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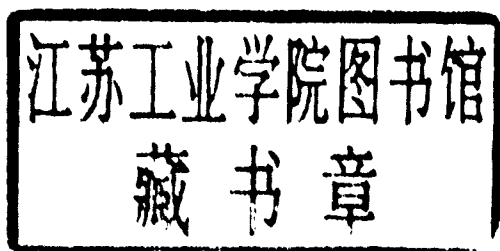# The Language of Sophocles

COMMUNALITY, COMMUNICATION AND INVOLVEMENT

THE LANGUAGE OF SOPHOCLES
Communality, Communication and Involvement

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INTRODUCTION

This is a study of Sophoclean language. As such it stands in a long tradition of scholarship, which begins already in antiquity. Most famously Plutarch reports[1] that Sophocles himself traced a development in his style (λέξις). From Aeschylean grandeur (ὄγκος) he passed on to a pungent and artificial style (τὸ πικρὸν καὶ κατάτεχνον τῆς αὐτοῦ κατασκευῆς) and finally to the best kind of writing, that which is most expressive of character (ἠθικώτατον). Plutarch is not alone: a substantial number of scattered remarks by various authors[2] suggest that the language of Sophocles has interested spectators and readers from the very beginning.

This ancient interest was taken up by modern scholarship. In particular the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth saw a great number of works on various aspects of Sophoclean language. Titles like *De assimilatione syntactica apud Sophoclem*, *De figurae quae vocatur etymologica usu Sophocleo* or *De Sophoclis quae vocantur abusionibus*[3] are representative of the aims and scope of many such treatises. Some of them are still widely used today. Lewis Campbell's 'Introductory essay on the language of Sophocles' at the beginning of his edition, Ewald Bruhn's *Anhang* to the edition by Friedrich Schneidewin and August Nauck, and Wilhelm Schmid's article on Sophocles in the *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*[4] contain highly valuable collections of

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[1] *De profectibus in virtute* 7.79b. The most recent discussion, with previous literature, is Pinnoy (1984).
[2] Collected by Radt under T II.
[3] Azelius (1897), Haberlandt (1897), Kugler (1905). For some further titles see Goheen (1951) 160-1. For a very early modern treatise on Sophoclean language see Stephanus (1568).
[4] Campbell (1871), Bruhn (1899), Schmid (1934) 485-99. Note also the index to Pearson's edition of the fragments.

material. All of them share an emphasis on syntactic, grammatical and linguistic features. What they are often less interested in is the context in which these features occur. They usually confine themselves to individual words and sentences, leaving discussion of the larger context to literary studies. This tradition continues today. The outstanding recent study is A. C. Moorhouse's *The syntax of Sophocles*,[5] which is the most thorough work on Sophoclean language of its kind. Its concerns, as Moorhouse says, are 'essentially syntactic and linguistic, not stylistic'.[6]

Between them, such studies have accumulated much valuable information about Sophoclean language, but in their stress on its formal aspects they fail (and often freely admit that they fail) to capture many of the things that Sophoclean words or sentences can do in their particular surroundings. Among the most successful attempts to go further are the books by Robert Goheen and A. A. Long. Long's subject in his 1968 monograph *Language and thought in Sophocles*[7] is abstract nouns, which he discusses in their context, thus distinguishing himself from the works I have mentioned so far. Although Long's book concentrates on abstract nouns, it throws much light on the passages in which the nouns occur as a whole, illustrating how certain choices of word have certain effects. As he puts it, 'one element of Sophocles' vocabulary is subjected to very close scrutiny, but this examination inevitably involves analysis of his language and thought in a wider sense'.[8]

Long regarded abstract nouns as just one of many 'aspects

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[5] Moorhouse (1982). See also Webster (1969) 143–62, Earp (1944), Stevens (1945), Nuchelmans (1949), Tsitsoni (1963), pp. 263–80 of Stanford's edition of *Ajax* and pp. 12–17 of Kells's edition of *Electra*, all of which despite obvious differences are comparable. Many useful observations can also be found in commentaries, most of all those of Jebb, and the works of textual critics, especially Dawe (1973), Dawe (1978) and Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1990). For more detailed reviews of work on Sophoclean language until the 1950s and 60s see Goheen (1951) 101–3 and Long (1968) 4–6.

[6] Moorhouse (1982) preface (no page number).

[7] Long (1968). For a further, less successful, study of certain words in their contexts see Coray (1993).

[8] Long (1968) ix.

of Sophocles' language and thought' which can be studied in this way.[9] Thirty years later his choice of single words, rather than clauses or sentences, can be seen as part of a larger pattern. Long, it turns out, is not alone in his choice. As early as 1951 Robert Goheen published a book entitled *The imagery of Sophocles' Antigone*,[10] in which he traces certain images and tropes throughout the play. Much of his study is concerned with suggesting a web of associations between related or repeated words.

Although Goheen is less interested than Long in the precise effects of an individual passage and concentrates instead on the significance certain images have in the play as a whole, he shares with Long lengthy discussion of individual words and their place in the play. This emphasis is central not just to Long and Goheen but to much twentieth-century criticism on tragedy and otherwise. The work of scholars influenced by Cambridge English and by New Criticism such as R. P. Winnington-Ingram, Gordon Kirkwood and Bernard Knox gains much of its force from close attention to language and in particular to recurrent words. Winnington-Ingram, in his study of Euripides' *Bacchae* (1948), was one of the first classicists who rigorously traced various verbal themes throughout a play, and his later work on Sophocles is characterised by similar methodology.[11] Gordon Kirkwood devotes a large part of the chapter on language in *A study of Sophoclean drama* to verbal 'themes'.[12] Finally, Bernard Knox has been greatly influential with his books about *Oedipus Rex* and about the 'Sophoclean hero', both of them works which study thematic words in great detail.[13]

Winnington-Ingram, Knox and Kirkwood, in turn, share their interest in thematic words with many later Sophoclean critics. One of the most prominent recent works that make recurring words one of their chief concerns is Charles Segal's

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[9] Long (1968) 168.

[10] Goheen (1951).

[11] Winnington-Ingram (1948) index *s.v.* '*Bacchae*, words and themes'; Winnington-Ingram (1980), which is on Sophocles, dates back a long way.

[12] Kirkwood (1994a) 215–46.

[13] Knox (1957), e.g. 147–58 on *isos* ('equal'); Knox (1964), especially 1–61.

Tragedy and civilization (1981).[14] This wide-ranging discussion of Sophoclean drama shows that verbal themes can also be studied to great effect from a more structuralist perspective. More than once, concentration on thematic words has proved a point of contact between critics of rather different critical persuasions.

The study of verbal themes still continues. What has changed is the approach. Literary theory and criticism in the last twenty or thirty years have increasingly come to stress the spectator's and reader's roles in the construction of meaning. As it is widely emphasised that all writing may mean different things to different people, the study of tragic language has also taken a new direction. Thematic words are now often looked at for their ambiguity. Again Winnington-Ingram is an early example. All his writing on Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides investigates the ambiguity of tragedy and tragic language. Yet the scholar who has been most influential in making ambiguity a buzzword of recent criticism on Greek tragedy is probably Jean-Pierre Vernant, who in a 1969 article with the title 'Tensions and ambiguities in Greek tragedy' pointed to the different ways in which different characters use terms such as *dikē* ('justice', 'right') and *kratos* ('authority', 'force'). Vernant concludes that 'it is only for the spectator that the language of the text can be transparent at every level in all its polyvalence and with all its ambiguities. Between the author and the spectator the language thus recuperates the full function of communication that it has lost on the stage between the protagonists in the drama.'[15] With a less strong emphasis on the certainty of the spectators, Vernant's suggestions have become highly influential. Simon Goldhill has the backing of numerous scholars when he concludes his chapter on 'The language of tragedy: rhetoric and communication' in the recent *Cambridge companion to Greek tragedy* by saying that 'tragedy puts language itself *es meson*, on display and at risk in the glare of democratic scrutiny'.[16]

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[14] Segal (1981).   [15] Vernant (1988b) 43.
[16] Goldhill (1997a) 149–50, who cites further literature.

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The word 'democratic' in Goldhill's sentence points to a second and related recent critical development. As Edith Hall puts it, 'the greatest innovation in the study of Greek tragedy over the last thirty years has been the excavation of its historical and topographical specificity'. Universalist approaches, like those of Aristotle and many nineteenth-century scholars, are now avoided. 'A scholarly project of the last three decades has been to undermine such universalising readings and to locate the plays within the historical conditions of their production.'[17] A brief glance at the titles of influential collections published in the last fifteen years is enough to show what Hall means: *Greek tragedy and political theory*; *Nothing to do with Dionysos?: Athenian drama in its social context*; *Tragedy, comedy and the polis*; *Theater and society in the classical world*; *History, tragedy, theory: dialogues on Athenian drama*; *Tragedy and the historian*.[18]

Along with much else, the language of tragedy has been put into its historical context. Rather than trying to determine what is special about Sophocles, scholars have come to look for the connotations that Sophocles', as well as Aeschylus' and Euripides', language may have had for fifth-century spectators. In the article from which I have just quoted, Goldhill stresses that 'the language of tragedy is public, democratic, male talk ...: that is, the language of tragedy is in all senses of the term *political*'.[19] Long, too, had a historical interest and traced the rise of abstract nouns during the fifth century. But for him this historical development was the background against which he investigated 'certain highly individual

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[17] Hall (1997) 94. A scholar who is more interested than most not only in what is culturally specific but also in what is universal in Greek tragedy is Oliver Taplin. See, for instance, Taplin (1978) 5–8, with the criticism in Wiles (1997) 5–14, and Taplin (forthcoming). Note also discussions of Greek tragedy from the viewpoint of the modern philosopher: Nussbaum (1986) and, especially, Williams (1993).

[18] Euben (1986), Winkler and Zeitlin (1990), Sommerstein *et al.* (1993), Scodel (1993), Goff (1995), Pelling (ed.) (1997). More varied approaches in Silk (1996) and Easterling (ed.) (1997); perhaps the fact that they are among the most recent collections suggests a change in scholarly preoccupations?

[19] Goldhill (1997a) 128, his italics. See Knox (1957) for an early sustained study of Sophoclean drama and language in its historical context.

ways'[20] in which Sophocles used these nouns. Goldhill and other recent scholars, by contrast, place their emphasis on the historical frame. They are interested in the 'political' meaning that is shared by *all* tragedy.

No outline in five or six pages can convey the full breadth of work that has been carried out on the language of Sophocles in the last two centuries. At the risk of making a somewhat simplifying generalisation and of doing injustice to the specific interests of individual scholars, I none the less draw attention to a development that can be traced in this selective history of Sophoclean scholarship. It concerns the different places at which different scholars have been prepared to accept limits to their investigations. While formalist studies tend to give a panoramic view of all kinds of linguistic details, they often fail to take the context into account. Long, by contrast, who makes a point of contextualising the passages he discusses, confines himself to abstract words. Similarly, Winnington-Ingram, Knox, Segal and others have much to say about certain words in certain contexts, but have abandoned many of the more grammatical and linguistic interests of earlier scholars. Critics like Vernant and Goldhill distance themselves still further from formalism in two ways. Firstly, their analysis of tragic language is often dominated by their concern with ambiguity. Sentence structure, thematic words and other such areas of long-standing interest are now frequently studied in the first place for the polyvalent meaning that they yield. Ambiguity was already at the heart of Winnington-Ingram's work, but only Vernant and later scholars repeatedly make it their declared object of investigation. Secondly, by stressing the context that is provided by history and society in addition to that provided by the play, they focus not only on thematic words but, more particularly, on words that yield especially well to historical investigation. For these scholars Sophoclean language is no longer itself an object of study, but is subordinated to tragic language, which in turn is one aspect of the historically contingent nature of

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[20] Long (1968) 26.

Greek tragedy. To put it briefly, work which examines various linguistic phenomena, but is not interested in the context or in the different ways in which different spectators might react, and approaches which centre on ambiguity and politics all have their limits. There is still much work to be done on the way Sophoclean language works.

My aim in this book is to do some of this work by learning from as many as possible of the varied observations that scholars have made over the years. In particular I will try to combine an awareness of the spectators' and readers' role in the production of meaning with a concern for the uniqueness of Sophocles and of each Sophoclean play. I will therefore give due weight to the differences between different spectators and readers, and still make room for aspects of Sophoclean language other than its ambiguity and its political nature. In other words, I will neither take it for granted that all spectators and readers of all time are the same, and thus produce a formalist study, nor place all my emphasis on the differences between different spectators and readers, and thus concentrate on historical context and indeterminacy. Rather, I am interested in those aspects of Sophoclean language that may be shared by different spectators and readers, whether at different times and in different places or at the same time in the same theatre. For want of a better term, I will call this kind of shared response 'communality among the different', giving the term both a diachronic (various times and places) and a synchronic (one theatre at one time) meaning.

As the starting-point for my discussion I will use the observation that I made at the outset: Sophoclean language has produced an impressive tradition of scholarship. There are, of course, few classical authors whose language has not been scrutinised in great detail over the years. But even against this backgound, the amount of work carried out on Sophoclean language is remarkable. Clearly, it has been fascinating critics for a long time. Sophocles' continuous success as a playwright both in antiquity and in the modern world, moreover, suggests also that various generations of spectators have not, to say the least, found his language off-putting. One of my

guiding questions, therefore, in my search for communality among the different will be what there is that may make many different spectators and readers of many times and places engage with Sophoclean language.

Before I begin to answer this question, it is necessary to stress that, like all the earlier scholars whose work I have reviewed, I have to accept various limitations. The most important of them is the inevitably tentative nature of any answer that I will give. Differences between different spectators and readers are overwhelming. At a very basic level there is the difference of language. Most spectators today see, and readers read, Sophoclean tragedies in translation, rather than in the original Greek as in antiquity. A study like mine, which is based on the Greek text, is applicable to users of translations only to a degree, lesser or higher depending on the aims and the success of the translator.[21] And even spectators and readers who are confronted with the Greek original, or with the same translation, may describe Sophoclean language in differing terminology. Many will speak, say, of the 'Sophoclean hero', others will not, and those who do may mean a wide variety of things. Much that I will say would therefore have to be rephrased in order to be even comprehensible to many given spectators and readers. Most important, even if one sets all such problems of translation and terminology aside, one comes back again and again to the fundamental truth that everybody who watches or reads Sophoclean plays watches or reads them with different expectations and assumptions, in different states of mind, under different conditions and so on. Strictly speaking, one might be tempted to say, there is no communality but only difference.

And yet, I repeat, Sophoclean language has the power to engage all these different spectators and readers. To put it very crudely, different spectators and readers can have very different views of *what* Sophocles means, but none the less, to some degree, they will be affected by *how* he means; they differ

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[21] This is not to say that it can only be read by those who know Greek. Almost all of the Greek is translated. See below, p. 18.

over *what* Sophoclean language communicates but they all react to *how* it communicates. This is a distinction which ought not to be pressed too hard, since it would ultimately become hard to sustain. 'How' and 'what' are reminiscent of 'form' and 'content', and this is a notoriously difficult pair. It would be a great mistake to assume that 'how' a passage communicates is nothing whatsoever to do with the individual spectator or reader. However, if they are not made to carry this kind of weight, 'how' and 'what' are useful terms which (if nothing else) can help to give an impression of what I try to do in this book. At its very heart is the desire to describe how Sophoclean language communicates.[22] For all the differences between the various ways in which spectators and readers understand a passage, there is still often something in the way the passage is written, in 'how it means', how it communicates, to which many of them are responsive. In this respect there is not only difference but also communality.

In order to talk about this communality, of course, it will be necessary to allow for a wide margin of variation. Even *how* Sophocles means is after all not the kind of absolute that allows sweeping formalist statements. Here, too, differences between different spectators and between different readers make a certain difference. Nothing, therefore, that I say about communality in the perception of how Sophoclean language means will be meant to suggest identity. Nothing I say will be meant to be true for all spectators and readers in the same way. I am interested in communality *among the different*. With these provisos I ask again: what is there in Sophoclean language, in the way Sophoclean language communicates, that can engage different spectators and readers?

The path that I will pursue in order to answer this question is by no means untrodden, but it has not, as far as I am aware, previously been used for an investigation into Sophoclean language, and it will let me arrive at new insights (I hope) into

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[22] This kind of project is by no means unparalleled. A recent book on 'Greek literature in its linguistic context' begins by invoking a recent 'shift in interest from the "what" to the "how" in the production of meaning': Bakker (1997) 1.

how it functions. Sophoclean language, I suggest, can engage different spectators and readers of different times because, repeatedly, it makes them both know and not know something. As I will argue in detail, it often gives them a degree of information, and at the same time withholds full knowledge. There is much that spectators and readers do not know, but they still know enough to escape utter bafflement. They are given some understanding and can try to push forward its limits. There are many moments when spectators and readers are busy negotiating and re-negotiating certainty with uncertainty, moments when they engage with Sophoclean language as they know (or think they know) some things and do not know (or think they do not know) others.

These are moments of what I call communality among the different. People are different. Not everybody has the same kind of knowledge. Different people are certain or uncertain about different things when they see and read Sophocles. But allowing, as I said I would, for a large margin of variation, I will have enough space to think about the spectators' and readers' shared involvement. As I hope to bring out in this book, Sophoclean language is such that they all, again and again, find themselves having something to start from and yet struggling to get a full grasp, and that again and again such moments of being certain about some things and uncertain about others are shared by many spectators and readers, different though their reactions are in detail. To look at communality as I understand it is to try to see both what is different and what is similar.

Stepping back a little, I wish to draw attention to the way this concern with both what is different and what is similar informs also my assumption that simultaneous knowing and not knowing, or being certain and being uncertain, may prompt involvement. Knowledge was not conceptualised in the same way by the ancient Greeks as it is today, and there is no *a priori* reason for believing that fascination with the half-known is identical in all cultures. I do not therefore try to develop a detailed and universally valid psychological, behavioural or other kind of model of audience or reader

response, as, in their different ways, narratologists following Gérard Genette, reception theorists like Wolfgang Iser or Hans Robert Jauss, students of semiotics like Umberto Eco, anthropologists like Victor Turner, scholars interested in the semiotics of theatre or psychoanalytic critics have done.[23] Although I have learned from such models as well as from the criticism that has been levelled against them, my emphasis throughout the book will be on Sophoclean language and kinds of possible response, rather than on detailed accounts of the spectators' and readers' precise reactions. There is too much that is different from one spectator or reader to the next to make the latter a worthwhile project.

Yet at the same time there is much that different spectators and readers have in common. The twentieth century's fascination with the half-known and the ambiguous does not need elaborating. A few pointers will be enough. This is a century in which novelty has been a central category by which art works are judged, in which the concept of defamiliarisation has been at the heart of much aesthetic theorising, in which a term like 'absent presence' has widely gained currency, and in which critics from Roman Ingarden ('places of indeterminacy'), *via* Wolfgang Iser ('blanks', 'Leerstellen') to Anne Ubersfeld ('le texte troué')[24] construct aesthetic theories around gaps.

While 'absent presences', 'places of indeterminacy' and other such details are distinctly modern, there can be no doubt that also fifth-century Athens liked to juxtapose knowledge and ignorance. Not only is the ambiguity of language thematised in tragedy and the limits of human knowledge a concern of Sophoclean plays like *Oedipus Rex* and *Trachiniae*, but other genres display similar interests. Most famously, Socrates is reported to have proclaimed that he, unlike others, knows that he does not know,[25] and in Plato's early dialogues he is portrayed as somebody who makes others, who believe that

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[23] For a review of recent theories of the theatre see Carlson (1993) 505–40.

[24] Ingarden (1973), especially 50–5, Iser (1976) 257–355, Ubersfeld (1978) 13–25 and Ubersfeld (1996) 10–18.

[25] Plato *Apol.* 21d.