8. METRE

φεῦ φεῦ, τί δῆτ' ἄν, ὦ γύναι, σκοποῖτό τις
τὴν πυθόμαντιν ἑστίαν, ἢ τοὺς ἄνω
κλάζοντας ὄρνις, ὧν ὑφ' ἡγητῶν ἐγὼ
κτανεῖν ἔμελλον πατέρα τὸν ἐμόν; ὁ δὲ θανὼν
κεύθει κάτω δὴ γῆς·

Pheu pheu, my wife, why should anyone look to the hearth of Pytho, or to the birds that screech above, under whose guidance I was going to kill my own father? But he has died and is hidden below the earth. (*Oedipus the King* 964–8)

Reacting to the death of his supposed father, Polybus, Oedipus' dismisses the power of Apollo's shrine in Delphi at the very point when that god is inexorably bringing him to his destruction. The immense relief which Oedipus feels on learning that after all he will not kill his father is strikingly marked by the metre. An iambic trimeter usually scans ×—⏑—×—⏑—×—⏑— (where — represents a long syllable, ⏑ a short, and × an anceps which can be long or short); but line 967 scans ⏑—⏑— —⏑⏑⏑⏑⏑⏑—, with three successive resolutions, or substitutions of a long syllable by a double short (⏑⏑). With the intervening short ancipites, this gives fully nine consecutive short syllables, something unparalleled among the few tragic instances of threefold resolution, and indicative of the impact of the news: Oedipus is giddy with relief. The vivid metrical effect coincides with the phrase 'my father' and the reference to his death: this is what has triggered the outburst of joy from this previously frantic man.

Greek metre is a subject that even specialists in Greek tragedy usually tend to shun. It is a hard subject; a student must get to grips not only with the intricacies of the spoken iambic trimeter, but also with the sometimes bewildering variety of lyric metres which the dramatists employed. It has a long history. Demetrius Triclinius in the fourteenth century rediscovered the principle of responsion (p. 18 above), inaugurating modern scholarship not just on metre but on tragedy in general; and in 1802 Richard Porson explained a key property of the iambic

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trimeter, which was named after him as a result.[1] Recent scholarship has put the subject on a new footing, producing a much better idea of what was and was not possible in individual metres, and of how broader metrical patterns can be identified and appreciated.[2] Perhaps the best synthesis is provided by Laetitia Parker in the introduction to her book *The Songs of Aristophanes* (1997), which is as relevant to tragedy as to comedy; sophisticated in its analysis, it is nevertheless readily accessible to a novice. No-one has attempted, however, a survey along the lines of Llewelyn Morgan's *Musa Pedestris* (2010), which asserts the important of metrical literacy for interpreters of classical Latin poetry.

Later in *Oedipus the King* a still longer run of short syllables from Oedipus marks a quite different emotion from the joy portrayed above. As Oedipus begins to sing after his entrance, he breaks into dochmiacs – a metre associated with high emotion, usually negative – to express the depth of his grief:[3]

Οι. ἰὼ σκότου	1313 [str. 1
νέφος ἐμὸν ἀπότροπον ἐπιπλόμενον ἄφατον	1313/14
ἀδάματόν τε καὶ δυσούριστον <ὄν>.	1315/16
...	
ἰὼ φίλος,	[ant. 1
σὺ μὲν ἐμὸς ἐπίπολος ἔτι μόνιμος· ἔτι γὰρ	1321/2
ὑπομένεις με τὸν τυφλὸν κηδεύων.	1323/4

Iô my cloud of darkness, abhorred, menacing in its onset, unspeakable, unconquerable, and sped by an evil wind!

...

Iô, my friend, you still stay as my attendant; for you remain for me, caring for me, the blind man. (*Oedipus the King* 1313–1323/4)

These two passages, from the beginning of responding stanzas, have the following metre:

[1] Namely, that tragic trimeters do not end in the metrical form — — | —⏑—, where | marks a word break; the phenomenon is known as 'Porson's Law' or 'Porson's Bridge'.

[2] L. Parker 1958, 1966, 1968, 1976, 1997; Stinton 1965 = 1990: 11–16, 1975 = 1990: 113–42, 1977 = 1990: 310–61; Schein 1979; Diggle 1981, 1984: 66–71 = 1994: 313–19, 1994; Itsumi 1982, 1984, 1991–3; M. L. West 1982; Willink 2001 = 2010: 347–81, 2002 = 2010: 382–423, 2003 = 2010: 424–71.

[3] For actors' song see Nooter 2012.

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(1) 1313	1321	⏑—⏑—	one iambic metron
(2) 1313/14	1321/2	⏑⏑⏑⏑⏑⏑⏑⏑⏑⏑⏑⏑	two dochmiacs
(3) 1315/16	1323/4	⏑⏑—⏑—⏑— — ⏓ —‖	two dochmiacs

In (2) there are two successive dochmiacs, a metrical unit of the form ×——×— typically instantiated as ⏑——⏑— ('the wise kangaroos'), which here take the unusual form of a string of short syllables: of only ten instances in extant Sophocles, four occur here. Not only does this unique combination reflect Oedipus' distraught mental state, it may echo the earlier, equally unparalleled run of short syllables which had reflected his joy. In each case, we have no idea how performance contributed to the effect: did the music speed up or otherwise mark the unusual rhythm? Yet the contribution of metre to meaning is nevertheless clear.

Identifying the significance of a particular metrical form other than dochmiacs is difficult, usually impossible; and runs of short (or long) syllables are rarely as striking as the instances just mentioned. But that does not prevent us from observing Sophocles' metrical creativity, and the interaction of that creativity with the sense of a passage. For example, the first stasimon of *Electra*:

Χο. εἰ μὴ 'γὼ παράφρων μάντις ἔφυν	472/3 [str.
καὶ γνώμας λειπομένα σοφᾶς,	473/4
εἶσιν ἁ πρόμαντις	475
Δίκα, δίκαια φερομένα χεροῖν κράτη·	476/7
μέτεισιν, ὦ τέκνον, οὐ μακροῦ χρόνου.	477/8
ὕπεστί μοι θάρσος	479
ἀδυπνόων κλύουσαν	480
ἀρτίως ὀνειράτων.	
οὐ γάρ ποτ' ἀμναστεῖ γ' ὁ φύ–	
σας σ' Ἑλλάνων ἄναξ,	482/3
οὐδ' ἁ παλαιὰ χαλκόπλη–	484
κτος ἀμφήκης γένυς,	484/5
ἅ νιν κατέπεφνεν αἰσχίσταις ἐν ᾠκείαις.	486/7
ἥξει καὶ πολύπους καὶ πολύχειρ	488/9 [ant.
ἁ δεινοῖς κρυπτομένα λόχοις	489/90
χαλκόπους Ἐρινύς.	491
ἄλεκτρ' ἄνυμφα γὰρ ἐπέβα μιαιφόνων	492/3
γάμων ἀμιλλήμαθ' οἷσιν οὐ θέμις.	493/4
πρὸ τῶνδέ τοι θάρσος	495
μήποτε μήποθ' ἡμῖν	
ἀψεγὲς πελᾶν τέρας	
τοῖς δρῶσι καὶ συνδρῶσιν. ἤ–	

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τοι μαντεῖαι βροτῶν 498/9
οὐκ εἰσὶν ἐν δεινοῖς ὀνεί– 500
ροις οὐδ' ἐν θεσφάτοις, 500/1
εἰ μὴ τόδε φάσμα νυκτὸς εὖ κατασχήσει. 502/3

ὦ Πέλοπος ἀ πρόσθεν [ep.
πολύπονος ἱππεία, 505
ὡς ἔμολες αἰανὴς
τᾷδε γᾷ.
εὖτε γὰρ ὁ ποντισθεὶς
Μυρτίλος ἐκοιμάθη,
παγχρύσων δίφρων 510
δυστάνοις ἀκείαις
πρόρριζος ἐκριφθείς,
οὔ τί πω
ἔλιπεν ἐκ τοῦδ' οἴκου
πολύπονος ἀκεία. 515

Strophic pair

472/3	488/9	— — —◡◡— —◡◡—	*asclep*
473/4	489/90	— — — —◡◡—◡—	*mol dodr*
475	491	—◡—◡—▽‖	ˆ*ia ia*ˆ
476/7	492/3	◡—◡—◡◡◡—◡—◡—	*3ia*
477/8	493/4	◡—◡— —◡—◡—◡—‖	*ia* ˆ*ia ia*
479	495	◡—◡— —⏑‖	*ia* ˆ*ia*ˆ
480	496	—◡◡—◡—⏑‖	*cho ia*ˆ
481	497	—◡—◡—◡—	ˆ*ia ia*
482	498	— —◡— — —◡—	*2ia*
482/3	498/9	— — — —◡—	*mol* ˆ*ia*
484	500	— —◡— — —◡—	*2ia*
484/5	500/1	⏑ — — —◡⏑‖	*ia*ˆ ˆ*ia*
486/7	501/2	— —◡◡—◡—▽—◡— — —|||	*tel ia* ˆ*ia*ˆ

Epode

504	—◡◡— — —	*ia* ˆ*ia*ˆ
505	◡◡◡— — —‖	*ia* ˆ*ia*ˆ
506	—◡◡— — —	*ia* ˆ*ia*ˆ
507	—◡—‖	ˆ*ia*
508	—◡◡— — —	*ia* ˆ*ia*ˆ
509	—◡◡— — —	*ia* ˆ*ia*ˆ
510	— — —◡—	ˆ*ia*ˆ ˆ*ia*
511	— — — — — —	*2mol*
512	— —◡— — —	*ia* ˆ*ia*ˆ
513	—◡—‖	ˆ*ia*
514	◡◡— — — —	ˆ*ia mol*
515	◡◡◡— — —|||	*ia* ˆ*ia*ˆ

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If I am no senseless prophet and left behind in wise judgement, prophetic Justice will come, bearing just power in her hands. She will come, child, in no long time. I have confidence as I just heard the sweet-breathing dreams. For the lord of the Greeks, who begot you, will never forget, nor will the ancient two-headed axe of beaten bronze, which slaughtered him amid the most shameful outrage.

With many feet and many hands, she who hides in grim ambushes will come, the bronze-footed Erinys. For the race for a polluting union, that brought a bed that was no bed, a marriage that was no marriage, came upon those whom it should not. Thanks to this reason I have confidence that, in our view, never, never will the portent approach the perpetrators and their accomplices without harming them. There are no prophecies that pertain to mortals, in grim dreams or in oracles, if this vision, seen in the night, will not have a favourable coming to land.

O Pelops' woeful horsemanship from the past, how terrible you were when you arrived at this land! For ever since Myrtilus was thrown in the sea and went to sleep, cast out by the roots from the golden chariot in wretched outrage, never has woeful outrage departed from this house. (*Electra* 472/3–515)

The metrical form shifts at the epode, with its notably shorter lines dominated by syncopated iambic metra. Instead of the usual ×—⏑— (*ia*), we have —⏑— (⏜*ia*), and the doubly syncopated — — (⏜*ia*⏜), together with a related length, the molossus, — — — (*mol*). Full iambic metron followed by double syncopated metron occurs seven times; in six, the first long of the iambic metron is resolved into two shorts, resulting in metra dominated to begin with by shorts, followed by longs at the close. As a result, we see a move from great metrical variety in the strophe/antistrophe, where in addition to the above lengths we find asclepiad (— — —⏑⏑— —⏑⏑—), dodrans (—⏑⏑—⏑—), choriamb (—⏑⏑—), telesillean (×—⏑⏑—⏑—×), and a different type of syncopated iambic (—⏑—), to an almost obsessive concentration on one type of one sort of metre in the epode: a change accompanied by an equally striking change of subject and tone. The chorus begin by happily anticipating the outcome of Clytemnestra's dream; it marks, they are sure, the imminent punishment of Agamemnon's killers, and thus the assuaging of Electra's grief. Yet after the confident claim at the end of the antistrophe that prophecy as a whole must fail if this dream does not have a successful outcome, they suddenly turn to a darker topic – the killing by Pelops, the Atreids' ancestor, of his charioteer Myrtilus, since when woe has continually afflicted his house. Changes of metre and of mood coincide; metre, and thus music, must have reinforced the turn to sombre tones. The direction of the shift, from variety to monotony, from a mixture of long and short units to a succession of often extremely short cola, may itself be significant, the latter suiting

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the gloomy subject matter more than would the initial expansive rhythms. The change is so noticeable that scholars have suggested that Clytemnestra enters from the *skênê* building as the epode begins, diverting the chorus from their joy; if so, staging, semantics, and metre would strikingly align.

As we have seen, Sophocles' handling of the iambic trimeter, too, is full of subtle effects. Staying with *Electra*, Electra's speech over the urn uses plain iambic trimeters, with the barest of gestures towards lyric (1126–70). Nevertheless, its emotional effect is no less powerful than the songs given to Euripides' characters at moments of particular stress:

οἴχεται πατήρ·
τέθνηκ' ἐγὼ σοί· φροῦδος αὐτὸς εἶ θανών·
γελῶσι δ' ἐχθροί·

Father has perished. I have been killed by you. You yourself are dead and gone. And our enemies are laughing. (*Electra* 1151–3)

Scansion reveals nothing exciting here; significance lies in the pausing, with four stops across fewer than two full trimeters, the first three phrases delivered in staccato asyndeton; for Denniston, the 'connexion...varied with asyndeton' forms 'an astonishingly fine effect', as Electra expresses how totally her hopes have been disappeared, one bitter catastrophe after the next.[4] She has employed a similar means of expression before. After Chrysothemis' speech announcing the return of Orestes, she counters her sister's case with a series of briefly devastating phrases:

τέθνηκεν, ὦ τάλαινα· τἀκ κείνου δέ σοι
σωτήρι' ἔρρει· μηδὲν ἐς κεῖνόν γ' ὅρα. 925

He is dead, wretched woman. The salvation that was coming from him, I tell you, has perished. Don't look for help from him. (*Electra* 924–5)

By fitting three brief utterances of roughly equal length into two lines, Sophocles ensures that the conclusions of the first two do not coincide with line-end, lending the sense momentum. Again, asyndeton

[4] Denniston 1954: 164.

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produces further force, as Electra refutes her sister's (entirely legitimate) inferences with a succession of devastatingly short phrases.

The technique is employed again in *Trachiniae*, when Deianira notices a particular girl among the women brought by Heracles' messenger Lichas to her residence. In response to Deianira's questioning (culminating in ἔξειπ', 'tell the full story'), Lichas replies merely

> τί δ' οἶδ' ἐγώ; τί δ' ἄν με καὶ κρίνοις; ἴσως
> γέννημα τῶν ἐκεῖθεν οὐκ ἐν ὑστάτοις.

But what do I know? Why would you even question me? Perhaps she is the offspring of people who were not among the lowest in that city. (*Trachiniae* 314–15)

Previously fluent, he becomes curt and evasive. The replacement of his loquaciousness by brief utterances, which punctuate the first trimeter with two strong pauses even before the end of the line, rhythmically indicts him for mendacity; someone telling the truth would have no need to stumble. A further example occurs in *Philoctetes*, when, in answer to Philoctetes' lengthy, amicable inquiry (and after Philoctetes restates his question, indicating that his interlocutor at first makes no response), Neoptolemus replies ἀλλ', ὦ ξέν', ἴσθι τοῦτο πρῶτον, οὕνεκα | Ἕλληνές ἐσμεν· τοῦτο γὰρ βούλῃ μαθεῖν ('Well, stranger, know this first, that we are Greeks. For this is what you want to know', 232–3). The repeated pausing in the roundabout phrasing reinforces the idea, already present in his initial silence, that Neoptolemus speaks reluctantly because of the lies that he will soon have to tell.

This technique contributes to the false messenger speech from *Electra* (pp. 54–5 above), describing the moment when Orestes' chariot makes its fatal contact:

> ἔπειτα τανύων ἡνίαν ἀριστερὰν
> κάμπτοντος ἵππου λανθάνει στήλην ἄκραν
> παίσας· ἔθραυσε δ' ἄξονος μέσας χνόας, 745
> κἀξ ἀντύγων ὤλισθε· σὺν δ' ἐλίσσεται
> τμητοῖς ἱμᾶσι· τοῦ δὲ πίπτοντος πέδοι
> πῶλοι διεσπάρησαν ἐς μέσον δρόμον.

Then, as he loosened the left-hand rein as the horse made its turn, he unexpectedly struck the edge of the turning-post. He broke the central wheel of the axle, and was pitched out of the chariot. He was entangled in the cut reins. As he fell to the ground the foals scattered into the middle of the race-course. (*Electra* 743–8)

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The long sense unit in 743–5 joltingly concludes after the key word παίσας ('striking'), emphasized by enjambment combined with strong pause, mimetically suggesting the sudden forcible halting of a previously careering vehicle. The succeeding strong mid-line pauses, with only a weak pause at the end of 745, convey the chaotic jolting motion of the chariot; the unexpected motion of driver and conveyance is mirrored by the unusual phrasing. The death of Orestes repeatedly leads Sophocles to display his virtuosity in his handling of the iambic trimeter.

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