: cf. e.g. Cratinus, fr. 133 K.–A. and the Choregos vase (Naples, Museo Nazionale 248778, *c.*400–380 B.C.E.).

[24] Greek tragedy seems to ignore βακτηρία, a common word in fifth-century prose (cf. also Ar. *Plut.* 272): Hornblower (n. 9), 61–2.

[25] As D.J. Mastronarde, *Euripides Phoenissae* (Cambridge, 1994), 579–80 on vv. 1539–40 and 582 on vv. 1548–9 demonstrates, in all likelihood the term refers to a real staff.

[26] Later iconography pictures Oedipus as a blind man wandering with a walking stick with his daughter Antigone: cf. I. Krauskopf, 'Antigone', *LIMC* I/1 (1981), 820 nos. 2–3; ead., 'Oidipous', *LIMC* VII/1 (1994), 10 nos. 89–90.

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For being blind after having sight, and a beggar instead of a rich man, he will make his way to a foreign land, feeling for the ground ahead of him with a stick.

Tiresias' prophecy highlights the main aspects of Oedipus' current status—sight, wealth and citizenship. According to the seer, Oedipus will lose all of them, and will be forced to wander as a blind beggar into foreign lands: his only support will be a σκῆπτρον.

Set against the more general background of Greek drama's vocabulary to define staffs, Tiresias' choice of words seems, at the very least, peculiar. Why does he refer to the blind man's walking stick in terms of a σκῆπτρον and not of a βάκτρον (which would fit the metre as well)? It seems to us that Tiresias is alluding maliciously to Oedipus' royal status, just as Creon will do in *Oedipus Coloneus*. The complete upturning of Oedipus' fate implies his political downfall and his not being king anymore: this aspect of Oedipus' fall is conveyed by the word σκῆπτρον, which contains the images of both the king's power and the blind beggar's decline. With terrible tragic irony,[27] Tiresias equates the symbol of Oedipus' prosperity to the symbol of his degradation. As in *Oedipus Coloneus* Oedipus' σκῆπτρα were both his crutches (the symbol of his decline) and his sceptre (the symbol of his former power), in *Oedipus Rex* Oedipus' sceptre (the symbol of his current power over Thebes) becomes his staff (the symbol of his blindness and of his future downfall). Oedipus' present and future conditions are thus summarized—and symbolized—by one word, σκῆπτρον.

Sophocles' creative engagement with the term σκῆπτρον does not confine itself to the passage discussed above. We find it at another highly significant point, Oedipus' recounting of his killing of Laius (*OT* 810–13, transl. modified):

> οὐ μὴν ἴσην γ' ἔτεισεν, ἀλλὰ συντόμως
> σκήπτρῳ τυπεὶς ἐκ τῆσδε χειρὸς ὕπτιος
> μέσης ἀπήνης εὐθὺς ἐκκυλίνδεται·
> κτείνω δὲ τοὺς ξύμπαντας.

It was no equal penalty that he paid, but, in short, he was struck by a *skēptron* from this hand and straightaway rolled prone right out of the wagon. I slew them all.

Oedipus shows Jocasta and the audience the very hand with which he stroke Laius (811)—the hand that brandished a σκῆπτρον. What does σκῆπτρον mean here?[28] The majority of scholars take it to be a walking stick. When he meets Laius, Oedipus is travelling away from home: in this case, the σκῆπτρον he has in his hands is, without doubt, a traveller's staff.[29] Beating someone with a stick is no surprise for a Greek

[27] The only scholar suggesting an ironic reading of this passage is, to the best of our knowledge, G.W.M. Harrison, quoted by D. Konstan, 'Propping up Greek tragedy: the right use of *Opsis*', in G.W.M. Harrison and V. Liapis (edd.), *Performance in Greek and Roman Theatre* (Leiden and Boston, 2013), 70 n. 11. See Finglass (n. 1), on vv. 454–6.

[28] Cf. R.C. Jebb, *Sophocles The Oedipus Tyrannus* (Cambridge, 1893[3]), 111 ('staff'); P. Masqueray, *Sophocle* (Paris, 1922), 1.169 ('bâton'); A. Dain and P. Mazon, *Sophocle* (Paris, 1958), 2.101 ('bâton'); F. Ferrari, *Sofocle Antigone, Edipo Re, Edipo a Colono* (Milano, 1982), 221 ('bastone'); J. Bollack, *L'Oedipe roi de Sophocle. Le texte et ses interprétations* (Lille, 1990), 1.241 ('bâton'); Lloyd-Jones (n. 1), 1.407 ('stick'); G. Paduano, *Tragedie e Frammenti di Sofocle* (Torino, 1996), 1.479 ('bastone'); B. Manuwald, *Sophokles König Ödipus* (Berlin and Boston, 2012), 182 ('Stab'). For a different interpretation, see Finglass (n. 1), on vv. 810–13 ('sceptre').

[29] Such a staff is a common part of Oedipus' iconography: cf. Krauskopf (n. 26 [1994]), 3–9 and especially nos. 10, 16, 39, 41, 43, 44, 49 and 55 (Oedipus meeting the Sphinx). In some depictions of Laius' death both Laius and Oedipus brandish staffs: cf. O. Touchefeu-Meynier, 'Laios', *LIMC* VI/1 (1992), 185–7.

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audience: this was a common way of doing violence to enemies, especially if of lower rank. Once again, though, the word chosen to designate the walking stick is not βάκτρον or one of its cognates but the more resounding σκῆπτρον.

The term sounds all the more interesting, since at the time of his recounting Oedipus is king, and σκῆπτρον inevitably recalls his status. Moreover, what gave Oedipus power over Thebes was precisely the killing of the previous king, Laius. In defining as σκῆπτρον (811) the weapon used to commit the regicide, Sophocles' choice of words seems crucial, as if the violent passage from one king to the other were brought about—and once again were symbolized—by the badge itself of regal authority, the sceptre. As in the case of Tiresias, then, the poet exploits the polysemy of σκῆπτρον to create an ironic ambiguity: σκῆπτρον is both the weapon with which Oedipus killed Laius and the token of monarchy which Oedipus has obtained through the murder itself. Oedipus' ambiguous situation in Thebes—lawful heir *and* kingslayer—becomes evident through σκῆπτρον and its twofold meaning.

The audience, however, have already heard Tiresias' prophecy, and thus know that the σκῆπτρον will also be the staff that Oedipus will use once blind. By means of its polysemy, then, the same word is associated with the three crucial moments of Oedipus' life as it is laid out throughout the play: the past, with the killing of Laius; the present, with Oedipus' position of king; the future, with the atonement for Oedipus' crimes. Although recurring only twice in the drama, σκῆπτρον is set at the crossroads of Oedipus' life, and has therefore a remarkable significance for the whole meaning of the play. What is more, Sophocles seems to bear this association in mind when actually staging the 'sequel' of *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus Coloneus*. By playing again on the different meanings of σκῆπτρον (both the blind man's walking stick and his former sceptre), the poet revives the ambiguity he had already created in *Oedipus Rex*, and confirms the associations of the term with each stage of Oedipus' life.

V

One last question remains. One may wonder whether the σκῆπτρον was only recalled in words or was actually shown to the audience. Oedipus' blind mask aside, the theme of visual effects in *Oedipus Rex* does not seem to have drawn scholars' attention.[30] How should we picture Oedipus in the course of the play? It seems safe to suppose that he was richly dressed, as kings usually are in tragedy.[31] Nothing more specific, however, can be inferred from the text, and iconography does not seem to be of great help either.[32]

[30] Some notable exceptions being O. Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1978); C. Segal, 'Visual symbolism and visual effects in Sophocles', *CW* 74 (1980), 125–42; O. Seale, *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles* (Chicago and London, 1982).

[31] Cf. e.g. I. Brooke, *Costume in Greek Classic Drama* (London, 1962). A good testimony of kings dressed magnificently is Ar. *Ran.* 1061–4, where Aeschylus claims to have dressed demigods and kings *comme il faut*.

[32] A fourth-century Sicilian crater (Siracusa, Museo Archeologico Regionale 'Paolo Orsi' 66557) depicts a bearded man speaking with a high-ranking character wearing a lavish costume and holding a sceptre, while a female figure is covering her face with the edge of her cloak. Cf. A.D. Trendall and T.B.L. Webster, *Illustrations of Greek Drama* (London, 1971), 111.2, 111.8; R. Green, 'Towards a reconstruction of performance style', in P.E. Easterling and E. Hall (edd.), *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession* (Cambridge, 2002), 93–126; Taplin (n. 20), 90–2; id., 'How was Athenian tragedy played in the Greek West?', in K. Bosher (ed.), *Theater outside Athens. Drama in Greek Sicily and South Italy* (Cambridge, 2012), 226–50, at 229–30; id., 'The

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Scholarship on Greek drama has based its analysis of the staging of ancient tragedies upon the principle that significant stage directions are implicit in the words: thus, whatever significant action the poet wanted to highlight, this would have been sanctioned by words.[33] In *Oedipus Rex* the presence on stage of a royal sceptre is never explicitly mentioned by the text, and one should be inclined to rule out the use of such a stage property. However, in light of the prominence of the word σκῆπτρον throughout the drama, we would contend that it is possible that, while on stage, the actor impersonating Oedipus did carry a sceptre for the following reasons. First, such a prop would be appropriate to Oedipus' status, marking him clearly as the most prominent character. Second, and most importantly, the presence on stage of an actual prop would make the 'σκῆπτρον leitmotiv' much more powerful, fitting perfectly with the common treatment of stage materialities in Greek drama. As pointed out by scholars, props frequently serve a crucial cognitive function in drama: they bring key actions or elements out by shifting the audience's attention toward a clear image.[34] This cognitive and dramatic strategy was well known by Sophocles, who employed it in some of his extant tragedies. The urn supposedly containing Orestes' ashes in *Electra*,[35] Ajax's sword,[36] Deianeira's casket in *Trachiniae*[37] and Philoctetes' bow[38] are good examples of how Sophocles was able to direct his audience's attention through a significant object on stage (that is, an object that symbolizes some of the play's main themes and sets its plot in motion). Moreover, as each of these four cases shows, text and staging both contribute to the significance of the object. For a prop to be significant, it is neither sufficient that it be on stage nor that it be mentioned; rather, both aspects, the visual and the textual, must concur for its 'visualization' to work. Lastly, tragic props are not 'static, isolated entities', but help make 'connections across time, space, and thought'.[39] Their mere appearance condenses their entire history—as well as their backstory—facilitating the memory of what they stood for. This is, for instance, the case of Orestes' urn in Sophocles' *Electra*: by holding it in her arms, Electra recalls the

Siracusa tragedy-vase: Oedipus and his daughters?', *Engramma* 150 (2017) (online). Scholars usually think that this vase-painting depicts the agnition of *Oedipus Rex* (with the Corinthian messenger, Oedipus and Jocasta). In any case, the crater gives no evidence for Oedipus' costume in the original Sophoclean scene.

[33] Cf. already U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Aeschyli tragoediae* (Berlin, 1914), xxxiv and E. Fraenkel on *Agamemnon* 502, 503. The most influential restatement of this assumption can be found in O. Taplin's works (cf. e.g. *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus. The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy* [Oxford, 1977], 28–39).

[34] Cf. e.g. A. Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor, 2003); J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, 2010); C. Chaston, *Tragic Props and Cognitive Function. Aspects of the Functioning of Images in Thinking* (Leiden and Boston, 2010); Harrison and Liapis (n. 27); Mueller (n. 18).

[35] Cf. Chaston (n. 34), 131–77; Mueller (n. 18), 112–26; C. Barone, 'Stage props and the extrascenic dimension: the casket in *Trachiniae* and the urn in Sophocles' *Electra*', in ead., A. Coppola, M. Salvadori (edd.), *Gli oggetti sulla scena teatrale. Funzione, rappresentazione, comunicazione* (Padova, 2016), 35–44, at 41–3.

[36] Cf. J. Fletcher, 'Weapons of friendship: props in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and *Ajax*', in G.W.M. Harrison and V. Liapis (edd.), *Performance in Greek and Roman Theatre* (Leiden and Boston, 2013), 199–215; G.W. Most and L. Ozbek (edd.), *Staging Ajax's Suicide* (Pisa, 2015); Mueller (n. 18), 19–34.

[37] Cf. Barone (n. 35).

[38] Cf. Fletcher (n. 36); Mueller (n. 18), 38–40.

[39] Chaston (n. 34), 3; cf. M. Revermann, 'Generalizing about props: Greek drama, comparator traditions, and the analysis of stage objects', in G.W.M. Harrison and V. Liapis (edd.), *Performance in Greek and Roman Theatre* (Leiden and Boston, 2013), 77–88, at 80–2 and 85–6.

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protagonist's past (when she used to have baby Orestes in her arms), her present and even her future (her unborn children).[40]

Oedipus' sceptre may fit in this dramatic strategy. After seeing the king on stage with the most obvious token of his power, in some key points of the drama the audience are reminded of, and directed toward, the prop by the text: the spectators' interest in the object is triggered at strategic moments. Having drawn the audience's attention to the prop, Sophocles can play with both the object and its lexical ambiguity: the audience see a sceptre, but the text suggests that this object can become something completely different—a blind man's walking stick or a weapon. Moreover, the appearance of the object itself would clarify the temporal value of σκῆπτρον throughout the play serving as 'temporal materiality'.[41] The vision of the sceptre on stage would condense the three key moments of Oedipus' life summarized by the word σκῆπτρον: his past (the weapon used to kill Laius), his present (the king's sceptre) and his future (the blind man's walking stick). And this would be even more powerful if, after becoming blind, Oedipus came on stage again with the same σκῆπτρον as before, not using it as a sceptre anymore, but as a walking-stick: Tiresias' prophecy would have been completely fulfilled.[42]

Tragic irony pervades the whole Oedipus-saga through an absolute mastery of ambiguity. This irony does not limit itself to the general plot or some major phrases. Ambiguity can be found in single, and apparently meaningless, words, as well as in the clash between vision and text. Oedipus' fate seems to be foretold by a disturbing number of tiny details. σκῆπτρον is, then, a perfect example of such a dramatic strategy: it can be—or, better, *it is*—at the same time the symbol of triumph and the symbol of downfall.

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[40] Cf. Mueller (n. 18), 126. See also Barone (n. 35).
[41] Mueller (n. 18), 125–6.
[42] This hypothesis was first proposed by Segal (n. 30), 139: 'Presumably Oedipus at the end bears the *skêptron* which he carried as king at the beginning.' On the presence of a walking stick in the last scene of *OT*, cf. also Konstan (n. 27), 70.

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