5. MYTH

μακάριόν ἐστιν ἡ τραγῳδία
ποίημα κατὰ πάντ', εἴ γε πρῶτον οἱ λόγοι
ὑπὸ τῶν θεατῶν εἰσιν ἐγνωρισμένοι,
δεῖ τὸν ποητήν. Οἰδίπουν γὰρ †φῶ†
τὰ δ' ἄλλα πάντ' ἴσασιν· ὁ πατὴρ Λάιος,
μήτηρ Ἰοκάστη, θυγατέρες, παῖδες τίνες,
τί πείσεθ' οὗτος, τί πεπόηκεν. ἂν πάλιν
εἴπῃ τις Ἀλκμέωνα, καὶ τὰ παιδία
πάντ' εὐθὺς εἴρηχ', ὅτι μανεὶς ἀπέκτονε
τὴν μητέρ', ἀγανακτῶν δ' Ἄδραστος εὐθέως
ἥξει πάλιν τ' ἄπεισι <...>
<ἔπει>θ' ὅταν μηθὲν δύνωντ' εἰπεῖν ἔτι,
κομιδῇ δ' ἀπειρήκωσιν ἐν τοῖς δράμασιν,
αἴρουσιν ὥσπερ δάκτυλον τὴν μηχανήν,
καὶ τοῖς θεωμένοισιν ἀποχρώντως ἔχει.
ἡμῖν δὲ ταῦτ' οὐκ ἔστιν, ἀλλὰ πάντα δεῖ
εὑρεῖν, ὀνόματα καινά, <...>
<...> κἄπειτα τὰ †διῳκημένα
πρότερον, τὰ νῦν παρόντα, τὴν καταστροφήν,
τὴν εἰσβολήν. ἂν ἕν τι τούτων παραλίπῃ
Χρέμης τις ἢ Φείδων τις, ἐκσυρίττεται·
Πηλεῖ δὲ ταῦτ' ἔξεστι καὶ Τεύκρῳ ποεῖν.

Tragedy's a thoroughly enviable type of poetry! The plots, first of all, are familiar to the audience before anyone speaks a word; so all the poet has to do is offer a reminder. Because †says† 'Oedipus', they know everything else: his father's Laius; his mother's Jocasta; who his daughters and his sons are; what's going to happen to him; what he's done. Again, if someone mentions Alcmaeon, he's as good as named all his children, plus the fact that he went crazy and killed his mother, and that Adrastus is going to get annoyed and come straight home and go off again...Then, when they've run out of anything to say and have totally collapsed from exhaustion in their plays, they raise the theatrical crane like a white flag – and the audience is satisfied! We don't have these advantages, so we have to invent everything: new names,...; and then what †happened† previously, the current situation, the conclusion, and the introduction. If some Chremes or Pheidon omits even one of these points, he's hissed off the stage; but they let Peleus and Teucer get away with this.

(Antiphanes, *Poetry* fr. 189 *PCG*)[1]

[1] Text and translation from Olson 2006–12; see further Olson 2007: 172–5.

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The character delivering this speech was not attempting a dispassionate assessment of the relative merits of two genres; rather, as often, a comic poet was asserting his rivalry with practitioners of an art form at once closely related and quite distinct.[2] Nevertheless, the sentiments voiced here probably occur to anyone aware of how serious Greek literature generally confined itself to well-known myths. Can a literature based on such restricted subject matter really deserve its place among the world's classics? More specifically, to what extent can Sophocles be reckoned an original artist, when so many of his plays are based on myths already treated by an earlier tragic virtuoso, namely Aeschylus?

Antiphanes' character presents the myth of Oedipus as the ultimate in predictability; in fact it was one of the most contested myths of all. To take just one example, Euripides' *Oedipus* (first performed between 419 and 406) seems to have included a speech describing Oedipus' blinding at the hands of his father Laius' servants, who, when they mutilate him, and when the speech is delivered, still believe that he is the son of Polybus, his adoptive father and king of Corinth.[3] This implies a story quite different from the one presented in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, where Oedipus' blinding is perpetrated by Oedipus himself, some time after the discovery that Polybus was not his father, and where a slave formerly belonging to Oedipus' real father, Laius – the slave who exposed Oedipus as a baby, and was the only surviving witness of the fracas in which Laius met his end – desperately avoids saying anything that could damage the new king. (Euripides' vengeful slaves might even be a deliberate contrast to the loyal Sophoclean servant.) The eventual canonization of Sophocles' play as *the* drama about Oedipus has detracted from what must have been the startling originality of its mythological treatment;[4] appreciating its novelty requires us to unthink its later remarkable success.

One key original aspect of Sophocles' play is the absence of any fault on Laius' part. Aeschylus' Laius defies the gods' command that, to save his city, he should not have children (*Seven Against Thebes* 739–57); the trilogy traces the results of that offence, for Laius himself, for his son and grandsons, and for the city. Laius' offence is also clear in the story of Chrysippus (Pelops' son, whom Laius rapes), portrayed in Euripides' play of that name. Sophocles' play, by contrast, dispenses

[2] For the relationship between fifth-century tragedy and comedy see Taplin 1986.
[3] Fr. 541 *TrGF* with Finglass 2017b: 9–13.
[4] For that originality see Finglass 2018e: 13–40.

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with inherited guilt. The idea that one generation's offences result in the punishment of the next was a fundamental way of making sense of the world during antiquity; tragedy drew on it to explain the sufferings which its characters undergo. So Sophocles' *Antigone* refers to how the ills currently afflicting the house stem from offences committed by Oedipus, and meditates on how sin passes down through the generations. Antigone's death is thereby overdetermined: it results from choices which she takes, but is also the consequence of her evil inheritance, caused by offences committed by ancestors for which she is still paying the penalty.[5] *Oedipus the King*, by contrast, omits this causal/explanatory mechanism entirely, without replacing it with anything else; there is no suggestion, for example, that Oedipus is being punished for offences of his own.

With no explanation for why Oedipus suffers, that suffering is all the more terrifying: so total, and yet so devoid of justification. The play becomes an appalling commentary on the nature of the universe and humanity's place within it, as Oedipus, whose glory once surpassed that of all men, becomes a paradigm (the chorus use that word of him, 1193) for the nothingness of humanity as a whole. The unique genius, the unique sufferer, becomes Everyman.[6]

The fallen Oedipus begs for exile: the designated punishment for Laius' killer, the fate prophesied for Oedipus by Tiresias, the apparently appropriate outcome given Oedipus' extraordinarily polluted state.[7] The idea of exile is likely to be a Sophoclean innovation, one emphasizing the gravity of Oedipus' offences, as well as giving the unique journey of his life, every leg of which is described (Thebes to Cithaeron, to Corinth, to Delphi, to Thebes), one final, fatal stage, sending Oedipus to die on the mountain which his parents had long ago appointed as his tomb (1451–4). But the denial of that exile will then also be an innovation. Creon's unwillingness to allow Oedipus to depart comes as a surprise; properly considered, however, it provides an entirely appropriate conclusion (pp. 104–5, below).

The opening of the drama, too, is probably original: the application to the myth of a typical tragic pattern, the mass supplication scene

[5] *Antigone* 2–3, 582/3–603, 856–68.

[6] For justice and theodicy in *Oedipus the King* see Kovacs 2009b, 2019; Cairns 2013a; Finglass 2018e: 70–7.

[7] *Oedipus the King* 100–1, 236–43, 455–6, 823–5, 1290–1, 1340/1–1346, 1410–11, 1436–7, 1518.

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which opens plays such as Euripides' *Children of Heracles* and *Suppliant Women*. The people's supplication caused by the plague which is racking the city allows Oedipus to appear in all his magnificence, the figure to whom every eye turns at the moment of crisis, thus permitting the maximum contrast with his later fallen state. But it also introduces the theme of compassion, the emotion which Oedipus here displays in abundance – in contrast to figures supplicated in the prologues to other such tragedies.[8] Compassion drives Oedipus to search for the cause of the plague, a search which will lead to his own destruction; it will also culminate in the discovery that Oedipus himself survived thanks only to the drastically misplaced pity of Laius' slave, the Herdsman, who did not expose him as ordered but gave him to the Corinthian shepherd, paving the way for the catastrophe to come. The paradoxical consequences of pity give the drama a unity of theme, reinforcing its pessimistic view of the human condition. The most devastating punishments strike the virtuous for no apparent reason; natural, human feelings of sympathy for people thus destroyed have destructive consequences of their own; and it is Sophocles' unique handling of the myth that makes it so.

Even when Sophocles retains inherited elements of the story, his communication of the detail in question can be striking. For example, the audience does not learn that Oedipus has fathered children on Laius' widow until lines 258–63. This crucial aspect of the myth is at least as old as Aeschylus, but its revelation, while Oedipus proclaims the solemn duty of the killer to come forward and of the people to excommunicate him if he does not, undermines the audience's view of Oedipus even at the moment of his maximum authority and power.[9] Oedipus cites the detail while emphasizing his connection to, even fellow-feeling for, the deceased monarch, saying that if Laius had had children, then their fathering of children on Jocasta would be something that they had in common; that link is closer that Oedipus realizes, since both men did in fact do that, and Oedipus is the son whom Laius thus fathered. The close association with Laius which Oedipus here asserts rhetorically turns out to be fatally grounded in fact.

So anyone attempting (on the advice of Antiphanes' character) to predict the plot of Sophocles' drama from its title (simply *Oedipus* at

[8] Finglass 2017e, 2018e: 41–51, 2018g.
[9] On this speech see Finglass 2018f.

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its first performance, later called 'the King' to distinguish it from Sophocles' later *Oedipus* play) will have had a hard time of it; from the start Sophocles moulds content and presentation to secure his own dramatic ends. *Philoctetes*, too, has barely begun when its original mythological prospectus becomes apparent, as Odysseus tells Neoptolemus,

> ἀκτὴ μὲν ἥδε τῆς περιῤῥύτου χθονὸς
> Λήμνου, βροτοῖς ἄστιπτος οὐδ' οἰκουμένη

This is the shore of the sea-girt land of Lemnos, untrodden and uninhabited by mortals (*Philoctetes* 1–2).

In the *Iliad* the 'Sintian men' are said to have lived on the island (1.592–4), a tradition followed by Aeschylus and Euripides in their *Philoctetes* plays. The island was well known to the Athenians of Sophocles' day as a vital staging-post on the Black Sea grain trade route that was key to the survival of Attica; Athenians had held land there since at least the early fifth century. The news that the island was uninhabited, then, would have come as a surprise.

The change allows the play to explore the idea of a man transformed by long years of solitude. Philoctetes' speeches are all the more powerful because the audience knows that, for a decade, he has lived virtually without any human contact, meeting only the occasional traveller who, despite kind words, never consents to bring him home. Philoctetes' trust in Neoptolemus, too, is all the more poignant because of his previously desperate, lonely state, and the deceit practised on him feels all the more terrible because this isolated man is trusting a deceiver. Even when Neoptolemus has given Philoctetes his bow back and offers to have him healed, Philoctetes nevertheless prefers to be taken home, in agony, prompting Neoptolemus to tell him that he has become a wild man, deaf to good advice.[10] Giving Philoctetes fellow-dwellers on Lemnos would have fatally blunted these effects; this mythological innovation stands at the heart of Sophocles' achievement.

Aiming for an effect different from that produced by Aeschylus seems to have been important in Sophocles' approach to tragedy: thus *Oedipus the King* and *Philoctetes*, but also *Niobe* and other plays where Sophocles brings on stage elements of a myth which Aeschylus

[10] *Philoctetes* 1321–3. For the wildness of Philoctetes see Davies 2003; Finglass 2006.

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had reported at third hand (p. 35 above). The younger man wanted to do things differently from the poet of the previous generation; yet transformation rather than simple rejection of Aeschylean motifs suggests not just rivalry, but a fundamental respect for the old master against whom Sophocles competed so many times.

Identifying a relationship with Aeschylus is tricky for many plays because of the loss of the relevant comparative material; yet sometimes just enough survives to give us a glimpse. In *Ajax*,[11] apart from the transformation of the myth caused by putting the suicide almost on stage (p. 35 above), one fundamental change involves the absence of any full narration of the Judgment of the Arms. Aeschylus dedicated one drama to that event – *The Judgment of the Arms*, very likely the first, ahead of *Thracian Women* and *Salaminian Women*, in a trilogy centred on Ajax and his half-brother, Teucer. In Sophocles' play, by contrast, the Judgment looms in the past; Ajax hotly disputes its outcome, unconvincingly claiming fraudulent activity. The change permits a different story arc. Aeschylus' Ajax began his trilogy hopeful, probably confident, that the upcoming contest would recognize his greatness; his disappointment and death contrast with that earlier state of mind. Sophocles daringly opens with Ajax already defeated, bent on revenge for the insult which he believes has been done to him; the only changes in his mental state that the audience observes are the shift from madness to sanity, and then the fake change in the Deception Speech. The overall effect will have been quite distinct from the more conventional emotional journey found in Aeschylus.

In the case of *Electra*, the survival of Aeschylus' version of the myth, in his *Libation Bearers*, permits fuller appreciation of Sophocles' originality.[12] He takes a minor element of Aeschylus' account – Agamemnon's daughter Electra, who plays no role beyond recognizing Orestes and invoking Agamemnon's spirit alongside him at his tomb – and turns her into the central figure, placing her recognition of her brother at the play's heart. She had featured in archaic lyric accounts, in Stesichorus and in his predecessor Xanthus, in whose *Oresteia* Electra's name is given the false etymology 'the unwedded one' because of her long years unmarried;[13] this indicates an interest in the consequences of Agamemnon's murder for his daughter. But any lyric precedent will

[11] Finglass 2011b: 26–41, 2011c.
[12] Finglass 2007b: 34–47 (on Pindar's version), 2007d: 4–8, 2018j (on Stesichorus' *Oresteia*).
[13] For Stesichorus see Davies and Finglass 2014: 489; Xanthus fr. 700 *PMG*.

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not have involved the same intense focus on the young woman that we see in Sophocles.

At the same time as expanding Electra's part, Sophocles suppresses one figure with a major role in Aeschylus' trilogy: Cassandra. Aeschylus' Agamemnon arrives home with this Trojan princess at his side, an insensitive move which, if not wholly justifying his death, nevertheless goes some way to explaining what drove Clytemnestra to such a course. By excluding any reference to Cassandra or to any other foreign dalliance, Sophocles makes his Agamemnon a more sympathetic figure; this accompanies a portrayal of Clytemnestra darker than anything found in Aeschylus, let alone the comparatively sympathetic Clytemnestra of Euripides' *Electra*.

A fuller account of Sophocles' transformation of myth would examine his engagement with Homer, the epic cycle, and other archaic poetry, as well as Aeschylus. His *Euryalus* provides one possible instance of creative interaction with a myth from the epic cycle.[14] In this play, Odysseus is persuaded by Penelope to kill Euryalus, who turns out to be his son from a liaison with Euippe, daughter of Tyrimmas of Epirus; Odysseus' own death seems to have been mentioned, probably through a prophecy. But whereas Odysseus' death at the hands of his son Telegonus is the key event of the *Telegony* (from the epic cycle), the Euryalus episode does not seem to have featured in that poem. If so, Sophocles has given his account of Odysseus' life post-*Odyssey* a moral shaping absent from the *Telegony*. Sophocles' Odysseus, it is clear from Parthenius, who summarizes the plot, bears some responsibility for Euryalus' death; ignorant though he is that Euryalus is his son, he is nevertheless criticized for his involvement. His subsequent death at Telegonus' hands, whether at the end of the play or described in a prophecy, feels more like a justified punishment than in the *Telegony*; this new ethical dimension ensures the originality of Sophocles' treatment.

In the lighter genre of satyr-play, too, we can observe Sophocles' transformation of myth. Whereas in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* Hermes on the first day of his life invents the lyre and then steals Apollo's cattle, in Sophocles' *Ichneutae* (*The Trackers*) the stealing comes first, followed by the invention, and both occur six days after Hermes' birth. These changes are essential to the impact of

[14] See Sommerstein 2015: 471–2 for the argument in this paragraph.

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Sophocles' play.[15] Putting the invention after the theft allows Hermes to use a cow's hide to fashion the instrument, making the baby's offence seem all the more outrageous to the satyrs (fr. 314.372–6 *TrGF*). It also enables Sophocles to dispense with the old man from Onchestus who, in the *Hymn*, gives the information about the cattle theft that enables the mystery to be solved. Sophocles has his satyrs track down the theft themselves thanks to the sight of the reversed hoofprints (leading out of the cave) combined with the sound of the lyre, allowing for a more dramatic discovery (including the comical extended reactions to the unfamiliar noise of the instrument) than if they were merely informed about the animals by a third party. That discovery is further facilitated by Sophocles' setting Hermes and the cattle together on Mount Cyllene in Arcadia, rather than, as in the *Hymn*, having Hermes set the cattle by the river Alpheus while Hermes conceals himself on the Arcadian mountain. In addition, making Hermes slightly older than a newborn allows Sophocles to eliminate his mother, Maia, from the play: the deceit practised by the nymph Cyllene, who takes her place as the baby's nurse, would not have suited that grander figure so well, and a nymph is a better target for satyrs' sexual proclivities (366–8 and perhaps later in the play). The reshaping of a myth to make a more effective narrative is clear throughout. Such reshaping in a satyr-play is also visible in *Oeneus* (fr. 1130), which depicts the satyrs pressing on Oeneus, father of Deianira, their claims as suitors for his daughter, before another figure (probably Heracles) comes on stage. Their comical, sexual language contrasts sharply with the high seriousness of the clash between Heracles and the river-god Achelous for Deinaira as portrayed in *Trachiniae*, demonstrating that Sophocles could further transform myths that he had already treated, and do so to effect quite different tones.[16]

A recent article has noted how 'Of all the classical poets, the Theban Pindar is perhaps the most well-known manipulator of myth; in fact it has become standard in modern approaches to the poet to emphasize his deliberate alteration of details from well-known stories.'[17] Pindar may indeed have that reputation, but it would be a mistake to infer that he truly is pre-eminent in this sphere, or that Sophocles, as an earlier scholar put it, 'regularly allowed himself to be led by the myth which

[15] Slenders 2012: 162–3, to whom much of this paragraph is indebted.
[16] Hahnemann 2012: 172.
[17] Larson 2017: 107.

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he had in hand and refused none of its implications. He "corrected" no stories, as did Pindar. He injected no special meanings, as did Euripides.'[18] Pindar explicitly points to the uniqueness of his retelling of the Tantalus myth in *Olympian One*, and Euripides' reputation for innovation was a standard feature of his reception since Aristophanes, especially in his *Frogs* of 405. Sophocles, by contrast, could be characterized by (for instance) Dio of Prusa (in his account of the *Philoctetes* plays of the three classical tragedians) as a middle-of-the-road poet, between the exciting extremes of Aeschylus and Euripides, but this schematic depiction has no basis in the evidence.[19] Sommerstein's designation 'Sophocles the sensationalist' perhaps pushes too hard in the other direction.[20] But his general claims – that Sophocles was an extraordinary mythological innovator, and that this innovation needs to be appreciated across not just the seven complete plays but his oeuvre as a whole – must be right.

[18] Whitman 1951: 122.

[19] Dio Chrysostom 52.15 (test. 123).

[20] Sommerstein 2012b. Cf. Wright 2012: 598–9: 'The oddly uncritical admiration of ancient readers has encouraged many modern scholars to understate or oversimplify the complexity of Sophocles' plays, or to base their opinions on an artificially schematic view of the genre, in which Sophocles somehow comes to represent an ideal or normative type of tragedy. This sort of criticism tends to make Sophocles seem too easy, even rather bland (while Euripides by contrast is made to seem unorthodox or aberrant).'

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