TRAGIC RHETORIC: SOPHOCLES AND THE POLITICS OF GOOD SENSE

by

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates rhetoric and prudence in Sophocles through close readings of Antigone, Ajax, Philoctetes, and Oedipus at Colonus. Central to the project is a reconstruction of a uniquely Sophoclean conception of prudence as “good sense”; good sense is distinguished from traditional conceptions of prudence as an inter-subjective capacity for good judgment that is born of experience and chance. The study finds that while good sense and persuasive rhetoric are occasionally paired, they are frequently divorced from one another. Thus, in place of heroic conflicts and tragic failings, these readings present an alternative tragic tension between the persuasive yet often solipsistic speech of heroes and protagonists and the good sense of marginalized characters.

This project is situated within the “turn to rhetoric” in contemporary democratic theory; in this context, it presents Sophocles as a novel and under-theorized resource in three overarching ways. First, his dramas were performed in a democratic context and gave voice to perspectives otherwise marginalized within the polis; in this respect he offers more inclusive democratic resources than his Athenian contemporaries. Second, these plays offer sobering insight into the impact of contingency in shaping rhetorical contexts. They reveal that overconfidence in rhetorical technē underestimates the extent to which successful persuasion is often aligned with chance and social advantage. Third, he
draws attention to pervasive structural inequalities that work against and silence good sense. In this final respect the plays themselves are considered as didactic resources that cultivate reflective judgments and good sense in the spectator and reader.
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Chapter I

Sophocles, The Turn to Rhetoric, and Good Sense

Introduction

This dissertation explores rhetoric and good sense in Sophocles. In the chapters that follow I engage in close readings of four Sophoclean dramas (Antigone, Ajax, Philectetes, and Oedipus at Colonus) and draw out central themes pertinent to the relationship between rhetoric and prudence in contemporary political theory. My decision to turn to Sophocles for insight into these themes will likely seem unusual for many reasons. First there is the question of turning to ancient theory at all for contemporary purposes. Why should we read Sophocles or Aristotle or Plato rather than simply focusing on Locke, Rawls, and Habermas? Does the ancient perspective, being so remote from our own, really have anything to say to contemporary democrats? Further, Sophocles is a dramatist and not a systematic political theorist. He does not expound a theory of ethics, of prudence, or of rhetoric. Indeed, one could read tragedy as many have done⁠¹, as reflective of a particular cultural moment in the development of the Athenian democracy and therefore as even more limited to this context than Athenian philosophers.

After examining these objections, I argue that Sophoclean tragedy is of cardinal importance to political theorists who concern themselves with prudence, rhetoric, ethics, and contingency. In the first half of this chapter, specifically, I situate my reading of

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¹The first and perhaps most influential of these contextual readings was Vernant’s volume, Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece, first published in 1972, as well as Winkler and Zeitlin’s edited volume, Nothing to Do with Dionysos.
Sophocles in light of contemporary democratic theory’s interest in rehabilitating rhetoric. While I endorse the turn to the ancients for challenging contemporary assumptions about reasonable speech, I nevertheless find Aristotle to be poorly suited to this particular purpose. I then elaborate my reasons for preferring Sophocles, not only as an alternative to Aristotelian theory, but also and more importantly as a thinker who has much to offer contemporary political thought in his own right on questions of both rhetoric and prudence—which I will call Sophoclean “good sense”.

**Deliberation under Fire**

In recent years there has been a paradoxical trend in liberal democratic theory – both to move away from an insistence on reasonable and neutral speech and at the same time to rehabilitate rhetoric. Theorists such as Iris Marion Young have argued that the thin, consent-driven focus that dominates Rawlsian inspired theories of public reason and the Habermasian insistence on the “unforced force of the better argument” do not adequately capture commitments to justice, equality and inclusion that underpin our democracies. Assuming that the most persuasive argument is the better argument misleadingly attaches validity to communication patterns that are traditionally privileged in liberal democracies. In reality, the carefully cultivated speech of well-educated men and women—whatever its substance or merits—is more likely to have persuasive force than diffident, impassioned, or affect-centered communication styles. As Young puts it,

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3 Habermas, *Justification and Application*, 145. See also Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*; Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*; Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*.  
4 Sanders, “Against Deliberation.”  
5 Krause, *Civil Passions*.  

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the privileging of allegedly dispassionate speech styles ... often correlates with other differences of social privilege. White men tend to be more controlled, without significant gesture and expression or emotion. The speech culture of women, racialized or ethnicized minorities, and working-class people, on the other hand, often is, or is perceived to be, more excited and embodied, values more the expression of emotion, uses figurative language, modulates tones of voice, and gestures widely.\(^6\)

The idea of “public reason,” nevertheless, assumes a limited, neutral territory within which citizens can arrive at a consensus that reflects their various commitments. But such neutral territory does not, for example, easily lend itself to normative disputes over religious or historic attachments to land, reproductive health, or religious dress, for often the issues at stake cannot be discussed neutrally without compromising the very commitments over which parties so strongly disagree. Indeed the need to translate one’s claims into the reasonable terms of the public sphere can dilute the substance of the claim itself. Consider, for example, recent Canadian aboriginal “Idle no More” protests over issues of contested territory. One concern that aboriginal spokesmen and their allies have raised is that, in order to be heard, aboriginals must assimilate their own conceptions of territory into a neo-Lockean, normatively liberal framework.\(^7\) This not only puts the aboriginal perspective at a disadvantage, but also constrains the public’s capacity to engage with and learn from an alternative perspective on both land and ownership that constitutes a healthy rival to the predominant one.\(^8\) Broadly speaking, then, these critical voices reflect a growing aware-

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\(^8\) On the need for aboriginal “word warriors” to work to assimilate native claims into a European discursive framework see Turner, *This Is Not a Peace Pipe*, 71–93. On resisting assimilation and protecting aboriginal autonomy see Coulthard, “Subjects of Empire” and Bennett, “Aboriginal Rights Deliberated.” We might also think here of Jonathan Lear’s *A Radical Hope*. In his study on Crow culture Jonathan Lear asks his reader to meditate on Crow Chief Plenty Coups’ claim “When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened.” *Radical*
ness that it is necessary to re-envision the way we think of democratic communication, particularly if we want our democracies to continue to strive toward greater justice and representation of the plurality of voices present in the democratic system.

Rehabilitating Rhetoric and the Turn to Aristotle

In the context of such theoretical debates and practical disputes, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* has become an attractive resource for a diverse range of democratic theorists. On the one hand, it appeals to deliberative democrats who have been persuaded by critics such as Young to revise their understanding of democratic communication. These theorists accept that rhetoric, emotion, and passionate appeals are unavoidable features of democratic life and have therefore turned to ancient thought to better differentiate pernicious from publically salutary forms of persuasion. Simone Chambers, for example, draws on Aristotle to distinguish a deliberative and healthy political rhetoric from the more troubling mass-oriented, plebiscitary rhetoric that has worried political theorists since Plato. For Chambers, Aristotle provides an attractive resource for deliberative theory because his *Rhetoric* alerts us to the mutually enforcing roles of *ethos* (a speaker’s character), *pathos* (the audience’s emotions), and *logos* (the expectation that arguments be coherent); when these they work together they yield a healthy mode of deliberative persuasion. Yet whereas Chambers understandably approaches the turn to deliberative rhetoric cautiously (she worries, ...
for example, about prejudices that might inform judgments about a speaker’s character), other advocates of rhetoric such as Bryan Garsten are willing to go much further. Garsten emphasizes that liberal democracies not only cannot avoid rhetoric, but in fact require rhetoric if liberal values are to win out over dissenting and potentially threatening alternatives. For Garsten, rhetoric involves the capacity to sway beliefs, for the purpose of either “bringing them [dissenters] to our side” or “trying to rebut their views in front of people who have no settled opinion of their own.” Like Chambers, who questions Aristotle’s emphasis on ethos, Garsten turns to Aristotle’s Rhetoric because he finds it an appealing resource that does not require its reader to adhere to other Aristotelian commitments; it “requires only that our opinions and emotions have enough structure to make them susceptible to deliberative engagement.”

While both of these approaches speak to the need to adjust our conceptions of democratic communication, both suffer from important limitations. Chambers, on the one hand, identifies a serious concern about the manipulative and pandering force of plebiscitary rhetoric in mass democracies, yet her revised Aristotelian conception of deliberative rhetoric does not go far enough to address the problems of exclusion and marginalization that have led theorists to invoke a broader notion of communication in the first place. For example, while she emphasizes the need for more diffuse “mini-publics” that might aim at enhancing the deliberative capacities of smaller groups of citizens, she does not explain how these groups themselves might satisfy norms of inclusion or would speak to those not already invested in democratic practices and forums.

12 Garsten, Saving Persuasion, 140–1.
Garsten, on the other hand, betrays a proselytizing liberal zeal, which might make democratic theorists bristle. The assumption that liberal democracies require rhetoric in order to convince non-believers to accept liberal values ignores or is perhaps deliberately blind to the reality that large groups of citizens within democratic communities, such as Aboriginal communities, have no desire to conform to liberal models, because they associate these models with unwholesome or corrupt individualism, environmental destruction, and injustice.

More importantly, however, these projects are both limited in their attempt to divorce Aristotle from the rich ethical context in which his theory of speech, rhetoric, and ethical action is embedded. Aristotle’s context provides the sharpest and therefore potentially most helpful contrast to the difficulties that arise in pluralistic liberal democratic contexts. Yet, in my view, the advantages of the turn to Aristotle’s classical perspective, which is inherently an ethical perspective, are lost if one simply reads Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* as a technical manual for persuading dissenters to adopt one’s values, or even more benignly to inform a more “deliberative”, or “inclusive,” model of liberal democratic persuasion.

In contrast to these approaches to rehabilitate rhetoric, Danielle Allen stands out for her use of Aristotle’s conceptions of rhetoric and friendship to challenge existing “illiberal” and exclusive models of citizenship. Allen wants to exhort citizens to build civic relationships based in mutual trust and self-sacrifice. She argues that Aristotle’s fusion of sound argument with character judgment and attentiveness to the emotional impact of a speaker, as well as his emphasis on civic friendship, helps us to conceptualize a practice of citizenship more conducive than current procedural models to building trust
and cultivating civic bonds, particularly across racial and ethnic barriers. She pits this Aristotelian approach to rhetoric and civic friendship against Hobbes’s attempt to neutralize contention and unify the will of the people by subjecting the citizen body to the will of one sovereign authority.\(^\text{13}\) This Hobbesian solution is inherited as the modern practice of alienating our diverse political needs to large-scale political institutions, which teaches us to overlook the immediate connection between the policies we endorse and the real concerns and need for mutual compromise among citizens. In Allen’s view, Aristotle understood that political communities achieved “wholeness” rather than “unity” or homogeneity – which she understands as the residual illiberal influence of liberalism’s founding concerns; he promoted a political theory aimed at fostering a dynamic pluralism in which contestation and trust amongst divergent civic perspectives could take root.\(^\text{14}\)

Like Allen and other theorists motivated by similar concerns,\(^\text{15}\) I am attracted to the ancient perspective precisely because it has something novel to teach the moderns not just about how to be better liberal democrats, but also about the limitations we face as citizens whose dominant ethical framework asks us to eschew discussion about civic virtue, flourishing, and friendship. Indeed, Aristotle’s rhetoric provides an attractive alternative to modern theory insofar as he pushes us to think much more deeply about what it might mean to live a thriving human life in a healthy political community.

Yet, as Allen herself argues, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* cannot be appropriated piecemeal. In my reading, however, this stricture ought to be applied even more emphatically to

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\(^\text{14}\) Allen, *Talking to Strangers*.

the *Rhetoric* than it is to other Aristotelian texts such as the *Nicomachean Ethics* or *Politics*. Unlike his conceptions of civic virtue, which, if nothing else, provides an explicit challenge to liberalism’s value pluralism, Aristotle’s discussion of rhetoric in the *Rhetoric*, if extracted from the larger ethical context in which it was embedded and in which it provides a careful response to Plato’s critique of rhetoric, becomes a mere technical manual instructing interested students in how to sway one’s audience to one’s own point of view. This is problematic, as approaching Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* instrumentally and as a technical treatise misreads Aristotle’s own purpose and undermines the benefit gained from turning to the ancient perspective for insight in the first place.

**Rhetoric and Judgment in Aristotle**

As moderns, we have learned that qualitative judgments are matters of subjective (or inter-subjective) opinion that require us to “woo the consent of others.” In most cases, however, we neither hope nor expect that we will be capable of proving what is good or better to

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17 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*; Frank, *A Democracy of Distinction*.

18 While I am largely sympathetic to Eugene Garver’s reading of the *Rhetoric* as a philosophic text that aims at the cultivation of civic virtue, I disagree with his emphatic insistence that “the *Rhetoric* is not an argument against Plato’s thoughts on rhetoric” (22). Aristotle’s treatment of rhetoric may not be an argument against Plato’s critique of rhetoric, for Plato, too, had a salutary conception of rhetoric that he proposed as a corrective to rhetorical *technē*. However, it makes little sense to argue Aristotle’s attempt to rehabilitate rhetoric as a civic art with ethical implications was not also a direct response to (if not an argument *against*) Plato’s much more explicit attacks on rhetorical *technē* in the *Gorgias* (521d).

19 Hannah Arendt, who was significantly influenced by Kant, picked up on his idea in the *Third Critique* that political judgment is, in many respects, an inter-subjective art that must involve “wooing the consent of others”. As Arendt persuasively argues, we do not arrive at political judgments through an appeal to a fixed set of moral laws and truth claims. To do so would be to lapse into the unthinking banality that Arendt so chillingly captured in her presentation of and reflections on Eichmann and the problem of the banality of evil. Rather, in the absence of an epistemic basis for establishing truth claims, it is persuasion that that allows us to woo the consent of others and forces us to make judgments about the validity of other’s perspectives as they relate to public well-being. See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*; see also Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*. 


those who have different conceptions of the good; in fact, as a society, we generally remain suspicious of those attempting to convince us that their conception of the good is superior to ours. Yet, this very capacity to establish, qualitatively and normatively, a hierarchy of goods, and to convince listeners that some things such as civic friendship and human flourishing are simply better than others, such as the pursuit of self-interest, is at the heart of Aristotle’s disagreement with modern thought. This at once makes him an attractive alternative for modern thought and yet shows why his ideas are very difficult to import to a liberal environment.

Yet, as contemporary theorists such as Garsten have rightly observed, the Rhetoric is a treatise about how to use the art of rhetoric, not the ethical ends towards which rhetoric should be used. In its pages Aristotle does not outwardly advance arguments about better and worse ways of life, as he does in his Ethics and Politics, and this does seem to lend itself to the kind of reading that many contemporary theorists want to advance.\(^\text{20}\) We

\(^{20}\)It is important to mention that Aristotle does, however, present his reader with better and worse examples of different conceptions of happiness and different ends of politics and therefore invites his audience to make correct distinctions between good and bad arguments. For example, while Aristotle is clear that happiness is the end toward which all people individually and collectively aim, he appears to leave the definition of happiness to the audience’s discretion: “Let happiness be defined as success combined with virtue, self-sufficiency, the pleasantest life accompanied with security, or an abundance of possessions and bodies, with the ability to defend and use these things” (1.5.3.1350b5-10). He then goes on to expand on this list and the constituent parts of each conception of happiness in great detail. The same is true for his presentation of regimes. While Aristotle clearly states that the “greatest and most important of all things in an ability to persuade and give good advice is to grasp an understanding of all forms of constitution [politeia] and to distinguish the customs and legal usages and advantages of each” (1.8.1.1365b20-25), he does not identify a preferred regime. In fact, he goes further than one might expect in encouraging his reader to pay attention to political psychology, “for the character distinctive of each [regime], is necessarily most persuasive to each” and will thus be amenable to different rhetorical techniques (1.8.5.1366a10). This agnosticism with respect to the various ends of political and ethical life—indeed, what might even be termed a subtle complicity in advising would-be tyrants and oligarchs how to influence their populations—seems clearly to separate the Rhetoric from Aristotle’s other ethical and political works. And yet, it is my view that Aristotle is both directing his reader to texts where justifications for the “better” choice are provided in full, and inviting his audience to correctly exercise their own deliberative judgment. I therefore situate my reading generally against interpreters who have mapped the various teachings on ethics and politics against the claims Aristotle makes elsewhere. Such close attention to the various ethical and political teachings advanced in the rhetoric, to my view, misses the overarching rhetorical purpose of the text. My reading is therefore in many
need, however, only look to the first chapter of the first book of the *Rhetoric* Aristotle to get a sense of Aristotle’s vastly different perspective from modern thought. Here Aristotle frames what I take to be the central problem with his treatment of rhetoric. He points out that, while on the one hand, that which is objectively better and just (i.e. truer) will also be that which is most persuasive (1.1.3), the validity of an argument nevertheless precariously depends on the judgments of listeners, for if judgments are not made in the right way, the truer and better arguments will be necessarily defeated by their opposites (1.1.12).

In this respect the *Rhetoric* is, as Ronald Beiner has argued, “a study in practical judgment.” Indeed, it is the emphasis on practical judgment that redeems rhetoric in Aristotle’s view, for it is the mutual capacity of speakers and audiences to discern what is truly persuasive—ethically, politically, emotively, and rationally—from what is only apparently persuasive that makes rhetoric a potentially beneficial art (1.1.12-13). Yet while modern interpreters have found Aristotle’s emphasis on judgment to be one of the ways consistent with that advanced by Poster, “Aristotle’s Rhetoric Against Rhetoric.” For an alternative much more detailed inquiry into the ethical nature of the Rhetoric see T.H. Irwin “Ethics in the Rhetoric and in the Ethics” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Rhetoric*.

Scholars have spent much time considering what Aristotle means by truth and how this might be reconciled with his clear emphasis that rhetoric is a contextual art. Troels Engburg Peterson argues against an either strictly moral or amoral interpretation. He instead understands truth in the context of *Wahrheitsfindung*, or truth-discovery, by which he understands that the subject matter of rhetoric and the truth it aims at is the subject matter of ethics and politics—both of which rely on *phronēsis* and do not lend themselves to static or fixed truth-claims. See “Is there an Ethical Dimension to Aristotelian Rhetoric” in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle’s Rhetoric. Wahrheitsfindung* is a useful if not overly complicated solution to this difficulty. Rhetoric, like political science, deals with practical conflicts the aim of both is to determine the most prudent course of action within the horizon of the set of goods defined by any given community. Moreover, while these goods can vary for Aristotle depending on the nature of the ‘constitution’ he believes that there are clear criteria for assessing better and worse ends and these are made available to us through philosophic study and education in virtue. Cf. Irwin “Ethics in the Rhetoric and in the Ethics”, 143-5.

My primary source for reading the rhetoric has been Kennedy’s edition of *On Rhetoric*. Kennedy does not use Bekker numbers so to avoid unnecessary complication I have followed his method of citing Book, chapter and paragraph.

This, Aristotle claims, “is worthy of censure” (1.1.12).

more attractive features of his teaching, it is crucial that Aristotle’s understanding of good judgment is far from the open-ended pluralistic understanding of deliberation that liberal democrats hope to recover. For Aristotle, the advantageous use of rhetoric as a beneficial civic art precariously rests on the correct judgment of a discerning audience. That is to say, Aristotle believes that there are objective truths, including truths about what leads to and obstructs human flourishing, that are grounded in the natural order. Yet for rhetoric to function well and not to transform itself into the kind of demagoguery that worried both Aristotle and Plato, audiences would need to be trained to be discerning judges and listeners. This likely meant that Aristotle’s anticipated audience for his teaching on rhetoric would be the elite students of the Lyceum or future philosophic schools. As Carol Poster argues, “the Rhetoric collects many endoxa concerning persuasive communication, a task necessarily propaedeutic to making judgments about the value of rhetoric itself.” Even more idealistically, Aristotle likely imagined rhetoric to be a useful skill amongst citizens of the ideal regime, as presented in Book VII and VIII of his Politics, in

26 Cf. Gorgias, 521d.
29 Ibid.
which all citizens would be exposed to a rigorous and common civic education and thus equally habituated in the moral virtues.\textsuperscript{30}

One of the central challenges that Aristotle poses to modern thought, then, is a deep scepticism about the judgments of precisely those citizens that we expect to find in a liberal democratic context.\textsuperscript{31} Even in the \textit{Rhetoric}, where Aristotle typically avoids normative claims, he expresses clear doubt about the capacity of democratic juries and deliberative audiences to judge well. He also doubts that their judgments will be trustworthy (1.1.7.1354b). This scepticism is more clearly developed in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} and \textit{Politics}. At the end of the \textit{Ethics}, for example, Aristotle claims that left to their own devices and in the absence of a moral education and good laws, the many will not be persuaded by, or know how to judge properly, good arguments. For the soul of the young student,

\begin{quotation}
\ldots needs to have been prepared by habits for enjoying and hating finely, like ground that is to nourish seed. For someone whose life follows his feelings would not even listen to an argument turning him away, or comprehend it [if he did listen]; and in that state how could he be persuaded to change? And in general feelings seem to yield to force, not to argument. (10.14.12.1179b30)
\end{quotation}

In the \textit{Politics}, Aristotle argues that the chief cause of political instability in democracies is the untutored and misleading rhetoric of demagogues (1304b20). Thus, even as speech coupled with the capacity for moral judgment is intrinsic to the human condition and essential to our capacity to flourish (1253a7), citizens in democracies are particularly vulnerable to the influence of pernicious forms of speech because they lack the capacity to

\textsuperscript{30} For a helpful discussion on Aristotle’s ideal regime see Kraut, \textit{Aristotle}, 192–239.
\textsuperscript{31} On this point in particular and on Aristotle’s criticisms of democracy in general see Strauss, \textit{The City and Man}, 32.
immunize themselves from the persuasive force of bad arguments. Put another way, rhetoric abused is the foremost danger to political stability in democracies because the judgment of democratic audiences fails to adequately distinguish between virtuous and pernicious persuasion. This is why the art of rhetoric must, for Aristotle, be confined as much as possible to procedural questions about future laws, policies, or past injustices, or celebratory causes for public praise or blame, even though rhetoric is much more generally defined as the “ability, in each case, to see the available means of persuasion” (1.2.1).

For all of these reasons I maintain that Aristotle does not travel well to a modern liberal environment. On the contrary, he calls into question the very capacity for deliberative judgments that liberals hope might make ordinary citizens choose the more tolerant or reasonable argument against demagogic attempts to pander and stir passions, to self-interested ends. And if this were not problematic enough, he also calls into question the extent to which rhetoric, in the absence of rigorous ethical education, can serve to buttress a political regime, including the liberal regime, against rival claims to justice or political order. Indeed, Aristotle’s confidence in both practical and moral judgment requires that such judgment be rigorously cultivated within a system that places high demands on both political participation and moral upbringing.

Against this reading, theorists will likely point out that there are tensions in Aristotle’s work that suggest he is more comfortable with contradiction, conflict and democratic judgment than one might initially think. Yet while Aristotle’s practical science leads him to see obligations as containing necessary contradictions, his central metaphors for illustrating well-functioning civic life—such as the feast, or an artistic representation
point toward harmony rather than conflict. This is best expressed in Aristotle’s argument against Lycophron in Book Three of the *Politics*, which could be an argument against modern liberal democracies: that is, Aristotle stated, any city which does not devote itself “to the end of encouraging goodness…” turns politics into a mere covenant and “a guarantor of just claims”—but lacks the capacity to make the citizens good and just (1280b6).

Indeed, tragedy may be an important part of the civic education recommended in Aristotle’s best regime. Tragedy might even have important lessons to teach citizens about thinking and judging, but to say that Aristotle saw an educative effect of tragedy does not entail that he embraced a tragic worldview. As Alasdair MacIntyre rightly observes, Aristotle’s presentation of the tragic flaw or hubris in the *Poetics* (ch.13-15) betrays a confidence that education in tragedy might mitigate the realization of future tragic failings in the audience. In the ideal Aristotelian community in which rhetoric might thrive, tragedy would serve to reinforce the emotional education of citizens by cultivating pity for fallen heroes and reinforcing the dangers of vice. Tragedy is, then, an

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32 I depart therefore from scholarship [Cf. Skultety, “Competition in the Best of Cities”; Yack, *The Problems of a Political Animal*; and, Yack, “Rhetoric and Public Reasoning: An Aristotelian Understanding of Political Deliberation.”] that presents Aristotle as a theorist who is oriented to the problem of conflict and disagreement. For while Aristotle does of course acknowledge the potential for conflict, his confidence in the persuasiveness of the better argument suggests that those who deliberate well will also know how to identify and bow to this better argument.

33 Aristotle himself saw tragedy as an important intellectual and moral component of civic education. In the *Poetics*, for example, he alludes to tragedy as an intersection between the philosophic quest for universals and the practical arts of rhetoric and politics. For Aristotle, this makes tragedy closer to philosophy and the philosophic quest for universal truths, than history (*Poetics* 1451a16-b10). This is because tragedy negotiates the explicitly contemplative and the explicitly political. Aristotle’s preference for tragedy over history helps explain why he draws more frequently from poetry than from politics throughout the *Rhetoric* when offering examples of effective and ineffective methods of deliberative, forensic, and epideictic speech. Cf. David Depew “Politics, Music, and Contemplation In Aristotle’s Ideal State” in Keyt, *A Companion to Aristotle’s Politics*; and, Lord, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle*.

34 Halliwell also does not provide Bekker numbers.

35 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 163.
important corollary to moral education insofar as it enforces stable notions of virtue and vice already established in civic life. It is useful, therefore, to consider the ways in which Aristotle alerts us to think about rhetoric and even to explore how tragic tendencies might emerge in his thought. However he is not a democratic thinker, nor should he be reinvented as a theorist with unusual tolerance for persistent tragic conflict. Rather, the medium in which possible disruptions to Aristotle’s theory are much more explicitly explored—disruptions that occur as a result of regime change, conflicts between unwritten and written law, eclipsing ethical horizons, political exclusion, or simply the threat of competing persuasive claims to what is just and good—is tragedy.

**Tragic Rhetoric: The Turn to Sophocles**

Emerging out of a similar Athenian context, Sophocles’ presentation of rhetoric is influenced by many of the same worries and recommendations that one finds in Aristotle. Yet, whereas both Plato and Aristotle are sceptical about democratic speech and the demos’

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36 As Steven Halliwell persuasively argues, Aristotle’s reading of tragedy does not necessarily reflect Athenian opinion, nor does it reflect the way that tragedians understood themselves. In this sense it is important that, even though Aristotle offered a valuable theory of tragedy, this theory has much more to do with Aristotle’s own philosophic project than with the way in which tragedians understood themselves or were understood within democratic Athens. Halliwell points to three important facts to justify this reading. First Aristotle elides the distinction between plot and myth; whereas most Athenians, including Plato, understood myth as a distinct category, Aristotle uses myth to mean plot. Second, Aristotle’s presentation of poetry is almost wholly secular, which means that he completely ignores the religious dimension of the dramas and the way in which they would have been understood to an Athenian audience components of a religious festival. Third, is his generic interpretation of the Chorus as a generic actor, which thereby diminishes the ambiguity and richness inherent in choral music. See Stephen Halliwell’s “Introduction” *The Poetics of Aristotle*. [It is worth noting that the latter two points were central to Nietzsche’s praise of tragedy and in particular of the tragic course as a unifying force and spiritual source for the spectator. See also Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* § 1-11.] Indeed Aristotle’s secular reading of tragedy as well as his emphasis on the educative import of *hamartia* for a viewing audience seems to be a deliberate response to Socrates’ criticisms of tragedy in Books III and X of the Republic and to his challenge for someone to offer a defense of poetry that would justify its acceptance in any well governed city (Rep. 607cd). In this respect it is important to approach with some critical distance Aristotle’s influential usage of terms such as *hamartia* (which has come to mean tragic flaw or moral fallibility), *mythos* (translated as plot) and *catharsis* which literally means purgation but which Aristotle specifically associated with a psychologically salutary response to tragedy rooted in pity and fear).
capacity to make sound judgments in the absence of a rigorous education in philosophy, or in the robust habituation in ethics in an ideal regime, Sophocles helps us reflect on what might give rise to ethical or pernicious speech, as well as good or bad judgment, in the absence of a philosophically or politically ideal universe. Sophocles explores political life, with all of its limitations and fissures, and is therefore, in my view, a better resource for thinking through questions of rhetoric and democracy.

I thus propose the following three ways in which reading Sophocles is beneficial for political theory, broadly speaking, and for questions about rhetoric and prudence more specifically. First, there is the ethical content of the plays themselves, which is embodied in Sophocles’ probing representations of communication and misunderstanding. In my reading of *Antigone, Ajax, Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*, I uncover a persistent sensitivity to problems of exclusion, marginalization, voicelessness, silence, and pernicious and solipsistic speech. I also lay bare a consistent and rich vision of what I describe as “good sense”. Although this is not a term that Sophocles himself uses, it captures a number of elements central to Sophocles’ presentation of human beings in general and specifically in their capacity as political agents. As I use the term, “good sense” originates in profound reflection on the human condition, particularly with respect to humanity’s relationship toward an unknowable and often inhospitable natural world. It leads us to recognize the need to moderate our behaviour toward others, to forgive transgressions that result from unpredictable contingencies, and to extend generosity toward others, even when this generosity defies one’s immediate interest.

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37 See epigraph to Chapter Two.
Hence, unlike philosophers driven to understand the world as a coherent order made up of intelligibly interrelated parts (like the Platonic Socrates), Sophoclean characters who exhibit good sense bow before, and find cause for solidarity in, an unknown natural order that they do not necessarily feel compelled to know better. 38 Like Odysseus before Athena in Sophocles’ Ajax, tragic characters are moved to dispense with divisive judgments (such as the friend/enemy distinction)—because they have shared in the humility, if not the absurdity, of the human experience. Sophoclean good sense is therefore derived almost exclusively from experience (both individual and collective) and combines knowledge of humanity’s existential limits with a sense of compassion and collective solidarity. This solidarity includes humility before luck 39 and a tolerance for the malleability that luck demands of us in our relations with others and in our understanding of ourselves. 40

In speaking about “good sense,” then, I do not attempt to retrieve a precise concept such as phronēsis. For Sophocles did not concern himself with illuminating rhetoric or prudence in any precise or systematic way. 41 Yet the understanding of good sense that I elicit from Sophoclean tragedy can be understood as an alternative to philosophic conceptions of prudence. I show that a Sophoclean presentation of both rhetoric and good sense

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38 While this language may invoke Rorty for some readers, I do not understand good sense as an ironic position. That is to say, good sense is ethically stable and therefore universally accessible even if it results from an acceptance of an unknowable or unstable whole, and results in solidarity. Cf. Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.

39 Here we might think of both Odysseus in Ajax and Theseus in Oedipus at Colonus.

40 This is not to say that good sense, as I am defining it, recommends ethical malleability.

41 While good sense in Sophocles is often contextually determined and therefore not defined within the play; it is also tied to Sophocles’ use of the Greek verbs phroneō and sōphreneō, along with phronēsis and sōphrosunē (all of which are typically translated along similar lines: to be sensible, to show or have good sense; they do not, therefore, have the distinct senses of practical wisdom and moderation that we find in Plato and Aristotle). The clearest example of Sophocles’ use of terminology indicating “good sense” is in Ajax, where a central question that the play poses is what does it means to be sensible. Cf. Chapter Three.
can be discerned through attention to the way in which contingency and relationships within the drama inform the psychological motivations of each of the characters. As an art form concerned with both plot development and speeches, tragedy speaks directly to and within the human condition. Even the most solipsistic or philosophic musing of a tragic character is located within an active, evolving dramatic context, and this context forces the audience to see agents as embedded within a web of human relationships.\footnote{Platonic dialogues are clearly the outliers here. Yet, while there is undoubtedly action in a Platonic dialogue, there is an important sense in which both action and time are is somewhat suspended. The Republic, for example, is meant to take place over the course of the course of an evening in the aftermath of a new religious festival for the goddess Bendis (327a); in fact when the conversation begins the ambition is to later return to the festival to continue watching a sunset parade and an all night festival (328c). These practical concerns, indeed all-practical and bodily preoccupations, are quickly suspended in favour of a marathonic investigation into the nature of justice.} Tragedy does not permit its audience to abstract from contingency or context. Indeed, its ability to frame central human questions through the action and dialogue of diverse but realistic characters brings the audience directly “to the phenomena”.\footnote{In his “Lecture on Humanism”, Heidegger claims that “the tragedies of Sophocles…preserve the ethos on their sagas more primordially than Aristotle’s lectures on ethics.” See Heidegger, Basic Writings, 256. For a fuller comparative discussion on the transition from Heraclitus and Sophocles to Plato and Aristotle – a transition that Heidegger understands as a decline, see Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics. See also McNeill, The Time of Life, 145–92.} Through studying Sophoclean characters—their actions, their speeches and their sets of attachments—we see good sense functioning at the individual level. This study of character therefore leads us to inquire after the political conditions that register the presence or absence of good sense in the Sophoclean dramatic world.

My emphasis on the importance of situating good sense within a dense web of social relations has some parallels to Hannah Arendt’s notion of common sense. For Arendt, common sense can be understood only through action in concert with others. We therefore lose the capacity adequately to describe or think about prudence when we leave behind the
real world in which common sense arises and takes shape. Yet whereas Arendt locates common sense strictly within a shared world of appearances in which truths are revealed and assimilated into a meaningful horizon, Sophocles’ dramas simulate the dynamic, shifting, and unstable terrain in which individual and collective judgments are grounded and err, and helps us to identify those contingent contexts in which good sense seems to take root. But unlike common sense, good sense is often at odds with collective opinion. We see this, for example, when Odysseus’ good sense leads him to depart from the generals of the Greek army in Ajax, or in the marked difference between Theseus’ and the Chorus’ judgment in Oedipus at Colonus (the Chorus are presented as superstitious and parochial, whereas Theseus is presented as thoughtful and universal in his thinking). A unique feature of Sophoclean drama, then, is its attention to a potential tension between good and the common sense of the collective. Good sense often requires the capacity to judge against the collective and, where possible, to persuade one’s fellows that one’s judgments are good. And yet, as our reading of these plays will illuminate, the capacity to persuade others on the basis of good sense is often directly related to contingent factors, such as one’s status within a particular community – for common opinion is hard to mobilize. In this respect, Sophocles shows that possible alignments of good and common sense can be deeply conditioned by contingent factors.

This emphasis on contingency, experience, and luck, together comprise the second feature I find compelling in Sophocles, and this, unsurprisingly, is characteristic of what

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44 Arendt describes this process as “the feeling of realness arising out of the sixth sense, which the French, perhaps for this reason, also call le bon sens, the good sense.” Realities are destroyed when “thought” flees from the world into itself; Arendt writes, “when thinking withdraws from the world of appearance, it withdraws from the sensorily given and hence also from the feeling of realness, given by common sense.” Arendt, The Life of the Mind, 52. Cf. Villa, Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political; and Villa, “Arendt, Heidegger, and the Tradition”; and, Norris, “Arendt, Kant, and the Politics of Common Sense.”
might be called the tragic worldview in general. Indeed most theorists who have attempted to draw on the insights of tragedy for contemporary politics have focused on reinterpreting, in secular terms, the tragic universe in which the gods obstruct and limit human agency. In the words of Charles Segal, “tragedy pushes back the structures and reopens the painful possibility of seeing life as chaos. Without that paradoxically pleasurable pain of tragedy, our order and our structures would become sterile, self-enclosed, solipsistic, arrogant with the hybris of their own intellectual power.” For Heidegger, tragedy was the “highest and purest expression” of the “unity and antagonism of Being and seeming [as] powerful in an originary way.” While my reading of Sophocles is not intended to be Heideggerian, I am sympathetic to Heidegger’s presentation of tragedy’s capacity to access something true about the human condition (even if for Heidegger this truth paradoxically refers to one historical moment’s capacity to grasp the pervasiveness of antagonism and flux).

Bernard Williams similarly argues that tragedy opens its audiences, ancient and modern, to a recognition that the universe does not provide for our comfort and that we are always, necessarily, limited by our subjective perspectives. This does not mean that we

45 Segal, Tragedy and Civilization, 42.
46 Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, 111–112. This antagonism was subsequently lost in philosophy’s attempt to disentangle the unity of Being from the flux of becoming.
47 Indeed this was Nietzsche’s point when he nostalgically lauded tragedy as the perfect synthesis of twin Athenian drives toward Apollonian discipline and Dionysiac abandon in the Birth of Tragedy. Yet, where Nietzsche focused on the tragic Chorus as an aesthetically soothing representation of these two drives which Athenians viewers could confront – particularly through experiencing soothing solidarity with the Dionysiac musicality of the Chorus, he focused primarily on the aesthetic of the Chorus and insisted on seeing tragedy as naively profound. Heidegger’s reading focuses slightly more on the tragic orientation toward nature, and therefore to a degree on a specifically Sophoclean form of wisdom that was also characteristic of preSocratic philosophers. While I have been influenced by both these readings of tragedy, I differ in reading as an inquiry into the whole that is primarily preoccupied with the problem of flux, our relationship to others in the context of flux, and our ability to arrive at stable ethical, political and spiritual judgments in the face of flux.
cannot make judgments; it means that our judgments should be always provisional. Even the most confident moral course can lead to disaster and suffering because of the world’s unpredictable contingencies. As the story of Oedipus makes remarkably clear, in the tragic worldview, even the Socratic precepts “Know thyself” and “Do no harm” can prove dangerously incompatible, for the drive to self-knowledge can be surprisingly disruptive to the micro-universes in which we find ourselves embedded.

A more optimistic view of the role of chance in tragedy is developed by Martha Nussbaum, who sees tragedy as pointing towards a progressive Aristotelian capacity to deliberate upon and articulate moral judgments both within and against one’s community. Nussbaum argues that Williams’ conception of tragedy is too harsh. She emphasizes humanity’s vulnerability to chance and necessity, yet suggests that the vulnerability Williams identifies in fact prompts courageous action and ethical reflection and judgment. While tragedy does teach us that we cannot know the whole, we can still learn from our blunders. Like Sophocles’ Neoptolemus, who, as we shall see, must balance his commitment to nobility with Odysseus’ understanding of the common interest, we have the capacity to make independent decisions when our inherited communities fail to guide us to ethically sound judgments. For Nussbaum, however, these judgments point beyond the embedded tragic self to a more articulate human relationship to luck, best expressed by Aristotelian

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49 This point is of course consistent with Plato’s presentation of the tension between the philosophic drive to self-knowledge and the falsifying demands of the city. Cf. Strauss, *The City and Man*, 50–138. However, while Plato teaches that this tension leads the philosopher to turn away from the city, tragedy teaches that the city—that is our embedded communities—are, after all, all we ever have.
50 I do not think that Nussbaum’s presentation of Williams on this point is entirely fair. Tragedy does, for Williams, provide us with opportunities for reflection, judgment, and ethical growth; it is simply not the case, as Nussbaum argues, that these reflections always point in a straight line towards rational deliberation and modernity.
deliberation. While Nussbaum is sympathetic to the tragic articulation of human attachment and vulnerability to chance, she sees Aristotelian reasonable deliberation as “an appropriate continuation and an explicit description of those insights.” For Nussbaum, then, tragedy points beyond itself to the coherent ethical and political reflections we associate with Aristotelian political judgment.52

Building on and yet differing from these various readings, I argue that Sophoclean tragedy neither denies the capacity for progressive moral development, nor points toward Aristotelian rational deliberation or Platonic political philosophy. Most tragic characters engage in some form of rational deliberation, either with themselves or with others, but tragedy shows that prudent speech or reasoned arguments do not always enable us to overcome the gaps created by circumstances or luck. Moreover, tragedy shows that what is most rationally or emotively persuasive at any given time is not always what is most prudent or in our best interests. Believing that we can leave our comprehensive commitments at the door when we enter public discussion—or that the “unforced force of the better argument” will compel actors to adopt prudent courses of action and thereby to mitigate

52 Peter Euben attempts to go further than Nussbaum in showing an alignment between Greek theater and philosophy. In particular, he challenges Nussbaum’s characterization of Platonic political philosophy as lacking vulnerability, emotional richness, and a sympathy to human attachment that Aristotle, in contrast, understands. I agree with Euben’s claim that Platonic philosophy, “like tragedy, presents the tyrannical impulse toward certainty and security as a possibility, but alongside that it is an immanent critique of that possibility” (The Tragedy of Political Theory, 38). However, I do not find that he is as careful in articulating what he finds to be unique in tragedy or in any particular tragic author. Characteristic of this approach is Euben’s ability to draw connections between tragedy and Plato, while at the same time identifying connections between the subversive ethical universe of tragedy and the postmodernism of Foucault. In my reading, Sophocles does operate in the interrogative but, unlike Foucault, he represents a stable universe in which truths are distinguishable and “ethically” concrete—even if these truths defy philosophic theorization. Ahrensford’s study on the Theban plays also identifies a rationalism that he argues is continuous with Platonic political philosophy. I situate my reading of Sophocles largely against this “rationalist” interpretation. This reading is not, of course, claiming that Sophocles’ tragedies are “irrational”. Instead, I maintain that Sophocles both points to the limits of rational knowledge and privileges knowledge gained through experience over philosophic inquiry. Cf. Ahrensford, Greek Tragedy and Political Philosophy.
conflict—is itself an unreasonable approaches to public discourse. The former underestimates the extent to which we are a product of our contingent circumstances and requires a much deeper and compelling experience of solidarity to step outside our own perspective in order to adopt and listen to the different reasoning of the other. The latter demonstrates a naive confidence that what is most beneficial for the individual or collective will somehow turn out to be what is most persuasive. Sophoclean tragedy forces us to question this over-confident view. Ajax, for example, is not convinced by Tecmessa’s prudent pleas to preserve his life because he genuinely believes himself to be already dead. Similarly, Neoptolemus cannot persuade Philoctetes to go to Troy even though that is the only way he will cure his wounded foot. Creon will not hear Haemon’s reasonable pleas to release Antigone because he is convinced that doing so will prove his undoing as a king and authority figure. Oedipus does not heed Jocasta’s reasonable warning to abandon a course of inquiry that will bring only pain and disaster because averting disaster is less important to him than knowing the truth.

Hence, the inability to yield to prudent speech, or good sense, is not bound to what Bernard Knox had identified as the “heroic temper,” since there is nothing particularly heroic or unique in finding oneself committed to a course of action that one believes to be good. Intense, intractable attachments are just as common today among ordinary citizens and people as they were among the heroes of the Attic stage. The inability to yield to good sense has everything to do with the force of our attachments on the one hand and the contingencies that lead us to adopt these attachments on the other. We live in a world in which we face ethical gaps, and where rhetoric alone—even persuasive and prudent rhet-

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ric—is often insufficient to mediate between different conceptions of what is good or just or noble. Sophocles shows that we will often be more committed to the goods that our particular micro-ethical universe privileges—whether this good be philosophic self-sufficiency, heroism, filial piety, or political power—than to the good privileged by another. But he also shows that the “good sense” required to see beyond one’s ethical horizon is contingent: it arises from accidental or experiential factors. Paradoxically, however, the insight that successful persuasion and prudence are only occasionally married and are more often than not divorced does not lead to relativism. The Sophoclean universe knows of good and bad, noble and ignoble. Nor does Sophocles teach that communication, persuasion, and good judgment are impossible. Instead, the Sophoclean tragic perspective asks that we face contingency with the full humility of those who have seen and embraced the limitations of their own understanding and indeed of their own humanity.

Third, while I do not think that tragic content is in any way dependent on dramatic performance, I do nevertheless see tragedy as a particularly democratic and self-reflective medium, and these features are heightened when we take into consideration tragedy’s function within the Athenian polis. Tragedy was performed on stage before a democratic audience. It engaged themes that were ethically and politically salient for the demos. As a form of civic practice, tragedy functions at the intersection between participa-

54 I disagree, for reasons I hope my study of Sophocles will make clear, with Peter Euben’s attempt to connect tragedy with Foucault and post-modern thinking. Euben, The Tragedy of Political Theory, 17–31.
55 On this point, I agree with Aristotle. In chapter 14 of the Poetics, Aristotle argues that the best tragedies do not depend on the theatrical spectacle; rather they arise “from the intrinsic structure of events.” See Aristotle, On Rhetoric, 46. For Aristotle, the integrity of the plot combined with the action of the drama is sufficient to evoke tragic catharsis. While I do not follow Aristotle’s theory of tragic form, I will argue that tragedy is valuable both as a text and as a performance.
tory politics and the self-reflective commentary characteristic of philosophers, without delivering any final resolution to the questions or problems to which it draws attention. The playwright, therefore, had an unusual opportunity to stimulate judgments and reflections on Athenian and Hellenic norms and to invite questions about established practices.\footnote{For discussions of such democratic discourse, see Rosenbloom, “Staging rhetoric in Athens,” in The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Rhetoric; Ober and Strauss, “Drama, Political Rhetoric, and the Discourse of Athenian Democracy,” in Nothing to Do with Dionysos?; Easterling, The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy; Sluiter, Free Speech in Classical Antiquity, 91–114; McClure, Spoken Like a Woman; and, Hall, Inventing the Barbarian. For a general discussion of Sophocles and Athenian democracy see Beer, Sophocles and the Tragedy of Athenian Democracy; for a discussion on dramatic festivals and audience see Pickard-Cambridge, The Dramatic Festivals of Athens.}

One way it did this was through what Edith Hall has termed its “multivocality,”\footnote{Hall, ‘The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy’, in Easterling, The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy, 93-126.} a term that speaks to tragedy’s tendency to give voice to those such as women, foreigners, and slaves, who were excluded from or on the outside of Athenian political life; in this sense tragedy invites us to think about persistent problems of marginalization and exclusion and injustice within our own liberal democratic societies. Far from simply reifying established norms of citizenship through “playing the other”\footnote{As Zeitlin puts it “even when female characters struggle with the conflicts generated by the particularities of their subordinate social position, their demands for identity and self-esteem are still designed primarily for exploring the male project of selfhood in the larger world” (Playing the Other, 347).}, Sophocles’ surviving plays gave powerful expression to the marginalized and excluded in the Athenian context—for example, Tecmessa, Ajax’ war-won barbarian concubine—in a way that challenges conventional Athenian understandings of difference and hierarchy. Considering tragedy as a commentary on Athenian democracy arguably might serve as a useful heuristic device for contemporary democrats who wish to think through contemporary practices of exclusion
and who seek resources for a better understanding of these practices and for calling them into question.\textsuperscript{59}

Sophoclean tragedy is, therefore, particularly democratic in its presentation of speech and action because it extends its terrain to include the excluded. In tragedy, we are invited to consider the perspectives of outsiders, such as women, slaves, and foreigners. In this way we see both persuasive and ineffective displays of good sense side by side and operative within a context that integrates the “realness” of the voices and judgments of the excluded. In this way, Sophoclean drama both extends its portrait of good sense and judgments on stage, while at the same time provoking the judging audience and reader with a broader representation of civic life. My hope is that in reflecting on the way in which Sophocles’ own reflective and inclusive dramatic performances challenged Athenian audiences to question their normative assumptions about inside and outside, justice and injustice, citizen and other, we will be motivated to think more critically about persistent sources of exclusion and structural injustice in our own liberal democratic communities.\textsuperscript{60}

Despite the importance of the plays’ performative dimensions, my reading of Sophocles is not, however, intended to be historical. I therefore only briefly draw out historical connections between different models of pernicious rhetoric, such as Odysseus in \textit{Philoctetes} or Creon in \textit{Antigone and Oedipus at Colonus}, and key figures in classical Athens such as Cleon and Alcibiades. I do, however, maintain that Sophocles uses these

\textsuperscript{59} For a helpful discussion on the way in which Athenian drama portrayed female free speech as a challenge to androcentric conceptions of \textit{parrhēsia}, see Roisman “Women’s Free Speech in Greek Tragedy” in Sluiter, \textit{Free Speech in Classical Antiquity}, 91–114. McClure, in contrast, argues that women were presented subversively on stage as disruptions to civic stability. See \textit{Spoken Like a Woman}.

\textsuperscript{60} Cases of aboriginal exclusion and voicelessness, identified briefly at the outset, are one example of contemporary issues of injustice, marginalization and exclusion our reading of Sophocles might provoke us to more deeply consider.
examples to hold up for public scrutiny common rhetorical practices and abuses. He thereby challenged familiar uses of rhetoric to conduct democratic politics. In this sense, tragedy was an instructive form of art that engaged with and inevitably stimulated the critical thinking of its audience.\footnote{For a recent discussion on the competence of Athenian audience see Revermann, “The Competence of Theatre Audiences in Fifth- and Fourth-Century Athens.”}

My readings of *Antigone*, *Ajax*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* in the following chapters operate on these three levels. I present Sophocles as a democratic thinker who alerts his audience to the unknown and to the power of contingency over human agency, yet who nevertheless who has a coherent ethical position, even if this position in its deepest moments defies and points beyond *logos*. My second chapter, for example, presents *Antigone* as a play about the seductive power of pernicious forms of rhetoric and the tragic silence of good sense. I show that Creon’s rhetoric is at least superficially convincing because he relies on oppositions—between power and nature, man and the divine, leadership and chaos—that persist today as justifications for political authority. Similarly, I argue that Antigone is neither a heroine of the household, nor is she an effective champion of traditional morality, given that she fails to evoke the sympathy of the Chorus. Finally, I briefly consider the wisdom of the Chorus as a voice of good, and in this case, common, sense. I suggest that the Chorus, more than any other character, represents a perspective that speaks persuasively and directly to the viewing audience, ancient and modern, even though the play also dramatizes the way in which this good sense is too often silenced.

My third chapter, on *Ajax*, explores the power dynamics that give persuasive force to good sense, and the social and psychological conditions that deafen listeners to its power. In particular, I explore Ajax’s suicide and Odysseus’ good sense as tableaux that
shed light on the structural and psychological conditions that block and enable good sense. The first section of this chapter considers the reasons for Ajax’s intractability and suicide in light of the psychology of shame. I develop this reading to explore why Tecmessa’s good sense fails to gain purchase on Ajax and how Ajax is in turn able to mislead Tecmessa and his friends into believing that he has come to be sensible. The second part of the chapter turns to Odysseus’ persuasive good sense. I argue that Odysseus’ tragic confrontation with Ajax’s madness helps to facilitate a conception of good sense rooted in equality, concern for others, and a revised conception of justice that is itself based on friendship, obligation, and forgiveness. Odysseus’ success, I argue, may be attributed to his position as a spectator to tragedy rather than a tragic sufferer himself. In treating this final theme I reflect on tragedy as a rhetorical mode that tries to anticipate and forestall its own realization in real life by exposing the audience to its shared vulnerability to fate and its equality before necessity. These lessons, I maintain, are fundamental components of good sense and therefore of the revised conception of justice as prudence that the play delivers to its audience.

In my fourth chapter, I present Philoctetes as a drama that focuses primarily on the destructiveness of instrumental discourse and deception. My analysis focuses, first, on Odysseus’ rhetorical technē and the logic he uses to advance his instrumental claims. He is ready and willing to marginalize the weak, and he is prepared to co-opt the language of necessity, including divine necessity, to justify his ends. Second, I turn to a study of Neoptolemus’ transition from being an instrument of Odysseus to an ally of Philoctetes; I explore this transition through the lens of the psychology of shame and the “internal other” already developed in Chapter Three. Contrary to most readers, I find Philoctetes to be the
play’s most sympathetic yet tragic character, since his capacity to hear good sense or forgive his enemies is undercut by the gravity of the injustices he experiences. I read this play as the most “tragic” of the four, for it teaches that some wounds cannot be mended, at least by human means.

My fifth chapter focuses on *Oedipus at Colonus*. I argue that Sophocles’ final play offers his most comprehensive treatment of the contrast between solipsistic rhetoric and good sense, as exemplified by Creon and Theseus, respectively. Contained in this treatment are both Sophocles’ most negative presentation of the pernicious features of self-regarding political rhetoric and his clearest portrait of the elusive political conditions under which good sense might find an effective champion. *Oedipus at Colonus* is a play that offers remarkably clear insight into Sophoclean universals and standards of judgment, and, thanks to these delineated markers, it is a play that also invites the reader to peer into a chasm that can only be expressed in the inversions and paradoxes of myth. In this sense, the play draws the spectators’ attention to an important gap between the ideal and what I call the “Oedipal centre.” This gap, I argue, is the substance of Sophoclean tragedy, and accepting its significance for both ethics and politics is a constitutive feature of Sophoclean good sense.

In the chapters that follow, I present Sophoclean tragedy as a resource for thinking more modestly and realistically about contemporary attempts to retrieve rhetoric for liberal democratic purposes, and for identifying the structural, ethical, and contingent factors that both inhibit and enable communication. Sophocles’ plays are concerned with the whole of the human condition—and in particular with the relationship between speech, power, and prudence in the *polis* and across *poleis*—in a way that is at least as central and provocative
for an understanding of rhetoric, prudence, and power as were the reflections of Athenian philosophers. For Sophocles’ dramas draw attention to the ways in which our persuasiveness during communication is influenced by various contingencies, including political contingencies defining membership, power, and exclusion, as well as larger cosmic and natural contingencies such as where we are born, how much we have suffered, how much we see ourselves as members of a community, and the fact of our mortality.

Sophocles helps us to understand the extent to which this persuasiveness is aligned with or departs from an ethical understanding of how one ought to act towards others. Even as Sophocles reveals the limits of communication, however, his tragedies both broaden our understanding of persuasive possibilities and point to the pervasive “good sense” that is not exclusive to any one civic, political or ethical context, even if it is often silenced or buried in the experiential wisdom of the people, the excluded, or the marginalized.
Chapter II

Rhetoric and Good Sense in *Antigone*

*Father, the gods give good sense (phrenas) to every human being,*
*And that is absolutely the best thing we have.*

– Sophocles, *Antigone* 62

Antigone and Creon’s respective positions continue to be seductive to modern audiences, even though (and perhaps because) scholars have tended to pay closer attention to the content of these positions than to the methods of persuasion used to advance them. Of the two, Antigone tends to be favoured. Even Aristotle, who was primarily concerned with civic oratory, drew on Antigone to exemplify how speech might be ethically persuasive even if logically unsound.63 For Hegel, who hoped Antigone would inspire heroic devotion and excellence within modern family life, Sophocles’ heroine was “the most magnificent figure ever to have appeared on earth.”64 More recently, she has been hailed as a champion of civic resistance65 and family values,66 and as a representative of both the humanizing and disruptive powers of mourning.67 Creon, meanwhile, though less obviously persuasive to a modern audience, still finds support from liberal theorists who, indebted to Hobbes, recognize the necessity of maintaining a tight “economy of citizenship.”68 Those sympathetic to Creon’s position have presented him as an unfortunate politician, but not an evil or malicious one, whose one-sided interpretation of the common good led to

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64 Cited in Williams, *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*, 221.
65 Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*.
66 Elshtain, *The Family in Political Thought*.
miscalculations in judgment,\(^69\) or as representative of the political need to make distinctions between friends and enemies even at the expense of other personal obligations.\(^70\)

Bonnie Honig has recently gone further still in presenting Creon as a proto-Periclean figure representative of Athenian democracy. She sees in Creon Sophocles’ attempt to limit the aristocratic exceptionalism associated with Homeric funeral dirges (represented by Antigone’s excessive lament for her traitor brother), by instead cultivating a collective ethos of sacrifice and courage.\(^71\)

In my reading, *Antigone* is, first of all, a play about rhetoric\(^72\) and its abuse. Moreover, it is a play that invites us to identify rhetorical abuse where we might otherwise be seduced. In my view, Creon is not democratic, nor is he representative of common concerns. His conception of political authority is autocratic: a leader must legislate according to

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\(^70\) Mary Whitlock Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics*, 118.

\(^71\) Bonnie Honig draws careful attention to this imagery in her article “Antigone’s Laments, Creon’s Grief.” She speculates that this use of Homeric imagery is intended to parody and draw attention to Pericles’ rhetoric of individual sacrifice for the sake of communal prosperity in the Funeral Oration (Thuc. 2.35-66). In contrast, Honig presents Antigone as representative of a Homeric worldview in which the individual is celebrated in death for his particular contribution in war. For Honig, the play thus “invites readers or viewers to reassess the regulation of mourning and the democracy’s post-heroic citizenship practices.” Against Honig’s reading, I argue that Creon does not simply represent democratic practice—for, though one might find subtle parallels between Periclean leadership and Creon’s attempt to legislate public over private devotion, it is a much greater stretch to suggest that these parallels make Creon democratic. I will develop this counter-argument in my discussion on Creon.

\(^72\) This reading has some affinities with George Steiner’s interpretation. For Steiner, the conflict in *Antigone* represents a conflict inherent in communication in general—which is, broadly speaking, the problem of misunderstanding and mistranslation inherent in language itself. This conflict, for Steiner, is represented by Antigone and Creon’s gender differences. “The original source of the dramatic lies in the paradox of conflict, of agonistic misunderstanding, in language itself. The roots of dialogue, without which there can be no drama, are to be found in the discovery that living beings using the ‘same language’ can mean entirely different, indeed irreconcilable, things. The paradox of divisive facsimile is present in all speech and speech-acts. It occurs persistently as between men as well as between women. But it is in the exchanges of language between men and women that the antinomies within external concordance, the reciprocal incomprehensions within outward clarity, take on a formidable thrust.” Steiner, *Antigones*, 234. While I am sympathetic to Steiner’s elegant presentation of the tragic aspect of persuasion writ large, I focus less on gender in my reading of *Antigone* and look instead at the pervasiveness of incompatible self-interested commonplace “rhetorics” that parade as reasonable or other-oriented—but which are, more accurately, reflections of individual desire dislodged from the common good.
to his own precepts, radically, and with a view to the future, not the past (181). If Creon’s rhetoric is at least superficially convincing, this is because he relies on oppositions—between power and nature, man and the divine, leadership and chaos—that persist today as justifications for political authority; and yet, his justifications unravel to expose the narrowly self-interested claims of a petty despot. This invites the following questions: does Creon’s descent from polished speech into naked self-interest simply reveal him as a leader paradigmatically lacking in good judgment? Or, does it expose an essential proximity between political rhetoric and coercion? I will argue that both are true. Creon’s poor judgment helps to amplify a connection between political persuasion and coercion that is common in political speech, but which often remains concealed by prudence.

At the same time, however, I will argue that Antigone is neither a heroine of the household (she rejects her sister and fiancé), nor is she an effective champion of traditional morality, given that she fails to evoke the sympathy of the Chorus. Studying the impact of her political attack on Creon, as well as its poor reception by her fellows, helps us to recognize Antigone’s lauded moral deed as self-regarding and misguided. Furthermore, considering the failure of Antigone’s lament to move the Chorus invites us to reflect on the strange solipsism of her ethical commitment. Ultimately, I will argue that in addition to being about the eclipsing power of coercive speech, with its seduction and its persuasive limits, Antigone is also the tragedy of good sense. I will conclude by briefly considering the wisdom of the Chorus as a voice of good and often common sense. I will suggest that the Chorus, more than any other character, represents a perspective that speaks persuasive-

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73 All in-text citations from Antigone refer to line-numbers in Sophocles, Sophocles, Volume II. Antigone. The Women of Trachis. Philoctetes. Oedipus at Colonus, 1994. All English translations of this play are taken from Lloyd-Jones unless otherwise noted.
ly and directly to the viewing audience, ancient and modern. We are left to ask what to make of its power and what is, in effect, its silence.

**Creon’s Political Rhetoric**

We are introduced to Creon as a public persona after he has called together a council of elders for a special meeting (*sunkleton*). As others have noted, this public meeting sets the stage for the action of the drama, which is largely centered on the issue of political speech and the fallout of the “the great words of boasters” (1350). Creon’s opening lines are crafty; he implicitly attributes political superiority to the gods. The gods, he says, having “shaken the city with a great toss,” have “righted it again” (*ōrthōsan palin*; 163-64). Just as the gods’ arbitrary will is the source of the city’s misfortunes, so too are the gods responsible for returning the city to stability. Some lines later, however, when Creon returns to the image of the violent storm through which man must sail, it is the city, which, when righted, provides for man’s security and allows for friendship with others; as he says, he “would never be silent, when [he] saw ruin coming on the citizens instead of safety, knowing that this is the ship that preserves us, and that it is the ship on which we sail and only when it is righted can we make friends” (184-87, trans. Lloyd-Jones, adapted). Thus, the opening presentation of the “righting” ability of the gods to protect man is superseded by the “righting” ability of man. Unlike the gods, who arbitrarily shake the city and who are aligned with the storm of the sea and the violent rebellion of civil

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74 Allen notes, Creon is introduced by the Chorus “as a new kind of man [*neochmos*] for new kinds of conditions.” (*The World of Prometheus*, 91)


76 This translation is my own.
war, we learn that man can use his wisdom to pre-empt disaster through legislation, deliberation, and rewarding friends and punishing enemies.\footnote{Retributive justice is thus at the core of Creon’s speech. For the popularity of this conception of justice in Plato’s \textit{Republic} see (331e-336a). See also Allen, \textit{The World of Prometheus}, for a general study of punishment in ancient Athens and Blundell, \textit{Helping Friends and Harming Enemies}, 26–69, for a more specific analysis of retributive justice in Sophocles.}

This opening dichotomy between the arbitrary power of the gods to bring both safety and destruction and the capacity of the city to protect itself introduces a second dichotomy between the individual and the collective, couched in seemingly democratic or deliberative language. Indeed, Creon goes so far as to hint that men are only truly knowable through political activity: “It is impossible to know thoroughly the soul and thoughts and judgments of any man before he appears versed in ruling and in laws” (175-78). This strong claim that men are collectively political is strengthened by the further assertion that political legislation includes striving to find the best counsel for the city, since he who does not strive to find the best counsel (\textit{mē tōn aristōn haptetai bouleumatōn}), but remains tongue-tied due to fear, is the worst among men (178-79). It would be reasonable to conclude from these statements that Creon is setting up the conditions for deliberative politics: speaking, legislating, and seeking counsel are presented as mutually compatible activities and are celebrated as the wisdom that enables cities to sail safely and “rightly” (163-4) within otherwise unpredictable and treacherous seas. And yet, somehow the exclusive right of one individual to speak and act decisively precludes the contribution of others. It becomes almost immediately clear that Creon understands political rule and law-giving to be an autocratic, not a deliberative or collective, activity. Creon’s earlier rhetorical linkages—of the ability to know a man with political participation, and of courageous speech with collective deliberation—are now elided as he quickly shifts from impersonally dis-
cussing law-giving as a collective and deliberative activity to unilaterally declaring new
law.\textsuperscript{78} Indeed, the leader’s decisive speech trumps the citizens’ deliberation—since listen-
ing to such decisive speech presumably involves being quiet. Creon, however, “would
never be silent, when [he] saw ruin coming on the citizens instead of safety” (184-87),\textsuperscript{79}
nor would he hesitate in taking exclusive credit for “the laws by which I make the city
great” (191).\textsuperscript{80} Therefore, while “it is the city that protects us all” and “bears us through
the storm,” the security of Creon’s state rests on the will of one individual; Creon has thus
subtly replaced the righting ability of the gods, with the righting ability of the city, with,
finally, the righting ability of himself as king.

However, Creon’s attempt to draw a distinction between man, security, and autho-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{78} If Creon was sincere in stating that man is only knowable through participation in law-giving and gov-
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{79} Trans. Lloyd-Jones, slightly adapted
\item \textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{81} In Jebb and Lloyd-Jones’s translations, there is some ambiguity between Creon’s reference to the city’s
\begin{itemize}
\item support for Oedipus’ paidas—which they translate as “children” and which could imply all his children,
\item including Polynices and Eteocles—and the demonstrative ekeimoi that is used in the following clause to
\begin{itemize}
\item indicate the two brothers: “how again when Oedipus was ruler of the land and when he perished, your
\item steadfast loyalty still upheld their children. Since his sons have fallen in one day by a two fold doom—each
\item smitten by the other, each stained with a brother’s blood,—I now possess the throne and all its powers.”
\item Kitto translates less ambiguously as “when he perished round his sons you rallied, / Still firm and steadfast
\item in your loyalty. / Since they have fallen by a double doom upon a single day, two brothers each / Killing the
\item other with polluted sword, I now possesses the throne and royal power / By right of nearest kinship with the
\end{itemize}
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\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
At the same time, however, it is important that he not be too closely associated with this troubled family, since he has already implied a connection between the most recent civil war and the arbitrary, dangerous will of the gods. Creon’s not insignificant challenge, then, is to distance his rule from the strife associated with his family and the gods’ unpredictable authorship of this strife, without undermining his credentials as a hereditary king.

Moreover, according to Creon’s own presentation of the gods, one might forgive both brothers equally, as well as their father whose demise preceded them, as having been playthings of an unpredictable divine will. But, of course, if Polyneices and Eteocles were playthings of the gods, then man stands no chance of righting strife and steering a safe and prosperous ship of state. Creon’s promise to restore order to the Theban people through human wisdom would have no purchase on an audience for whom the gods’ arbitrariness was axiomatic. Creon’s speech carefully nestles the decision to leave the body of Polyneices out to rot within a larger set of claims about security, authority, and necessity; he emphasizes the need to set right the disastrous conditions that nature and the gods have imposed on him. His tactic is to attempt to render both his family history and the will of the gods in instrumental terms. He erases Polyneices’ status as a child and outcast ruler of the city and casts him unambiguously as a vengeful enemy, while the gods are reduced to predictable actors who abide by Creon’s conception of retributive justice.\textsuperscript{82} Polyneices is
dead,”\textsuperscript{79} suggesting much more explicitly that the city loyally supported both sons until they perished (168-75). I prefer Kitto’s version, which seems to make more sense of the ekeinoi and the relation between the two phrases; either way, however, it is important that Creon does not suggest that the city rallied exclusively to Eteocles.

\textsuperscript{82} Creon’s presentation of the divine shifts according to context. In the beginning, he presents the gods as the authors of political instability, against whom must steer a safe course (162-210). Later, he suggests that the gods are motivated by Theban politics and would not deviate from his own conception of retributive justice (280-89). Finally, at the end of the play, he presents the gods as uninterested in and unaffected by human affairs (1040-44). This almost exaggerated inconsistency makes it difficult to see how a scholar such as
therefore declared an enemy and denied burial; whereby Creon erased his identity as beloved son of Oedipus and the Theban people, nephew to the king, and brother of the king’s surviving children. Creon further departs from established political and religious custom by insisting that the body remain unburied within the city, to be defiled by ravenous animals. As Creon tells it, Polyneices had come “meaning to burn to the ground his native city and the gods of his race, and meaning to drink the people’s blood and to enslave its people” (198-202). Yet even Creon, in his opening lines, presents Polyneices and his brother Eteocles as equally supported by the Theban people (168-72). While Sophocles does not provide us here with the background to the brothers’ quarrel, we know from Ahrensdorf arrive at the conclusion that Creon is “genuinely devoted to the city and pious” (Greek Tragedy and Political Philosophy, 87).

While there is some debate over the extent to which Creon’s decree violated Hellenic burial practices and punishment, the more significant violation was leaving the body out to rot within the city. For textual evidence that Polyneices is left unburied within the city, see Tiresias claim that the rotting body was being eaten by local animals and thus causing pollution (998-1022) – it also seems unlikely that Antigone would be capable of leaving the city unseen to bury the body for if the body were outside the city, some or all of the guards would likely have been posted at the city gates in order to identify trespassers. The absence of these details suggests that the body was indeed left within the city gates. For proof internal to the play that respectful burial of friends and enemies was commonly accepted as the will of the gods, see 77-79, 450-70, and 1040-44. The Chorus also hints that the decree violates divine will when it suggests that the gods themselves may intervene to bury the body (278-79), and shows reluctance to enforce the decree from the outset (216-18). Helene Foley argues that traitors were often cast out to sea or refused burial on Attic soil “Tragedy and Democratic Ideology: The Case of Sophocles’ Antigone,” in History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama, 134. Danielle Allen (The World of Prometheus, 215-24), draws on Thucydides to argue that leaving a corpse out to rot was stigmatized as ‘ Spartan,’ yet was a practice that Athenians also adopted in retaliation. Executed traitors were thrown in pits outside of the city to avoid pollution. Throwing them in a pit was a way of expelling them from common memory. Although Rush Rehm argues that while it may have been standard to refuse burial on Attic soil to traitors and those guilty of sacrilege, “it was accepted as a pan-Hellenic custom that the dead were owed burial somewhere. . . a compulsion that was magnified if the dead were kin” (Marriage to Death, 181n9) In Plato’s Laws, we find a provision that the impious and their associates be denied burial “When he dies he is to be cast out beyond the borders unburied. And if some free man should take part in burying him, he is to be put on trial for impiety by whoever wishes.” (909c); Cf. Laws 873d-874b. This passage supports the idea that the unburied should be cast beyond city walls. [It also suggests that a more flexible interpretation of “divine law” than Antigone permits (that is to say, that refusing burial as a form of punishment would have been acceptable). I will return to this idea in my discussion of Antigone.] See also Iliad, 21.71.
other texts that the brothers fought over the crown of Oedipus, which they were presumably given to share.\textsuperscript{84}

Bonnie Honig argues that Creon’s departure from accepted burial norms represents democracy’s departure from the Homeric emphasis on burial. According to Honig, “If Creon’s treatment of Polyneices exceeds the bounds of the permissible, that is perfectly compatible with the claim that Creon represents.”\textsuperscript{85} In Honig’s reading, the play dramatizes residual tensions between the Homeric view represented by Antigone’s individualistic defiance and her insistence on remembering her brother as an irreplaceable loved one, on the one hand, and, on the other, the democratic shift towards common burial. Creon’s harsh decree exaggerates the “recognizably democratic figure failing to bury properly in a way that exceeds even the permissible impropriety called for by a dead man’s treason.”\textsuperscript{86} For Honig, the connection to Periclean burial tradition could mean either that Sophocles approved the regulation and wanted to show “its reasonableness by comparison with Creon’s more extreme prohibition,”\textsuperscript{87} or, that “democracy disrespects the dead, tout court.”\textsuperscript{88} Honig may be right to observe that Creon’s law would likely have reminded an Athenian audience of their departure from traditional Homeric approaches to death and burial.\textsuperscript{89} It is a far stretch, however, from Creon’s politically inexpedient and impious law to Pericles’

\textsuperscript{84} In Sophocles’ final surviving play, \textit{Oedipus at Colonus}, written over thirty years after \textit{Antigone}, we learn from Antigone’s sister Ismene that Polyneices was the rightful inheritor of the crown yet was usurped by his younger brother Eteocles (365-75). While all three Theban plays were written as part of different trilogies and are not dramatically related to one another, it is possible that Sophocles provides such extensive background in \textit{Oedipus at Colonus} to clarify inconsistencies between the Theban narratives and to provide a new framework for understanding the motivations of the characters in earlier plays.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., “Antigone’s Laments,” 10.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 25

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 21

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 25

\textsuperscript{89} See also Harvey Yunis for a discussion of Cleon’s rhetorical capacity to use “democratic deliberation” against itself. Yunis, \textit{Taming Democracy}, 87-92.
attempt to subsume individual exceptionalism under the collective exceptionalism of the Athenian empire.⁹⁰

Rather, the excessiveness of Creon’s law has a clearer parallel in Achilles’ excessive and vindictive abuse of the body of the dead Hector. But whereas the Iliad is the story of the wrath of Achilles finally yielding to compassion and ends with an established moral order in which the divine insistence on burial is set above vengeance, Creon’s excessive wrath against a member of his own family not only violates the limits of political justice as vengeance established by the Homeric tradition, but deliberately overturns this tradition. Creon’s law subsumes the Homeric law of burial, and the existential equality of enemies in love and death that this law establishes, under the political law of justice as vengeance. Sophocles may very well have identified this conception of justice with Athenian democracy, but, even so, the primary tension he is setting up is not between a prior individualism and democratic collectivism—for Creon is anything but a democrat and he is surely more convinced than anyone of his own exceptionalism. Instead, Sophocles may be pointing to a tension between the Athenian tendency to privilege retributive justice over piety, and instrumental reason over good sense. Rather than seeing Creon as a proto-Periclean figure, those who are committed to this style of contextual reading ought to see him as a prescient image of Thucydides’ Cleon.⁹¹

Creon’s decree is from the outset out of step with public sentiment and customary law, and it does not represent what Bonnie Honig terms a proto-democratic economy of

⁹⁰ See Thucydides, 2.43-5 for Pericles’ Funeral Oration. See Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood for an alternate yet equally unconvincing perspective on Creon’s democratic credentials. “Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles’ Antigone.”
Not only is his understanding of political authority autocratic, but his credentials as a tyrant become even more apparent as the play progresses. He casts aspersions on all dissenters; he refuses to listen to reasonable advice; he is impious, yet he uses religion instrumentally according to his will; he sees rhetoric as a means of masking his coercive view of politics. When confronted by Ismene’s emotional reminder that in executing her sister Antigone, Creon would kill the future wife of his own son, he responds coldly and expediently that “the furrows of others can be ploughed!” (569). For Creon, human relations have no intrinsic significance. People, like customs, are replaceable. Creon’s tyrannical principle implies the political utility of collective amnesia, and forgetfulness is intrinsically hostile to the cumulative process by which communities develop common sense over time.94

And yet, again in contrast to Honig, while we might draw a useful parallel between Creon’s politically expedient rhetoric, and the more general principle of forgetfulness that

92 Honig emphasizes Creon’s “economy of substitution,” which she sees as representative of economies of mourning in Periclean Athens and as antithetical to the Homeric “economy of individuality.”
93 See footnote 15.
94 In speaking of “common sense,” I follow what I take to be Hannah Arendt’s understanding, as derived primarily from The Human Condition and her lectures on Kant in Responsibility and Judgment. While too wide ranging and nuanced to be adequately summarized here, Arendt’s point, in brief, seems to be that common sense is a prerequisite for any kind of collective judgment or democratic action, inasmuch as it roots public discourse in well-weathered cumulative standards of right and wrong. The enemy of common sense is the obliterating tendency of tyranny, totalitarianism, and violence (Other thinkers, such as Plato (561c) and Saxonhouse might add democracy to this list.). See Saxonhouse, Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens. Arendt was, of course, largely preoccupied with that obliterating tendency, as “even our ordinary common-sense judgment is rendered ineffective…when we live in a topsy-turvy world, a world where we cannot find our way by abiding by the rules of what once was common sense.” Arendt “Understanding and Politics,” 383. In Between Past and Future, Arendt writes that “Common sense—which the French so suggestively call the “good sense,” … discloses to us the nature of the world insofar as it is a common world; we owe to it the fact that our strictly private and ‘subjective’ five senses and their sensory data can adjust themselves to a non-subjective and ‘objective’ world which we have in common and share with others. Judging is one, if not the most, important activity in which this sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass” 221.
Nietzsche,\textsuperscript{95} in particular, recommends, it is important to emphasize that the manner in which this amnesia is usually activated in democracy—that is, through freedom of speech\textsuperscript{96}—is antithetical to the unilateral and silencing principle of Creon’s tyrannical rule. Still, while Creon manages to quiet the selected audience of Theban elders, his excess provokes Antigone’s famous act of defiance: she buries the body herself.

Antigone’s defiance threatens Creon’s carefully calculated “economy of citizenship.” To be sure, she is disobedient, but this is not the central issue. Creon’s frequent references to greed and pre-emptive accusations of bribery,\textsuperscript{97} as well as his carefully constructed opening speech—which, we should recall, serves to reiterate a decree already made public\textsuperscript{98}—suggest that he was prepared for some dissent. Antigone is threatening because she challenges the oppositions between god and politics, rulers and ruled, that Creon had rhetorically constructed in order to persuade his subjects of his sovereign power. Perhaps because of her relationship to the dead,\textsuperscript{99} perhaps because of her status as a woman, perhaps because the tragedy she has experienced as the daughter of Oedipus has left her with a stronger sense of piety than that of most, perhaps because of a combination

\textsuperscript{95} For Nietzsche’s most focused discussion on the problem of cumulative memory and “common sense” and the utility of forgetting, see Nietzsche, \textit{On The Advantage And Disadvantage Of History For Life.}

\textsuperscript{96} For a discussion of the connection between forgetfulness and democracy in ancient Athens, see Saxonhouse, \textit{Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens}; Saxonhouse argues that amnesia is a unique feature of democratic life, given its tendency to value progress over tradition and the potentially uprooting aspect of \textit{parrhesia} (free speech).

\textsuperscript{97} Accusations of bribery were a common rhetorical method of slandering one’s opponent in ancient Athens. See Taylor, “Bribery in Athenian Politics Part I.” See Ober and Strauss Drama, “Political Rhetoric, and the Discourse of Athenian Democracy,” for a discussion of bribery as a “common rhetorical topos” in \textit{Nothing to Do with Dionysos}.? See also Strauss, B. “The Cultural Significance of Bribery in Ancient Athenian Politics: The evidence of the Period 403-386.”

\textsuperscript{98} See lines 5-7. Josh Beer also raises this point in \textit{Sophocles and the Tragedy of Athenian Democracy}, 71.

\textsuperscript{99} In \textit{Oedipus at Colonus}, Sophocles has Antigone promise to Polynices that she will bury him should he die, as he is fated, at the hands of his brother in battle for the crown (1399-1413). While we cannot read this background back into \textit{Antigone}, which was written at least thirty years earlier, it is possible that Sophocles included this scene in his last surviving play to clarify Antigone’s motives. In this sense we might read \textit{OC} as an attempt to clarify things that remained hazy in \textit{Antigone} with a view to shaping subsequent interpretations of the earlier play.
of some or all of these factors with her own particular temperament, Antigone alone rebels against Creon’s edict. She refuses to accept his attempt to render religious law subservient to political expediency. And yet, while her defiant action is out of step with her fellow Thebans, her concerns, arguably, are not. By emphasizing her gender as her primary offence (528, 678-80), Creon attempts to marginalize concerns that are not gender specific.

Faced with Antigone’s unanticipated and forceful defense of accepted morality, Creon’s attempts to present his will as representative of the good of the collective descent into egoism and coercion. When told, by his son, that most of the city opposes the death penalty, Creon retorts, “Must I give orders then by their permission?” (734) When Haemon responds with the accusation that Creon’s rule defies the will of the people, he replies, “Must I rule this land for another and not for myself?” (736) When told, “There is no city that belongs to a single man!” (737) Creon is unmoved and replies, “Is not the city thought to belong to its ruler?” (738) When Haemon further points out that Creon’s rule not only opposes the will of the people but opposes the standards of political justice (743), he affirms, “Am I offending when I show regard for my own office?” (744). This ex-

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100 While their tacit agreement with the charge that Creon has violated the norms set by common sense is arguably evident throughout the play, one might point in particular to the Chorus’s silence Antigone’s claim: “These think as I do—but they dare not speak” (507). While this is admittedly a stronger example of Antigone’s rhetorical attempt to align her dissent with common sense, it is nevertheless a claim about the Chorus’s disapproval of the King’s actions which stands uncorrected in his audience. As well one might look to the Chorus’s reluctant, even sarcastic endorsement of Creon’s decree near the beginning of the play (211-14).

101 This is not intended to undermine the gendered divisions that clearly mark the play and which make the confrontation between Antigone and Creon so provocative and challenging, particularly for an Athenian audience, which, while it was used to seeing women portrayed subversively on stage, certainly wouldn’t have accepted or empathized with Antigone as an actual model for political action. For an excellent general discussion of female representation in theatre see Zeitlin’s “Playing the Other” in Winkler and Zeitlin, Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Nevertheless, perhaps because Antigone is a woman and hence an unrealistic antagonist, she is able safely to serve as Sophocles’ critical spokesperson against political rhetoric, even as the Chorus publicly dismisses her action on a number of occasions as excessively reckless (471-3; 852-5; 872-5; 928-30).

102 My discussion of Antigone’s speech follows in the next section.
change, spoken in the heat of argument and stripped free of practiced rhetorical flourish, lays bare Creon’s unflattering conception of political rule.

It also gives rise to Creon’s second noteworthy decision—to bury Antigone alive in a cave where she may “pray to Hades, the only one among the gods whom she respects” (777-78). Scholars have suggested that Creon’s reaction to Haemon and his rash decision to bury Antigone alive represent a departure from his earlier civic-mindedness. This does not do justice to Creon’s authoritarian character. Provoked by Haemon’s “reasonable” attempt to persuade him that he has gone too far (632-765), Creon’s decision is certainly an impassioned departure—but only from the official script. Haemon’s reasonable pleas are ineffective because Creon is motivated neither by what other people actually think, nor by the desire to preserve good relations with family members. Creon’s aggression helps us to see clearly the self-interest that his earlier rhetoric had attempted to conceal. Haemon’s pleas do not stand a chance because Creon’s concerns deny the common ground on which any claim to reasonableness might be based. The

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103 Among political theorists, Honig and Sourvinou-Inwood are most convinced that Creon represents democratic concerns. See Sourvinou-Inwood, “Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning.” 146 and Honig, “Antigone’s Laments, Creon’s Grief,” 9: “If he becomes tyrannical over time, that may signal a defect of character; or it may suggest perspicacity.” Ahrensorf reads Creon as “evidently devoted to both Thebes and the gods” and thinks that it is clear that the Chorus “supports him, even against Antigone,” Greek Tragedy and Political, 88. Charles Segal presents Sophocles as devoted to the good of the state, at least initially, see Segal, Sophocles’ Tragic World and Segal, Tragedy and Civilization. Blundell stresses the tyrannical undertones of Creon’s political rhetoric, yet nevertheless sees him as committed to what he believes to be the common good, see Blundell, Helping Friends and Harming Enemies, 130-2. Nussbaum sees Creon as narrow-minded yet genuinely committed to the good of the polis, see Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness, 60.

104 At the beginning of the play, Antigone relates the public decree, which includes a stated punishment of death by “public stoning” (35). Later, when Antigone asks if Creon will “do more than to take me and kill me?” (497) he does not indicate that he intends to change the punishment. Rather, he says he wishes “nothing more” (498). Presumably, this is meant to signal his intention of sticking with his initial decree.

105 Barker’s argues for a Haemon-focused reading of Antigone arguing that Haemon models deliberative speech and is an idea model for citizenship, see Barker, Tragedy and Citizenship, 21. But as Barker himself points out, picking Haemon as poster-child for reasonable, deliberative speech, is complicated by the fact that Haemon later attempts to kill his father, misses, and kills himself over the body of Antigone (1206-43).
much more serious problem that Sophocles draws out, then, is that deliberative reasoning is ineffective precisely where it is most needed. As Antigone’s own rhetoric now reveals, self-interest detached from the common interest is intractable.\textsuperscript{106}

\textbf{Antigone’s “Political” Rhetoric}

Antigone’s speech challenges the rational assumption and dichotomy laid out by Creon. And yet, this does not mean that she fails to follow Creon’s logic, or that her role as a woman and her commitment to customary laws and history preclude her from understanding the importance of political order. If anything, of the two principal characters, Antigone is more attuned to Theban common sense; Creon, in contrast, attempts radically to re-found common sense according to his own political objectives. Still, while her political engagement with Creon exposes his self-interested, arbitrary, and coercive conception of the political, Antigone fails, ultimately, to cast her objections to Creon’s decree in terms of a larger set of Theban concerns and interests. Her rhetoric thus fails to serve or speak to the common perspective that it might otherwise represent.

We are first introduced to Antigone in the opening scene as she, having just learned of Creon’s public decree, endeavours to entice her sister to join her in revolt. Yet Antigone’s attempt to persuade her sister is weak. She asks once, “Will you bury this dead man together with this hand of mine?” (44) When met by Ismene’s predictable hesitation

\textsuperscript{106} Euben shares my skeptical reading of Creon, yet, for him, Creon’s problem lies primarily in his effort to “establish order(s) without contradiction and contest.” As Euben accurately points out, “there is no single measure within which differences can be assayed, compared, and domesticated. This incommensurability, rather than being a threat to politics, seems to be part of its substance.” Corrupting Youth, 181. While I completely agree with the latter part of this statement, I think that Creon’s attempt to impose order is rooted in a much deeper insatiable desire than the desire for order itself. In my reading, Creon is motivated by a desire to remake the world—exclusively and in his own image, even at the expense of the world—rather than by a desire simply to order the world.
at defying the law and welcoming “death by public stoning” (35-6), Antigone retorts hotly, “Well, I will bury my brother, and yours, if you will not; I will not be caught betraying him” (45-46). Antigone is self-righteous and dismissive of Ismene’s perspective. Ismene’s attempts to persuade her—by pointing out that “we must remember that we are women, who cannot fight against men, and then that we are ruled by those whose power is greater” (61-62), since “there is no sense in actions that exceed our powers” (67-68)—simply raise Antigone’s ire and position: “I would not tell you to do it, and even if you were willing to act after all I would not be content for you to act with me!” (69-71). If Antigone’s objective is to persevere in effectively burying the body, she would be wise to accept her sister’s commitment to keep her crime a secret (84-5). And yet, Antigone challenges her sister to defy her wishes: “Ah tell them all! I shall hate you far more if you remain silent, and do not proclaim this to all” (86-7).

Ismene’s resistance is reasonable. Since they are the only two remaining descendants in the line of Laius, it is better for them to stay alive and restore some honour to the family than add to the toll of shameful deaths (60). Further, and perhaps more importantly, she knows that it is impossible to succeed in burying Polynieces. He is too heavily guarded. If Polynieces’ safe passage to the underworld depends on safe burial, then Antigone’s short interventions offer little hope. From Ismene’s perspective, Antigone’s determination to protect the dead is reckless. Though Antigone demonstrates a fierce loyalty to dead kin and, presumably to what she takes to be divine laws of burial, her defiance takes no account of her obligations to her living sister and her future husband. Her piety reflects a

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107 It is important to emphasize that Antigone does not actually bury the body. Rather, she sprinkles the body with dust and pours on it a funeral libation. Antigone thus ‘buries’ the body twice and each time she leaves the body above ground (54-60, 421-31).
distorted privileging of duty to the dead over present and future relations. To make matters worse, Antigone later raises doubts about whether the gods will even approve of her disobedience (921-25). Given the ethical trade-offs she must make, her action is nowhere close to being unambiguously “right,” contrary to what some commentators have claimed.

Antigone’s stance is indeed extreme, but it is contradictory only if we assume that she is primarily devoted to family and piety. In my reading, Antigone’s defiance is more political than spiritual—even if, in the end, her politics turn out to be self-regarding and piously oriented. Antigone’s intention is publicly to undermine Creon’s tyrannical order and to restore the authority of tradition and customary law over expedient politics. As Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood notes, Antigone’s first public speech is, in this regard, “a piece of brilliant rhetoric.” In contrast to the obsequious guard who turned her in, An-

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108 Antigone’s rejection of the living and of her duties as sister and future wife make it difficult to see her as a champion “of the prerogatives of the oikos, preserver of familial duty and honor, protector of children, if need be, their fierce avenger” as Elshtain wants her to be (The Family in Political Thought, 55); Peter Euben also raises this objection to Elshtain’s reading (Corrupting Youth, 168).

109 Among readings of Antigone, Whitman’s is particularly one-sided. He claims that “It is useless to speak of the defects of Antigone’s qualities; there are no defects” (Whitman, Sophocles, 90). My argument in this chapter is not, however to say that Antigone was impious or that her piety is not sincere. Rather, I simply take her action to be more political than pious (as her sprinkling of dust over her brother’s body conveys a symbolic message of disobedience but it is not actually an attempt to bury the body; cf. footnote 84).

110 Ahrensdorf argues that Antigone buries the body out of a desire for “immortal happiness” and because she does not believe the body to be fully dead prior to burial rites. “Antigone denies that, as one who is by nature a mortal, human being, she must yield to those with the power to kill her, because she denies that she is mortal. As long as she satisfies the gods, she will enjoy immortal happiness. Antigone defends the wisdom of attempting to bury her brother by denying natural necessity and especially the natural necessity of mortality. Antigone most obviously rebels against the human laws and conventions of her city. But her deepest rebellion is against the sway not of Creon or Thebes but of nature itself” Ahrensdorf, Greek Tragedy and Political Philosophy, 101. This interpretation is strange for a number of reasons, but, most importantly, we have no reason to assume that Antigone believes she will be immortally “happy.” That is a Christian concept of the afterlife that simply does not apply to the Greeks’ ambiguous, even unwelcoming, conception of Hades. See for example, Odyssey 11.488–491. There is also nothing in the play indicating that Antigone thinks the body is not fully dead or that her attempts at burial will be successful.

Antigone displays no fear of punishment, nor does she attempt to appease Creon’s anger. When asked why she “dared” to disobey the law, Antigone appeals to a higher authority:

Yes, for it was not Zeus who made this proclamation, nor was it Justice who lives with the gods below that established such laws among men, nor did I think your proclamations strong enough to have power to overrule, mortal as they were, the unwritten and unfailing ordinances of the gods. For these have life not simply today and yesterday but forever, and no one knows how long ago they were revealed. For this I did not intend to pay the penalty among the gods for fear of any man’s pride. (450-60).

Antigone makes clear that the unwritten, unchanging laws of the gods, the laws of burial that she rebels to uphold, represent a higher order of justice than Creon’s law. It is Creon who has broken with authority in attempting to legislate against the unwritten, unchanging custom. Creon’s attempt to justify his departure from custom in terms of political necessity has no weight. Where justice and injustice are concerned, the gods’ tribunal is eternal, man’s lasts but a day. Antigone would be a fool not to abide by what is eternal over what is temporal. Moreover, Antigone makes clear that Creon’s threats have no power over her, since she does not fear death and considers Creon “the fool” for having issued such a reckless edict in violation of customary morality and divine law (463-470). Creon, unhinged by Antigone’s appeals to an authority higher than his own, says

112 According to Nussbaum, Antigone’s rhetoric is impious. “She sets herself up as the arbiter of what Zeus can and cannot have decreed, just as Creon took it upon himself to say whom the gods could and could not have covered: no other character bears out her view of Zeus as single-mindedly backing the rights of the dead” (Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness, 63–64). I do not think Nussbaum captures Antigone’s motive. Rather, Antigone’s intent is to say that Creon’s law is inconsistent with established religious law and seeks to overturn customary morality without any kind of spiritual backing. Even Antigone, in her final dirge, acknowledges that she cannot fully know the will of the gods (921-7).

113 Sourvinou-Inwood, “Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning,” 143. In this sense, one could make the case that Antigone is attempting to restore a Homeric order over and against the politically expedient and rational order represented by Creon. The difficulty with Honig’s reading is that she focuses on a misleading contrast between the Homeric elite and democracy; this formula makes her downplay the elite rationalism and absolutism of Creon’s leadership and overlook the democratic or egalitarian principles inherent in the Homeric teaching on burial and man’s existential equality before love and death.
little substantively in response. Instead, he focuses on the fact that she laughs at “us” and quickly turns to falsely accusing Ismene (488-494).

Antigone’s tactic is to expose the tyrannical nature of Creon’s silencing rule by volunteering to speak for the people: “These think as I do—but they dare not speak” (507-8). In contrast to Creon’s attempt to align disobedience with shame, Antigone appeals to common sense: “To reverence a brother is no shame” (511). When Creon proceeds to justify his decision according to principles of political justice, Antigone points to the triviality of retributive justice in the face of love and death (523). Rather than engage Antigone on any of these points, all of which seriously threaten the legitimacy of his opening speech, Creon attacks Antigone’s status as a woman and accuses her of attempting to rule (528). Nevertheless, Antigone’s case is silenced. Neither Ismene nor Haemon succeeds in convincing Creon to moderate his punishment.

In her earlier attacks on her sister and on Creon, Antigone claimed that remaining alive and among the living would give her no respite from the horrors inflicted on her family and her brother. She made clear that Hades represents a new beginning, in which the hatred and political ambition that continue to divide her family will be neutralized (84, 521-2). She even suggested defiantly that she looked forward to this, thereby undermining Creon’s power to authorize either retribution or forgiveness (462). Now, however, faced with immediate death, Antigone starts to waver. She sings of bodily attachment and expresses a desire for recognition and affirmation from her community. Antigone’s mistake, it seems, was to conflate political justice, broadly speaking—including the legitimate desire for peace and order—with Creon’s version of retributive justice. That is, Antigone’s

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114 It is perhaps too obvious to point out that Antigone’s designs are not set on ruling, nor does she represent any direct threat to Creon’s crown.
deed validates Creon’s claims by conflating his rule with Thebes in general; she therefore extends her rejection of his laws to a rejection of her Theban community,\textsuperscript{115} of her living family members, and, most drastically, of life itself.\textsuperscript{116} Her funeral dirge is her last speech to the audience and the first time Antigone engages directly with the Chorus. And yet, even though she finally recognizes the power of sensual experience and tries belatedly to set the record straight and to gain the sympathy and approval of the Chorus, Antigone’s final song fails to connect with Theban common sense and to evoke the Chorus’s pity. Her isolation when facing death helps to reveal more clearly the solipsism of her seemingly pious act.

\textbf{Antigone’s Solipsistic Song}

In turning to lyric song, Antigone joins the emotive discourse of her Theban fellows. Yet whereas the Chorus reverts to lyric poetry when reflecting on man’s common condition, Antigone’s use of lyric poetry is personal, even solipsistic. While moving at times, Antigone sings primarily of her own pain and anxiety facing death. She therefore fails to communicate to the Chorus and fails to evoke its acceptance of her transgression. The Chorus initiates the lament by singing of their sorrow upon seeing her about to depart for the dead (801-5). In response, Antigone lets loose her grief, singing first of her own finitude. This, she cries, will be her “last journey”; this, the “last sun that ever I shall behold. Never another!” Now, she even expresses belated regret that she will not be mar-

\textsuperscript{115} The community, of course, cannot support an attack on civic legislation in the absence of a convincing alternative conception of political justice. Creon, at least, has claimed that he will provide peace and security.

\textsuperscript{116} As Ismene points out, familial duty could just as easily be understood as avoiding shameful death and restoring honour to the bloodline (59-60).
ried and will not be honoured in marriage (813-16). Her earlier impetuous rejection of life
now haunts her, as the Chorus asks, unsympathetically, “Is it not with glory and praise that
you depart to this cavern of the dead?” (817-18). Antigone willed her own solitude by
acting with singular concern. She exacerbates her solitude by making this a central theme
of her song. When her self-pity fails to elicit a reaction, she attempts to situate her plight
within Theban common sense by drawing on well-known literary and mythic references.

First, Antigone recalls the story of Niobe, the goddess who, having offended Arте-
mis and Apollo, lost all of her children, and then spent the rest of her days alone among
the rocks in Sipylos (Iliad, 24.602-20). This reference to Niobe is particularly poignant in
that it points to the scene in the Iliad where Achilles returns Hector’s body to Priam for
burial. After promising to return Hector’s body, Achilles is moved by compassion to invite
Priam to share in a meal. He then tells the story of Niobe’s grief to remind Priam that even
a goddess who had suffered a far worse fate—in having lost all twelve of her children—
still remembered to eat once the children were buried, even though she was exhausted with
weeping.117 By inviting comparison with the Iliadic teaching on burial,118 the Niobe refer-
eence in the Antigone serves as a reminder that even grief finds its limit in bodily necessity;
it suggests the priority of living for the living. The connection to Niobe is all the more
fitting given that the thought of Antigone’s own death has signalled to her the importance
of bodily ties (806-816). And yet, Antigone is ineffective in fully drawing out the implica-

117 Though there where other references to the Niobe story in popular culture, including a lost play on Niobe
written by Sophocles himself, the spiritual authority of Homer, and the link between this section of the Iliad
and Antigone’s thematic focus on burial, make it highly probable that Sophocles was thinking of the Iliadic
reference.
118 The story of Niobe is embedded in the larger Homeric teaching on the importance of burial for the dead
for the gods. Creon’s law subsumes the Homeric law of burial, and the existential equality of all men in love
and death that this law establishes, under the political law of justice as vengeance. Antigone’s political
rhetoric is targeted at Creon’s law while her lament attempts to evoke, if nothing else, the compassion of her
fellow Thebans.
tions of this realization—she misses the opportunity, latent in her analogy, to acknowledge her potential mistake in privileging death over her own life and living relations (806-16; 840-44; 880). Unlike Priam, however, Antigone does not have an Achilles to make the connection explicit. Whereas in the *Iliad* Homer has Achilles soothe Priam with this story, Antigone has willed against common sense, and so must soothe herself. She does not speak with a view to communicating with her audience, and it is not even clear that she is listening to her own voice as she laments. Moreover, she gets so carried away in her reflection that she does not think about the implication of comparing the goddess’s solitude to her own situation: “very like her am I, as the god sends me to sleep” (832-33). The Chorus, perhaps predictably, hears Antigone’s speech as a confirmation of her overreaching and self-regarding desire for honour. Its response is to remind Antigone that, unlike Niobe, she is a mortal. They affirm that sharing, at least partially, in that figure’s doom will add to her renown, but in so doing they eclipse Antigone’s desire for political and social honour by shifting the significance of her renown from her defiant deed to her horrible death (834-39). This shift represents a complete failure of communication and understanding; the good and common sense that is potentially available is not “activated” when it might have been most beneficial.\(^{119}\)

Antigone responds poorly by lashing out at her compatriots. She fears, aptly, that the city is “mocking her,” and she reasserts that the defiance for which she was sentenced

\(^{119}\) While the Chorus earlier seemed to endorse Antigone’s interpretation of divine law as worthy of respect (872) they also stated that they could not endorse her act (873-5). Whereas they previously criticized her for being too reckless (875), they now, in pointing out that she conflates herself with Niobe, seem to suggest that her attempt to act individually and on behalf of divine law is itself impious. Thinking that she can act alone and without the care of and for the living suggests a hubristic identification with the gods rather than with her fellow Thebans. If this reading is correct, it would help to explain why the Chorus become increasingly cold toward Antigone throughout her funeral dirge (cf. footnote 124).
to death and left “unwept by friends” was due to Creon’s questionable laws (847-8). The Chorus, in response, reminds her that her rejection of Creon’s justice showed her as characterized by daring (tolma). In challenging the authority of retributive justice she courted its vengeful principle (852-55). If the city rejects Creon’s rule, the Chorus members are clear that they do not support single-minded defiance as an appropriate counteraction. Creon is not a just, fair, or other-oriented leader, but he at least stands for peace, stability, and order; Antigone’s rogue ethic, even if it accords more with divine justice, is much more threatening to civic peace.

Antigone’s second literary reference is to a story Herodotus tells about Intaphrenes’ wife, who stands in front of the castle of Darius excessively lamenting the death penalty the king has issued against Intaphrenes and all his male relatives (including in-laws). One day, moved by the woman’s excessive grieving, Darius takes pity on her and asks her which of her male relatives she would like to save from death. Intaphrenes’ wife chooses her brother as the one relative who is irreplaceable, and Darius finds her “reasoning” so delightful that he agrees to free her eldest son as well (3.119). Antigone’s invocation of this Herodotean episode\(^\text{120}\) elicits a parallel between the perverted rational-

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\(^{120}\) While, according to Knox, this passage is the most “discussed in all Attic drama,” (The Heroic Temper, 104) famous interpreters such as Goethe wished it spurious, while Jebb believes this is the case (http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0023%3Atext%3Dcomm%3Acommline%3D909) and others such as Knox and Honig make sense of this passage. Honig (“Antigone’s Laments, Creon’s Grief”), for example, sees it as a confirmation of Creon’s Periclean economy of substitution in mourning; see also Tyrrell and Bennett, Recapturing Sophocles’ Antigone, 112–7. Bernard Knox (The Heroic Temper, 106–7), argues that “she is telling Polynieces that no other love, not even that she might have had or the child of her own body, could surpass her love for him” Benardete argues, much less plausibly in my view, that Antigone is here imagining herself to be another Jocasta for she “assumes that if her son died she would need another husband to have another so; and only one condition would make that inevitable: if her son were her husband” (Sacred Transgressions, 111). Aristotle seems to have no doubt about the passage’s validity, referring to it as an example of ethical reasoning. “If what you say seems incredible, then add the cause, as Sophocles does. An example is the passage from the Antigone, arguing that there is more obligation to a brother than to husband or children; for the latter can be replaced if they die” (Rhet. 1417a).
ism and despotic rule of Darius and his impious Persian empire and Creon’s attempt to impose his own rational order on Thebes. In one sense, this parallel to Herodotus underscores that Antigone’s devotion to her brother to the point of disregarding her other relations is not absurd; indeed, it is matched by the choice that Intaphrenes’ wife makes and that Darius rewards. The fact that one must make these types of calculations about loved ones reveals an even deeper incompatibility between the logos that animates political justice and the love that we naturally share with our relations. For, more absurd than the calculation itself is the fact that Antigone and Intaphrenes’ wife must make these calculations at all. In expecting Antigone and Intaphrenes’ wife to choose between loved ones for the sake of political expediency, Creon and Darius expose the unreasonableness of their respective logoi. In using the instrumental vocabulary of replaceability to frame their dedication to love of their own, Antigone and Intaphrenes’ wife are co-opted into the logic of pure instrumentality and are forced, impossibly, to distinguish between those family members who are replaceable and those who are not. Antigone, however, takes this ethic of irreplaceability to its unintelligible extreme in using it to justify a commitment to the dead at the expense of the living—since Ismene, too, is presumably irreplaceable.

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121 See Herodotus 3.82. The Histories were likely not published at the time that Antigone was first performed (the date of the publication of the Histories is widely disputed. Most accept that the text was written between the 450s-420s however the actual date of publication is unclear. The first production of Antigone is also disputed, but is generally accepted to be between 441-39). Still, it seems highly unlikely that Sophocles would have i) accidentally attributed the same bizarre reasoning to Antigone that Herodotus attributes to Intaphrenes; ii) that he would have done so without attempting to draw a connection between these two figures; and, iii) that he would have included this reference solely for his own enjoyment. It seems much more likely that this story, whether published or not, would have been known to at least some members of the audience and that the reference was therefore intentional. Cf. West, “Sophocles Antigone and Herodotus Book Three,” 109-136, esp. 110-12; and Dewald and Kitzinger, “Herodotus, Sophocles and the Woman Who Wanted Her Brother Saved,” 122-129.

122 The bizarre emphasis on the replaceability of certain relations over others also points back within the text to Creon’s claim to Ismene that Haemon will find another furrow to plow (569); cf. Honig, “Antigone’s Laments, Creon’s Grief,” 17.
Indeed, the obscurity of this reference makes it difficult to discern with any certainty Antigone’s intention in making this point, and, while it presents an interesting problem for interpreters, it more importantly underscores Antigone’s inability to make her concerns resonate with her audience. The Chorus, while perhaps sympathetic to Antigone’s objections to Creon, remains even more unmoved by her solipsistic and desirous cries than by her original defiant act. Antigone’s attempts to evoke pity, while celebrated by Aristotle and others, are ineffective with the Chorus because she has failed to represent her rebellion consistently as a matter of common concern. Instead of connecting her with her fellow Thebans, Antigone’s speech alienates them. This failure to emphasize or make accessible the public character of her deed leaves Antigone wholly isolated in the end. Her action is solitary and, even to the extent that she is right in defending the divine right to burial—it is nonetheless self-regarding and self-defeating. Not only does it lead her to privilege the dead over the living, but it also leads her to neglect the claims of the city, of her family, and of Eteocles, her other brother. While she may not agree with Creon’s particular way of authorizing justice, she cannot do away with political justice, or politics. This is illustrated by the unquestionably political nature of her act of defiance. And yet, while her speech manages to expose Creon’s self-interested conception of rule, she nevertheless affirms Creon’s attempt to fuse his leadership with Thebes as a whole by extending her rejection of Creon into a rejection of Thebes, of family, and of life itself. She does not

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123 Initially, the Chorus seems concerned with the harshness of Antigone’s punishment (574) and, before Antigone’s lament, they “cannot hold back [their] tears” (802-3). And yet, in their final lyrical exchange with Antigone, they twice mock her desire for glory (817-22; 833-8), thrice point to her defiance (852-5; 872-5; 928-30), and end by affirming the necessity of her fate—“a fate from which neither “arms… nor city walls… nor storm tossed ship can give deliverance” (951-4).

124 Nussbaum, briefly discusses Antigone as a solitary actor who has a “single-minded concern,” (The Fragility of Goodness, 66) but she does not present this as solipsism nor does she see her deed as reflective of poor ethical judgment broadly speaking. Rather she follows Hegel in seeing Antigone as operating within an exclusively spiritual framework, which Nussbaum claims is incomplete or lacking.
look for alternatives to heroic death, such as, for instance, trying to convince Haemon to speak to his father about the severity of his new law. Failing this, she might have used her wiles to persuade Haemon to rally the support of the Theban people against Creon and against the decree. Instead, she is ready to abandon her sister and her fiancé on the basis of a commitment to divine law which others members of her community do not seem to uphold and about which even she expresses uncertainty (921-25). But more importantly, she expresses her piety with such reckless daring and exhibitionism (recall that she is ineffective in burying the body) that she creates distance between herself and the fellow Thebans she might have turned to for support.

As we learn in the play’s closing stanza, this work is indeed about the devastating effects of the “great words of boasters” (1350). As Josiah Ober puts it:

If Kreon has transgressed, it is not only in his deeds, but in his *logoi*, and in his attempt to control the *logoi* of others. His tyrannical actions would have offended the democratic principles of the audience in many ways, but most strikingly, perhaps—since drama itself depends on speeches—in his assault on freedom of speech. Kreon is a tyrant not least because he refuses to allow anyone else the right of public speech.125

Ober is one of the few scholars to examine the working of rhetoric in the play and he is exceptionally attuned to the question of how a democratic audience would have responded to Creon’s authoritarianism. He nevertheless underestimates the extent to which Creon is convincing, not only to characters within the play, such as the Chorus, and, possibly, to some Athenian contemporaries who might have empathized with his necessity-based rhetoric, but also, and perhaps most surprisingly, to contemporary interpreters.126 In expos-

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126 While few have gone as far as Honig in presenting Creon as a model of democratic citizenship, or as Ahrensdorf in presenting Creon as both pious and civic-minded, many scholars have empathized with Creon’s position. In Nussbaum’s reading, Creon is genuinely concerned for the common good, yet is torn
ing the personal excess that leads to Creon’s failure, Sophocles invites us not just to question the tyrannical motivations of this particular character as exposed in his unraveling speech, but also to see the continuity between Creon’s early claims about the stability of the community and his attempt to elevate retributive justice over customary morality and divine justice. Creon’s rhetoric exposes the way in which he has overstepped the line between political persuasion and coercion on which traditional claims to political legitimacy have always depended.

Yet Antigone, too, represents a seductive rejection of political reason—in her case for the sake of what she takes to be pious—that is ultimately self-regarding. While Creon’s political “wisdom” leads him to folly, Antigone’s speech is equally unyielding. Where she might have been an ambassador of piety and of “popular” resistance to Creon’s radical departure from common sense, her final song reveals the isolated reflections of a hero who recognizes too late the solitude of uncompromising conviction. While Antigone is less immediately threatening than Creon, she draws our attention to the potentially subversive quality of morality and of “unwritten” conceptions of justice. To use Kateb’s language,

between the conflicting values of needing to uphold civic order by punishing and his duty as a family member to acquiesce to Antigone and Haemon (The Fragility of Goodness, 54–63). For Segal, who understands the Antigone as a dialectic between physis and logos, Creon represents a coherent commitment to rationalism and civilization expressed in a “state-centered ethic” (Tragedy and Civilization, 154) that in order to remain coherent operates to the exclusion of family, religion, and nature—until, of course, the unity of this rationalism breaks down (Ibid., 54–63).

127 By the end of the play, Creon’s speech descends into inarticulate wailing moans, as Ober describes it: “Now Kreon no longer speaks in iambic verse as he did previously. In his final appearance, he is part of the closing kommos (lament), and sings his grief in dochmiancs. In metrical terms, Kreon has gone from the rhetoric of control to the music of emotional outpouring: a fitting punishment for one who has refused to listen to the speech of others” (“Drama, Political Rhetoric, and the Discourse of Athenian Democracy,” 263).

128 Peter Euben sums up Creon’s “antipolitical political rhetoric” nicely when he says, “To strive for political and intellectual mastery, as Creon does, is to act antipolitically in the sense that it will destroy the city as well as the household upon which the city depends. While knowledge does bring power, political knowledge comes from yielding to other voices and positions, sharing public space with others rather than consigning them to shadows and whispers (the people of Thebes) or caves and houses (Antigone and Ismene).” Corrupting Youth, 117.
“moral feelings [such] as pity, compassion, sympathy, empathy, fellow feeling, and so on are required to make sense of the morally relevant facts. A lack of feeling in responding to certain facts would not show reason’s presence but its absence; a kind of derangement or solipsism.”¹²⁹ Or, as Garsten puts it in a different context, “judgments are inscrutable or incommunicable if they are based entirely on an individual’s solipsistic perspective—they are not truly judgments.”¹³⁰ The problem with Antigone, then, is that even as a potential ambassador of human dignity—that is, of respect for the dead and unwritten law—she shares in the “derangement” and “solipsism” represented by Creon, because her fellow-feeling is directed away from the living. Antigone’s deed is arguably both ethically irrelevant and ethically subversive because she appropriates for herself an action and a rhetoric of resistance that might have been more effectively voiced by the collective through the leadership of a citizen—Haemon, perhaps—who convincingly represented their concerns.

So far I have primarily focused on Creon and Antigone as models of political rhetoric gone awry, but Antigone also helps us to recognize some of the obstacles common sense faces in resisting persuasion and making itself heard, as it is the Chorus that most powerfully voices the enduring wisdom of the collective in terms that continue to resonate with modern preoccupations. It is well known, for example, that Heidegger was particularly fond of the play’s famous Ode on Man, sung by the Chorus, which reflects on the marvellous and socially alienating consequences of resourceful overreaching.¹³¹ I thus

¹²⁹ Kateb, Human Dignity, 47.
¹³¹ See Martin Heidegger, Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, 156–176.
propose to follow Peter Euben in adding two alternative “centers of gravity” to our understanding of rhetoric in the play: the common sense of the Chorus,\footnote{For a discussion of the Chorus as one consistent character, see Gardiner, \textit{The Sophoclean Chorus}, 81–99.). There is not, to my knowledge, any existing study of the Sophoclean Chorus that focuses on common or good sense.} and the audience.

The Chorus’s Good Sense

After Creon’s first speech, the Chorus reflects on man’s overreaching attempt to control nature and his reckless capacity to act out of self-interest rather than for the interest of the collective. The Chorus presents man as the most resourceful of terrible or formidable “things,” limited only by his inability to conquer death. “When he applies the laws of the earth and the justice, to which one is bound by oath, of the gods, he is high in the city \textit{[hypsipolis]}, no-citied \textit{[apolis]} is he with whom the ignoble consorts because of his daring \textit{[tolma]}” (368-71).\footnote{Trans. Lloyd-Jones, adapted. The Chorus’ interpretation of natural law seems to therefore require an alignment of the laws of the city and the laws of the gods. While this passage is often take as criticism of Creon’s departure from the laws of the gods, I understand it as indicating that in departing from the laws of the land and the good and common sense of her fellows, Antigone too acts singly and with reckless daring.} The Chorus’s use of the term \textit{hypsipolis} thus pertains both to the city and to man equally: obedience to the laws of the earth and the laws of the gods elevates both the individual and the community, while recklessness and ignoble action with respect to traditional laws severs the bond between individual and community. Recklessness reveals a departure from common wisdom, and makes a man \textit{apolis}; that is, it casts an individual outside and beyond the constraints and support of the political. Antigone and Creon share in being reckless and, as the Chorus predicts, their respective actions result in isolation. But whereas Creon’s recklessness is overtly political, in that he explicitly aims
to erase the standards set by conventional wisdom, Antigone’s recklessness lies in her refusal to orient her concern for divine law within the common sense of the community.

In the second stasimon, the Chorus develops the theme of overreaching—but here, instead of the conflicting celebration of human resourcefulness, we find men’s hopes to be “widely wandering” and deceptive. Human aspirations, it turns out, are often guided by “thoughtless longings” and are therefore often met with far greater and more dire consequences than thoughtless longings anticipate (615-18). Indeed, despite man’s technical mastery of the world, he cannot insulate himself from madness or blind folly. While there is an implicit suggestion that some disaster might be averted through greater humility and foresight, the Chorus is also clear that the will of Zeus is violent and unpredictable. Hence, the sea that man traverses in the first stasimon here becomes a dark swelling abyss, while the gods infiltrate and pervert men’s minds and speeches, leading them to self-destructive folly (582-603).

While the third stasimon seems to be about the desire of lovers (783-83, 790), it continues the reflection initiated in the first two sections, except that here it extends the theme of ambitious overreaching, or recklessness, to love, “for which the sea is no barrier” (785-86)\textsuperscript{134} which spawns in men the desire both to both conquer and create anew. Love is in this way added to reason and speech as an impulse that drives men, as the Ode on Man put it, to “cross the gray sea beneath the winter wind” (336-37).\textsuperscript{135} From the perspective of the Chorus, it is this desirous excess that is the driver behind Antigone’s reckless prote-

\textsuperscript{134} Trans. Kitto
\textsuperscript{135} Trans. Kitto
tion of her own (48). As Ismene indicates, in wanting to protect and nurture the dead as her own, Antigone shows that she is in love with the impossible (90).\(^{136}\)

Antigone’s love of the impossible is akin both to erotic love and to man’s marvelous technique; furthermore, as Segal points out, both find a common theme in death.\(^{137}\) Antigone’s act is driven by a love of the impossible because she believes that she can act in an unknown, non-temporal, and non-mortal sphere; thus, she overlooks the fragile living context in which honour to her family might more effectively be restored. Because she neglects the connection between justice and an orientation to the whole elaborated by the Chorus in the Ode to Man, she forsakes her own future marriage and invites an unnecessary marriage with Hades. That is, Antigone’s love leads her to assume that she has the power to shape her own destiny through becoming apolis or without community. To desire to such an extent that one negates the limitations imposed by the common sense of the polis or community is, in other words, symbolically to invite that one limit which man’s love, resourcefulness, and wisdom cannot overcome.

In the fourth stasimon, we learn that “the power of fate is strange; neither wealth nor martial valour, nor a wall, nor black ships crashing through the sea can escape it” (951-54); and yet, the Chorus supplants this truth with mythic examples of those greater than Antigone who endured a harsh fate. In the fifth and final stasimon, the Chorus embraces the maddening weakness of the human condition in singing to Dionysus, telling him to purge the city with his maenad attendants through “the dance of the stars breathing

\(^{136}\) I do not think there is any textual basis for readings, such as Judith Butler’s, that Antigone’s perversion of loyalty has to do with incest or sexual attraction to her brother (Butler, Antigone’s Claim). It seems much more likely that her excessive loyalty was the result of a perceived injustice done to this particular brother—a reading that Sophocles invites in offering as background his later representation of the betrayal of Polyneices by Eteocles and Antigone’s promise to bury Polyneices in Oedipus at Colonus.

\(^{137}\) Segal, Tragedy and Civilization, 198.
fire” (1144-5). Calling on Dionysus, god of both destruction and creation, affirms the duality of destruction and creation as somehow predictable and therefore soothing. Out of the plague-ridden darkness, madness, and chaos there is possibility for renewal and learning. This arc is completed in the final scene as the Chorus again turns to man’s own power to control his destiny in the aftermath of Creon’s tragic unravelling. Good sense (phr̄onein), they argue, is “by far the chief part of happiness” (1348-9). It would seem that this good sense, insofar as it is accessible to man, is not equivalent to philosophy or theoretical knowledge, singular piety or morality, nor does it find suitable expression in an excessive attachment to one’s own reasons or relations. In this instance, it is a general good sense, carried by a community of elders, cultivated and passed on over time and embedded in collective experience, that speaks both to the power of tragedy and to man’s capacity to anticipate and circumvent tragedy through conventional wisdom. In this way, the Chorus acts as a foil to the action of the drama, which points to the challenge the collective faces in summoning and voicing its wisdom in a timely fashion in order to mitigate the disastrous, if not predictable, consequences of ambitious overreaching.138

Conclusion

In my reading of Antigone, I have suggested that its central conflict is not, as is often believed, between Creon and Antigone, but rather between both of these characters and the

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138 In fact, the Chorus offers no simple solution to the problem of man’s destructive overreaching, as Heidegger clearly understood. The symmetry between man’s ability to control and better his circumstance and his total vulnerability to desirous excess and death is maintained as the Chorus offers modest wisdom for accomplishing the former and collective deference before the hopelessness of the latter. What separates Sophoclean poetry from later Greek philosophy is its refusal clearly to separate reason, speech, and justice from the violent, self-regarding techniques that arise out of the same resourceful spirit. These are pervasive features from which man cannot “escape,” and which indeed defy perfect domestication, yet which nevertheless invite modest collective progress (787).
good and common sense of the Chorus. I advance this reading by suggesting that, while committed to markedly different causes, Antigone and Creon share a common recklessness and solipsism that isolates them from the more moderate wisdom held by the citizens of Thebes. Creon demonstrates his recklessness through his unilateral commitment to security and authoritarian rule at the expense of his commitment to the natural laws that govern relations amongst family members and burial of the dead. Creon’s rhetoric hinges on the appropriation of necessity for politically expedient ends. Antigone demonstrates her recklessness through her refusal to listen to sound advice and her anti-social obsession with the burial of her traitor brother over living relatives. While a more laudable character than Creon, Antigone nevertheless fails to earn the sympathy of the Chorus in her final lament because she, too, acts with disregard for the impact her acts will have on her fellows. In this respect, while her arguments may be “ethically persuasive” (even to Aristotle), they do not reflect good sense, which expresses itself in the common sense of the community.

Focusing on the tension between Antigone, Creon, and the common sense of the community helps us to recognize a deeper problem in thinking about rhetoric, its abuses, and the relationship between rhetoric and the good or common sense of citizens or subjects who are often silenced. This point may be sharpened if we consider the ways in which both Creon’s and Antigone’s various uses of speech have been seductive to audiences of interpreters. This, too, calls into question an over-confidence in approaching rhetoric as an art that might be politically and ethically salutary. For while speech does

139 Here we might be reminded of Judith Shklar’s description of post-Machiavellian political discourse: “necessity has served to paper over the tension between ethical restrain and political ambition in an effort to exploit the language of doom for the exculpation of rulers.” Shklar, The Faces of Injustice, 7.
convey and construct truths, it is not necessarily the case that eloquent speech, even ethically persuasive speech, reflects a sensibility that is attuned to the best interests of the community as a whole.

This point, however, should introduce concerns about using a communitarian barometer as the measure of good sense, for it is clear that communities can and often do err in their judgments. My point is not that the Chorus should be taken as representative of a static conception of good sense as embodied in the people, which we might adopt, but to show that in this particular instance the community did have access to an ethical standard that, if heeded, could have averted tragedy for both Creon and Antigone. Yet because this good sense was buried in the “common sense” of the Chorus—a group without persuasive status—it was silenced by the claims of competing interests.  

Antigone is thus largely about failures of persuasion and, as a drama, provides us with salient cases of what Peter Euben has termed “pride and stubbornness ‘masquerading’ as perverting reason.” In this respect, it points to the challenges in identifying public reasonableness, good, or common sense in the midst of much more compelling, more forceful, and often simply louder political and moral speech. In Sophocles’ other plays, we see this good and common sense translated into the leadership of Theseus, the existential humility of Odysseus, and the inquiring self-awareness of Neoptolemus, who cannot bear the idea of living in contradiction with himself. In Antigone, this remains a

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140 As is suggested throughout this chapter, I do not read Sophoclean tragedy as a genre that conforms to a strict tragic form; that is to say, I do not think that the plays ask us to believe that tragedy could not have been averted or that tragedies result solely from individual moral failings. What is most interesting in the Sophoclean tragic depiction is that where tragedy might have been averted – that is to say, where we can identify a sense of prudence that, if heeded might have steered the actors in a different direction – it is not; I believe that Sophocles gives us the resources to ask why tragedies that might be avoided persist, and to question the way in which these ‘tragic’ conflicts reflect persistent, seemingly universal, patterns in our social, political and ethical structures.
141 Euben, Corrupting Youth, 165.
subterranean voice that withstands political trauma, coercion, and seduction. It is a voice that makes itself heard directly and timelessly to a reading and listening audience, even though it is effectively silenced within the action of the drama. As spectators, then, we are asked what to make of this silence. If my reading of Sophocles is persuasive, we might be prompted by this drama to go further than the Chorus members in defending their own precepts.
Chapter III

Tragic Rhetoric and Good Sense in Sophocles’ Ajax

Both kinds of achievement, that of excellence and that of victory, will require effective practical reasoning; and it will be important to learn whether and, if so, how the kind of reasoning necessary for the achievement of excellence differs from that necessary for the achievement of victory.

― Alasdair MacIntyre, Whose Justice? Which Rationality?  

In the previous chapter, we explored the seductive power of persuasion and the departure of both politically and ethically compelling speeches from good sense and common sense. It was suggested that the tragedy in Antigone might be better understood as a conflict between a rhetoric, represented by both Antigone and Creon, that masquerades as serving the common interest yet is ultimately self-regarding, and a deeper, subterranean good and common sense, represented by the Chorus of Theban elders, that is other-oriented, hinges on experience, and is both practical and reflective, yet which is all too often overpowered when its guidance is needed most.

Ajax tells two stories about the efficacy of rhetoric and good sense. The first is a story about the unyielding temperament of a war hero who cannot listen to reason or be dissuaded from destruction by the good sense of his wife Tecmessa. Ajax’s resistance to the persuasive pleas of loved ones, combined with his “deceptive” embrace of good sense in his final speech to his wife and friends, calls into question the efficacy of “ethical” rhetoric and good sense to mitigate disaster. In considering this story, I will ask why Ajax’s narrow commitment to his heroic identity left him so tragically closed to other points of view.

The second story is one of successful persuasion and the rhetorical power of good sense. It is about the malleability of Odysseus, who, unlike Ajax, places good sense before piety and convention. Unlike Ajax, whose sense of superiority depends on a stable structure of recognition, and who therefore cannot accommodate equality, inferiority, or frailty, Odysseus’ exposure to Ajax’s demise leads to a commitment to compromise, justice, and moderation.

In this chapter, I consider the significance of both stories as reflections on the persuasive power and limitations of good sense. The first section of the chapter considers the reasons for Ajax’s suicide and his refusal to accept the subordination of his tainted heroic status to his ethical familial duties. This inquiry considers Ajax as having fully internalized a heroic ethos and therefore shows why this ethos is incompatible with and deaf to good sense. The second part of the chapter will turn to Odysseus’ persuasive good sense. I will argue that Odysseus’ tragic confrontation with Ajax’s madness helps to facilitate a conception of good sense rooted in equality, concern for others, and a revised conception of justice rooted in friendship, obligation, and forgiveness.143 The persuasiveness of this good sense will be demonstrated through tracing Odysseus’ intervention in the heated conflict between Teucer and the sons of Atreus. I therefore argue that Odysseus’ good sense is not exceptional; rather, it is based in a good sense that is shared by other, less successful, orators. His success, I suggest, may be attributed to his position as a spectator to tragedy rather than as a tragic sufferer. In the conclusion, I reflect briefly on tragedy as

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143 Sophocles in many ways anticipates Socrates’ critique of the Polemarchian conception of justice as doing good to friends and harm to enemies (Rep. 334b-336a). But rather than emphasize the need to do no harm in order to avoid harming innocent or good enemies, Sophocles shows that these categories are themselves unstable throughout the course of one’s life. Therefore the Sophoclean emphasis ends up going further in offering an account of the way one should behave towards friends who are now enemies or enemies who were once friends.
a rhetorical mode that tries to anticipate and forestall its realization in real life by exposing
the audience to its shared vulnerability to fate and equality before necessity. These lessons,
I argue, are fundamental components of good sense and, therefore, of the revised concep-
tion of justice as prudence that the play leaves us with.

**Heroic Intransigence and Good Sense**

In his famous deception speech, Ajax asks, “and how shall we not come to know how to
be sensible [sōphronein]?” (677)\(^{144}\). Indeed, this is the question that drives the action of
the drama. When Ajax is inconsolable and fixed on death, his wife commands him to “be
sensible [phronēson eu]!” (371) When he is questioned about his intentions after saying an
emotional goodbye to his son and forbidding lamentation in front of his tent, Ajax
brusquely tells Tecmessa that “it is best to show some sense [sōphronein kalon]” (586). In
the prologue, we learn from Athena that “the gods love those who think sensibly [tous
sōphronas] and detest offenders!” (132-33) And we are given further clues as to Ajax’s
particular offense when we learn later that he was punished by the goddess for declaring
his self-sufficiency in battle (776-77). Learning to be sensible is what is at stake for Ajax,
yet it is almost immediately clear that Ajax’s conception of what it means to be sensible is
at odds with the god’s imperative and with the new requirements of his community.

For Tecmessa, good sense is informed by self-knowledge and obligation to others.
Even as a concubine to a warrior for whom hierarchical relations are paramount, Tecmessa
is not afraid to speak her mind. When she notices Ajax setting off with his two-edged
sword in the middle of the night “when the whole army is asleep” (291), she rebukes him,

\(^{144}\) All translations are those of Lloyd-Jones unless otherwise indicated.
making clear that she understands his evil intention (288-91). That she does not persist when she is silenced in turn merely suggests that she is sensible enough to understand that her intervention is futile in this instance.\textsuperscript{145} Tecmessa’s most forceful attempt to persuade Ajax not to commit suicide hinges on this other-oriented understanding of good sense. As the daughter of a free father who was made a slave and war prize, she is no stranger to the evil of fortune and the need to adjust one’s self-image to accommodate necessity. Indeed, it was Ajax himself who imposed slavery on her; and yet, even so, she has grown well-disposed toward him (\textit{eu phronō}; 491). She accepts her new fate. In threatening his own death, Ajax not only shows himself to be less resilient and adaptable than his wife, he also shirks the responsibility he now owes to this slave and mother of his child. Even though, legally speaking, Tecmessa’s status as a slave forbids her from making a formal claim on Ajax,\textsuperscript{146} nevertheless, she reminds him that in sharing a bed and a child with her he has assumed a human obligation to care for their collective future. This claim is significant even if it is not recognized by the law. If he abandons her, she will surely be abused by Ajax’s enemies, and this abuse will be disgraceful for Ajax. Not only should Ajax feel an obligation toward Tecmessa, who has endured with dignity the fall from freedom into slavery, he should also feel obligated to care for the well-being of his own parents, neither of whom should have to outlive their son’s suicide, and who are both invested in his suc-

\textsuperscript{145} Tecmessa’s submission to the “ever repeated words: ‘woman, silence adorns women’” need not be taken purely as submission. Rather, Ajax’s invocation of this general and impersonal maxim is likely meant to indicate that he is in this instance indifferent to her persuasive powers as a lover. Whether or not this might be taken as indicative of a more significant strain in their relationship, as Garvie suggests, is difficult to determine, though Ajax’s later deliberate attempts to calm his wife with soft words (649-54) and his acknowledgment of her impact on his emotional state make Garvie’s interpretation difficult to sustain. See, Garvie, \textit{Sophocles} 153.

\textsuperscript{146} Cf. Blundell, \textit{Helping Friends and Harming Enemies}, 74.
cess. Finally, he should feel a sense of obligation toward his son, whose future depends on him (506-513).

Tecmessa’s speech attempts to take Ajax’s commitment to war and his sense of superiority as a warrior and redirect it towards the family. In so doing, she adopts the language of honour and shame that Ajax associated with his martial superiority and applies these terms to his implicit commitments toward others. Whereas Ajax had earlier lamented the shame he would bring upon his father in having returned without the arms of Achilles, when he “himself won a great crown of fame” (462-66), Tecmessa points out the greater shame in abandoning one’s responsibilities towards one’s parents in their old age (506-7). Nobility is not the self-sufficiency of natural strength; rather, according to Tecmessa, it is the capacity to fulfill one’s obligations toward others, to remember the benefits one has received from others, and to prevent one’s memory of these debts from slipping away (523-24).

Tecmessa's attempt to redefine nobility as paying one's debts to others, honouring family members, and acknowledging benefits received, modifies the heroic conception of justice as vengeance to which Ajax adheres. Indeed, Tecmessa anticipates a more forgiving and prudential conception of justice rooted in an acceptance of tragic outcomes and the weight of necessity in shaping individual fortunes. Under the heroic ethical code, where justice is understood as helping one’s friends and punishing one’s enemies, Tecmessa would have every reason to be hateful towards Ajax and hostile towards the Greeks. And yet, she reminds Ajax that these codes are limiting because they do not account for chance and necessity, which often require individuals to transform themselves so as to conceive of novel standards of honour that correspond to unanticipated circumstances. Even though
Ajax ruined her country and enslaved her family, he did so because, as a Greek noble, he was compelled to do so. Her own fortune was shaped by the necessity of having to share a bed with and marry this man who had destroyed her country “by violence” (518-19). And yet, Tecmessa has accepted the necessity imposed on her by fate. Through exchanging pleasure and a marriage bed, Tecmessa learned not only to see Ajax as a friend and lover rather than an enemy, but also to be well disposed towards all things associated with her captor (520-24). In embracing her new fate “imposed by compulsion” (485-86), she extended to her enemy a principle of friendship.

Tecmessa’s speech redefines friendship as the capacity to accept the “evil” of “fate imposed by compulsion” (485-86) and to recognize the role of fate in shaping the work of others. Nobility is knowing how to work within the limitations imposed by fate by honouring one’s commitments to friends and loved ones and retaining the memory of pleasurable and caring exchanges while forgetting evils that cannot be undone. The traditional conception of justice, which emphasizes vengeance against enemies, is turned on its head. Harm done to enemies is removed from Tecmessa’s formulation. Instead, she prompts Ajax to see that justice principally concerns itself with honouring friends and family in the way that is most appropriate to them. Implicit in Tecmessa’s formulation is the understanding that all enemies might one day become friends, a sentiment that Odysseus will later persuasively echo (353-361), as will Ajax, though he will interpret it quite differently (678-682). For Tecmessa, this understanding necessitates the capacity for forgiveness. Her good sense allows her to see that since nobility and justice must accommodate chance and necessity, they will be better rooted in principles of friendship and reciprocity than in those of vengeance and punishment.
But despite Tecmessa’s eloquent rhetoric, Ajax does not initially appear to have been persuaded. He takes her appeal to honour and good sense as meaning that he should take the time to make arrangements for his loved ones before he departs.\(^{147}\) He demands that Tecmessa bring him his son and proceeds to bestow on him parting words of blessing and instruction for the future (565-77).\(^{148}\) Ajax expresses his gratitude to his loyal seamen and requests that they bring home Eurysaces to Telamon and Eriboa, his parents, so “that he may ever tend them in old age” (565-70). When Tecmessa reacts to these parting sentiments with concern, Ajax demands that she show some sense. Tecmessa does not understand that he owes “the gods no service any more.”\(^{149}\) Ajax has appeased her concern for his parents and for his son in ensuring that they will both be cared for, but Tecmessa is “a fool if [she] mean[s] now to try and educate [Ajax’s] character” (594-95). Tecmessa thus leaves the scene with her son, Ajax returns to his tent, and the Chorus of Friends reflects on Ajax’s miserable situation (596-645).

\(^{147}\) Bernard Williams refers to a plausible argument made by David Furley in “Euripides on the Sanity of Herakles,” in Betts, Hooker, and Green, Studies in Honour of T.B.L. Webster that Euripides suggests a way out in the Madness of Heracles. There, Heracles is dissuaded from suicide by Theseus, who argues that suicide is a common reaction and not characteristic of a heroic nature. This argument helps Heracles to see that suicide is a form of cowardice, and, Williams argues, a similar logic might have been more forceful in motivating Ajax to remain alive (Williams, Shame and Necessity, 73). And yet, despite its surface plausibility, it seems unlikely that this argument would have convinced Ajax, since he would have still needed, in addition, to be convinced that there was a way for him to live in this new, unpredictable world that would allow him to be honourable. Tecmessa’s argument is a powerful attempt to make this case, and her failure suggests that Ajax is simply not open to being persuaded.

\(^{148}\) As Stuart Lawrence puts it, “Ajax passes on moral obligations to his kin through his mode of giving instructions to others and thus forcing them to become his obedient agents. His independence is complemented by his regarding others (even Athena (113f.) as instruments of his will without their own moral life—like slaves” (“Ancient Ethics, the Heroic Code, and the Morality of Sophocles’ Ajax,” 25).

\(^{149}\) As Garvie notes, Ajax believes he is under no obligation to serve the gods because they have rejected him. This highlights his isolation and his strange conception of piety, inasmuch as he seems to believe that he is in a reciprocal relationship with the gods (Garvie, Sophocles, 179.). Insofar as Ajax sees himself as no longer under obligation to serve the gods, we might infer that he formerly held himself to be pious. From this, we can also infer that Ajax’s understanding of piety was somewhat misinformed. He seems to believe that honouring the gods involves honouring oaths and serving the Greeks well in battle. His understanding of piety does not, however, include humility—even though it is this that Athena explicitly demands (133-34) nor does it include acting justly towards others, as Tecmessa suggests (589).
It appears that the situation is irreversible. Ajax re-emerges from his hut, followed by his wife, with the sword he won as a gift from his enemy Hector. The speech that follows is surprising and uncharacteristically poetic and has caused significant interpretive disagreement. It seems plausible that Ajax has finally aligned his conception of what it means to be sensible with the new demands of his community, as articulated by Tecmessa and dictated in the Prologue by Athena (127-33). Blundell goes so far as to argue that “the speech embraces the values that Ajax elsewhere rejects” and might have been argued by Odysseus himself (84-85). That said, a careful reading of the speech in light of the others shows that this is not the case. This speech is, in fact, completely consistent with Ajax’s character, even if it embraces themes that are echoed by other characters. Indeed, there are important nuances and ambiguities that should make Ajax’s intention clear to an audience who (a) understands his character and (b) is attentive to double meanings. The speech does, however, draw our attention not only to Ajax’s own intransigence, but also to gen-

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150 The question of whether Ajax intends to deceive with this speech has been hotly debated, and the problem posed by the speech is nicely captured by Gellie’s formulation: “Ajax cannot change and Ajax cannot lie. If Ajax cannot change, he speaks to deceive; if Ajax cannot lie, he is recording an honest change of heart” (Gellie, Sophocles, 12). Bernard Knox, for whom “the character of Ajax is Achillean; it may be all too easily tempted to extremes of violence, but not to deceit,” tries to get around this difficulty in suggesting that Ajax is undecided at the time of his speech (“The Ajax of Sophocles,” 11). Knox therefore argues that the speech represents Ajax’s honest attempt to understand his next move. But, as others such as Scodel and Blundell point out, Ajax has already resorted, however unsuccessfully, to Odyssean tactics in attempting to attack his comrades stealthily in the middle of the night. Following this clear shift in character, there is no reason to believe that Ajax would not deceive again. See Scodel, An Introduction to Greek Tragedy, 25; and, Blundell, Helping Friends and Harming Enemies, 84. Garvie argues that Ajax has in fact adopted the good sense (sophrosune) of Odysseus and Tecmessa and is attempting in this speech to reconcile himself to his new conception of the world. In the end, this reconciliation fails, as good sense is simply too alien to his nature for him to live this transition in practice (Garvie, Sophocles, 186.) Gill departs from others, such as Garvie, who have argued that Ajax has learned and is struggling to adopt sophrosune, arguing instead that the speech is bitter and ironic (Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy, 205). In my reading, Ajax’s speech is perfectly consistent with his understanding of the heroic code, which hinges on a denial of good or common sense. Ajax’s understanding of being sensible is based on knowing when to bow to authority, and this facilitated a self-sufficient heroic ethos, insofar as he has been recognized as a superior warrior. My reading is closest to that of Hesk (Sophocles, 95), who emphasizes the problem of interpretation and understanding when common sense isn’t shared—for Ajax’s double meanings should be obvious to the audience. For a comprehensive breakdown of the various debates surrounding this speech, see Garvie, Sophocles, 184–86; and Hesk, Deception and Democracy in Classical Athens, 74–94.
eral ambiguities in speech. As Jean-Pierre Vernant succinctly put it, “words take on different meanings depending on who utters them.”151 In my reading, this speech and the misunderstandings that it generates serve to highlight the psychological dissonance between Ajax and his listening audience.152 The interpretative problems that the “deception speech” generates go to show just how misleading rhetoric can be, especially when listeners are biased by the desire for a particular outcome. This potential for confusion points to the need for other indicators beyond mere rhetorical technique, such as the judgment of character as a whole and good or common sense, to help listeners distinguish between other-oriented ethical rhetoric and self-interested or misleading speech.153

Indeed, Ajax adopts a rhetoric very similar to the sensible rhetoric deployed by Tecmessa; and yet, whereas good sense for others hinges to a large degree on accepting a fundamental equality with others and forgiveness, Ajax’s good sense remains rooted in a hierarchical understanding of the world. The mistake most interpreters make in seeing Ajax’s speech as deceptive results from taking his general observations about submission to authority—observations he indeed upholds and believes important for his listening audience—as imperatives he now applies to himself. If, however, we understand that Ajax

151 Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece, 17.
152 Whitman suggests something similar in noting that “the lie is neither deliberate nor indeliberate,” inasmuch as Ajax’s companions might have seen through his rhetoric, even though they miss the point completely. See Whitman, Sophocles, 76.
153 Aristotle raises this point about the importance of character in one’s capacity to persuade at Rhet. 1.2.4, “character is almost, so to speak, the most authoritative form of persuasion,” and also in his discussion of rhetorical proof: “to seem virtuous suits a good person more than an exact argument does.” Of course, this rhetorical employment of character depends, in turn, on the audience’s capacity to use discretion in judging character. And yet, as I argue in Chapter One, Aristotle sees our ability to judge character as effectively depending on good rearing, education, and habits (and therefore on a controlled ethical system), while in Sophocles we are offered more robust criteria for assessing character, particularly in moments of conflict or breakdown. However, we can see that while Tecmessa has most aspects of good sense, she fails to situate Ajax’ speech within a broader understanding of his heroic character. This ability to understand the part within the context of a larger narrative will be crucial to Odysseus’ revised conception of justice and good sense at the end of the play.
has retained an elevated and uncompromising notion of heroic independence and self-sufficiency as the good sense of the hero, we see that he indeed means two things at once, and both sincerely. Simply stated, he thinks it is good to bow to authority and he thinks that he, Ajax, should not have to bow to authority—in other words, he sees bowing to authority as something that is good for others and abounds in the natural order, but he cannot accept this principle for himself. These two goods are thus related to each other in the sense that, insofar as Ajax’s heroic identity relies on other people’s willingness to bow to his own authority, he must assert such obedience as an abstract principle, even though he does not want or expect to be on the receiving end of it. Ajax’s good sense, therefore, is tied to both the self-sufficiency of the hero and deference to authority; it therefore shares very little with that of his listening audience.

Ajax’s opening reflection is his most profound and misleading:

Long and immeasurable time brings forth all things that are obscure and when they have come to light hides them again. Nothing is beyond expectation; the dread oath and the unflinching purpose can be overcome (646-49).154

This obscure statement seems to reflect Ajax’s privileging of a natural order governed only by flux and becoming and therefore suggests that he accepts the mutability of human convention.155 Ajax realizes that political codes and dogmatic beliefs are attempts to impose order on a set of processes towards which humans are mostly blind. Recognizing that

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154 Trans. Garvie
155 This Heraclitean sentiment was picked up by Heidegger in his lectures on Parmenides (which were also supposed to be on Heraclitus). Heidegger sees this sentence of Sophocles as indicative of the basic Greek conception of time and its relationship to being. For Heidegger, Greek “time” is a primordial force that gives rise to clearings or openings in which truth (alethea) can appear and which then fold back into the process of being. Though Sophocles is clearly not Heidegger, Ajax’s reflection on being in time should strike us as in a sense proto-Heideggerian and therefore distinctly un-Platonic. See Heidegger, Parmenides, 140-151, part (b) of “The Fourth Directive.”
time holds sway over all things leads Ajax to reflect on his own shift in perspective, and this reflection is genuine: “Why, even I, who earlier showed such hardness, like iron when it has been dipped, have had my words made soft by this woman; and I feel pity at leaving her a widow and my son an orphan near enemies” (650-54).

Tecmessa’s words have softened his hard nature—a reversal he admits he had not expected. Yet Ajax is clear that it is his words that have been made soft, not necessarily his resolve. In keeping with this claim, and possibly out of respect for the woman he will soon leave a widow, Ajax abandons his harsh, abrupt phrases for euphemistic, even poetic musings. He does not therefore reiterate his plans to take his life; rather, he says that he will “go to the meadows by the shore where I can wash myself, so that I can clean off the dirt on me and escape the grievous anger of the goddess.” As Jon Hesk points out, the word that Ajax uses here for bathing (loutra) is the same always used in Sophocles for washing a corpse before burial, and, indeed, is used later in the play by Teucer in reference to the washing of Ajax’s dead body (1405). It is easy to see why Tecmessa and Ajax’s friends would want to hear this differently, but Ajax’s meaning is clear. He will look for a clearing to bury his sword, the gift of his enemy Hector, in the ground “and conceal it” (557-60), for “the gifts of enemies are no gifts and bring no profit” (664-65).

Many interpreters take this particular sentence as an indication that Ajax is deceptive because his expression of pity is inconsistent with his resolve to die. Yet it is not entirely clear that pity should be interpreted as a change of mind. Rather, Ajax could very well be expressing the pity he feels for his family given what he will do. See Garvie (Sophocles, 188), for a discussion of the grammatical ambiguities surrounding Ajax’s formulation of oiktiro lipein. Garvie explains that there is no precedent according to which oiktiro should govern the infinitive, and it is therefore ambiguous whether the meaning is “I pity her and therefore will not leave her” or “I pity her that I am leaving her.” Ajax, therefore, could very well be expressing sincere regret about his inevitable departure, which is misunderstood by Tecmessa and the Chorus.

Hesk, Deception and Democracy in Classical Athens, 79; cf. Garvie, Sophocles, 188; and Knox, The Heroic Temper, 134–35.

In Iliad Book VII Hector and Ajax exchange weapons after a long day of fighting. Hector proposes this exchange in order to set an example that men can go from being the worst of enemies to the closest friends:
Ajax’s language is again rhetorically “soft,” his meaning should be transparent to listeners who have not lost sight of his heroic character. Ajax will indeed conceal the sword of his enemy—with his own flesh—as should be clear given that he has already announced to all in his parting words to Eurysaces that this remaining piece of armour will be buried with him in his own grave (577).

Ajax returns from this careful explanation of what is immediately to follow to reflect broadly on the collective future of his people: “Therefore for the future we shall learn to yield to the gods, and we shall learn to reverence the sons of Atreus. They are commanders, so that we must bow to them, how else?” Indeed, it would be easy to determine from this claim that Ajax is being deceitful, as he will go on in his solitary suicide speech to condemn and curse the sons of Atreus for having caused his destruction (839-42). And yet, Ajax may very well intend this instruction for the “we” that he will leave behind in the “future” in which he will not exist. Ajax may have recognized that human convention is unreliable and subject to natural and spiritual forces that human knowledge cannot anticipate or depend on; nevertheless, his reflections on nature lead him to reaffirm the importance of hierarchy. For, if we take stock of Ajax’s existential and philosophical claims, it becomes clear that, to him, the single truth that nature reveals in time is that even “the most formidable and the most powerful of things bow to office” (669-700). Indeed,

“Come then, let us give each other glorious presents, that any of the Achians or Trojans may say of us: These two fought each other in heart-consuming hate, then joined with each other in close friendship, before they were parted” (Iliad, 7.299-302) Ajax thus gives Hector his war belt, by which his corpse is later attached to Achilles’ chariot and dragged around the walls of Troy (Iliad, 22. 395-404) and Hector gives to Ajax his sword. As Josh Beer argues, Ajax’s fixation on ridding himself of this sword might have aroused suspicion, for a hero’s identity was bound up in the weapon he carried (Beer, Sophocles and the Tragedy of Athenian Democracy, 59.). See also Meier, Athens, 12.
“winter’s snowy storms make way before summer with its fruits, and night’s dread circle moves aside for day drawn by white horses to make her lights blaze” (670-73).

This affirmation that even within nature’s mystery there is a predictable cycle of succession, as each “formidable thing” must yield to its opposite, affirms that hierarchy and order are the natural basis of convention. It is in this sense that Ajax understands his own necessary finitude, and thus poses the seemingly uncharacteristic question: “and how shall we not come to know how to be sensible?” Taking this together with Ajax’s demonstrated conception of being sensible as self-sufficiency and bowing to authority, we should understand that, for Ajax, this means “how shall we come to know when it is our time to yield and when it is our time to be powerful?” Ajax responds to his own question by reflecting on the mutability of friendship: “for at this late hour I understand that our enemy is to be hated only to the extent that he will later become our friend, while as far as a friend is concerned I shall want to serve and help him only so far, believing that he will not always so remain. For to most mortals the haven of comradeship is not to be trusted” (677-84). Indeed, Ajax’s recognition that friendships are mutable, that he has been betrayed by his own friends, tells him that it is his time to yield.

To be sure, Ajax’s formulation of good sense as the knowledge of the mutability of human relationships appears, at first glance, surprisingly Tecmessean. For, if friendships are mutable and conventional structures unstable, then it seems possible that Ajax’s conception of yielding would involve accepting and submitting to a new hierarchy in which his status would be diminished.\footnote{For Blundell, Ajax’s description of good sense confirms his deceptive nature as “he gives us precisely the arguments we might have expected from some other character trying to dissuade him from suicide” Blundell, Helping Friends and Harming Enemies, 84. For Gill, Ajax is here responding to Tecmessa’s} Indeed, if Ajax were truly adopting Tecmessa’s good
sense, he would see this mutability as a reason to forgive his enemies. Yet, if we recall Tecmessa’s earlier reflections on the same theme, it seems clear that Ajax is reversing Tecmessa’s formulation. Whereas Tecmessa’s experience of fate and necessity led her to adopt a revised conception of justice based on forgiveness and friendship, Ajax sees mutability as a reason to approach human relationships with caution and suspicion. Ajax thus reveals his peculiar and consistently self-regarding understanding of good sense in drawing a markedly more negative and isolating conclusion.  

Ajax’s version of being sensible is to stand back and observe the submission of a man—of himself—to forces he had underestimated, even ignored. But accepting submission to a hierarchy in which the masters are fate and death does not mean that Ajax has changed. To be sure, Ajax once held elevated status in human affairs, but, for this same reason, he appreciates that the structure that supported his elevated status depended on the submission of almost all others. The heroic code by which he lived required fixed distinctions and an ordered hierarchy that cannot accommodate malleability. It is not, therefore, only because Ajax’s status is “destroyed” by the betrayal of his commanders that he yields.  

Ajax recognizes that the structure of the world that supported him, a world that was oriented according to a hierarchical and fixed heroic code, cannot accommodate the revised conception of justice and aligning this with being sensible, yet is at the same time rejecting the “compromises involved in meeting those claims.” Gill, Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy, 214.  

\[161\] It is useful to note here that, while Aristotle echoes Ajax’s remark that “silence makes a woman beautiful” (Pol. 1260a24-33), in his Politics he nevertheless follows Tecmessa’s logic in distinguishing between these two versions of the “friendship” maxim (i.e. between Ajax’s version, that justice requires treating all friends as though they may one day become enemies, and Tecmessa’s “positive” version, which will be echoed later by Odysseus, that it is better to hate as if one were bound to love, which implies the capacity to forgive). Aristotle phrases his observation as follows: “one’s character would appear better, if one were to say that it is not right, as men say, to love as if one were bound to hate, but rather to hate as if one were bound to love… or thus, ‘the maxim does not please me for the true friend should love as if he were going to love forever’” (Rhetoric, 1395a26-31).  

\[162\] Christopher Gill also makes this point, see, Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy, 214.
malleability imposed by necessity and time. Thus in decisively giving way to these new masters Ajax preserves a conception of hierarchy while at the same time accepting the dissolution of the ground on which he as a hero might persist.

It is important that while Ajax feels shame before those he esteems (460-65), this shame does not provide an opportunity for reconstruction or improvement, because he does not believe that he erred—except in the failure of his attempted massacre, which he attributes to the goddess (447-49)—and hence he does not accept the decision of the commanders as just. He is certain that “if Achilles were alive and were to award the prize of valour in a contest for his own arms, no other would receive them but I” (451-44). Yet Ajax also understands that Achilles is dead and therefore that the moment in which he could have been justly recognized as the recipient of the prize of valour has passed. Ajax’s final lines attest to this point when he says, “witness my destruction at the hands of the sons of Atreus” (837-38). Ajax’s question about what it means to be sensible is thus followed by his reflection on mutability, because it was this sequence—the mutation of his friends and the mutation of the world in which he had an identity—that led him to recognize his own limitations and to understand that his own formidable power has been extinguished. Ajax departs for the meadows with his sword, where, away from the sensi-

163 See Williams, Shame and Necessity, 90. I will return to a discussion of the significance of Ajax’s shame for his suicide shortly.
164 To grasp the significance of this slight, consider Achilles’ statement to Ajax in Iliad Book 9: “Everything that you say seems to be acceptable; but my heart swells with anger when I remember the disgraceful way Agamemnon treated me, as though I were some migrant without status” (645-48). Achilles cannot be persuaded to return to battle by logical argument because the slight against his honour is too great and causes him too much distress. Yet, for Achilles, it is nevertheless clear that he remains the most respected warrior, despite his general’s lack of respect. The situation that Ajax faces is much more extreme. He is not simply insulted; rather, the impossibility of obtaining the desired recognition for his status, or atonement for the wrongs done, means that he has been destroyed.
tive ears of Tecmessa and his friends, his words are devoid of softness and his purpose is laid bare.

**Heroic Sensibility and the Internal Other**

Ajax’s resignation to suicide prompts a deeper set of ethical questions. As Jonathan Lear puts it when speaking of the collapse of the North American Crows’ ethical horizon, “Is it in the lineaments of our psychological natures that my flourishing as a member of my culture makes me less able to confront the challenges of a radically new future?” That is, was it possible for Ajax to excel according to the heroic standards of war and at the same time to know and cultivate the humility and good sense required as his society anticipates the transition to peace? To what extent, we might ask, is Ajax the victim of a shift in cultural conceptions of virtue and justice? In addressing this question, it is important to recall that Ajax’s culture did not give way to another dominant culture, as was the case with the North American Crow. Instead, the shift in conceptions of justice took place from within Ajax’s own community, and the “radically” new future to which he could not adjust was the peaceful domestic future toward which war and heroism were presumably oriented. Yet it is still the case that Ajax was unprepared for this seemingly natural transition precisely because he so fully embodied the virtues demanded of him in war. It is also the case that the decision to slight Ajax, while perhaps consistent with the new virtues demanded by the present, represented an injustice toward the virtues expected and the obligations accrued in the past. This lack of continuity with and respect for the past does not only mean injustice toward the past, it also created a radical fracture between past and

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165 Lear, *Radical Hope*, 64.
present horizons of meaning and therefore within the community’s capacity to account for itself as a dynamic and evolving whole. In this particular case, this inattention to the past catalyzes a certain breakdown, for the single-minded focus and strength required of Ajax as an excellent warrior is incompatible with his community’s transition to privileging Odyssean virtues of malleability, deliberative skill, and judgment.\footnote{There is a denial of the significance of the community as a temporally evolving whole—instead of retaining continuity with and respect for the past, Ajax is denied recognition for exhibiting virtues once demanded by the community.}{166}\footnote{Cf. Jonathan Lear, \textit{Radical Hope}, for an account of how Plenty Coup was able to harness resources within Crow culture to redirect the Crow’s martial conception of Crow courage toward an ethos of adaptability, listening and attention to others. Lear argues that ability to use cultural resources to provide continuity between past, present and future horizons enabled the Crow to survive the transition to the reservation imposed on them by American government.}{166} There is a denial of the significance of the community as a temporally evolving whole—instead of retaining continuity with and respect for the past, Ajax is denied recognition for exhibiting virtues once demanded by the community.\footnote{As Whitman formulates it, “the Ajax embodies … a new kind of metaphysical conflict … the conflict of an inner moral standard with the external shape of life as a whole” Whitman, \textit{Sophocles}, 78.}{167}

It is not Ajax’s “fault” that these are the traditions he inherited. Yet it is also true that Ajax has taken these traditions to their extreme. To be sure, it is difficult to vindicate Ajax’s extreme interpretation of the cultural maxim that it is just to harm enemies, for, without some degree of prudence, this is a dangerous maxim for any culture.\footnote{See Lawrence, “Ancient Ethics, the Heroic Code, and the Morality of Sophocles’ Ajax,” 20.}{168} For Bernard Knox, the issue is therefore typological, not cultural. While Ajax may have been a product of his times, it is more important that he has a wildly independent heroic nature that transcends the imagination and expectations of his cultural horizon. In this respect, Knox presents Ajax as a characteristic Sophoclean hero, who,

unsupported by the gods and in the face of human opposition, makes a decision which springs from the deepest layer of his individual nature, his \textit{physis}, and then blindly, ferociously, heroically maintains that decision even to the point of self-destruction.\footnote{Knox, \textit{The Heroic Temper}, 5.}{169}
While Knox’s study of the Sophoclean hero is influential and persuasive, it is important to note that Ajax doesn’t entirely fit the renegade figure that Knox conjures up. Ajax’s commitment to heroism was too deeply dependent on a stable structure of recognition through which others might recognize and validate his worth. The source of Ajax’s greatness is therefore not simply in him alone, but in his understanding of tradition and of what it means to be great. The problem seems to be, rather, that Ajax so fully embodied these social expectations and modeled himself after a hero so rare that he was left with no internal resource or alternative sense of worth to appeal to when his contribution went unacknowledged. His particular temper helps to amplify and make critical to the community the limitations of a culture that prizes excess, martial valour, and vengeance. Indeed, Ajax’s particular expression of heroism may have been so perfect that its failure provided a central catalyst for the collapse of the heroic structure itself.

Ajax’s dependence on the recognition of his community on the one hand and his independence from and sense of superiority to this community on the other were necessary ingredients for a tragic breakdown, inasmuch as they left him with no internal resources to help him cope with this structure once it inevitably collapsed. Bernard Williams’s conception of the “internal other” helps us both to identify why this contradiction left Ajax psychologically ill-equipped for change, and, in turn, to formulate the minimal psychological requirements for durable good sense. For Williams, the Greek self is socially constituted and therefore responsive to

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170 While Aristotle most famously articulates this paradox (Nic. Ethics. 1.43, 1095b20-1096a), it should be noted that Sophocles is the first one to present it as a critical psychological and social problem.
an internalized other [...] whose view the agent can respect. Indeed, he can identify with this figure, and the respect is to that extent self-respect; but at the same time the figure remains a genuine other.\textsuperscript{171}

Because Ajax’s internal constitution hinges to such an extent on reinforcements from below, his life without the psychological support of these reinforcements is impossible to imagine.\textsuperscript{172} Moreover, this structure of Ajax’s psychology leaves him with few other “genuine others” whom he respects and can turn to for guidance. Indeed, Ajax respects his father Telamon,\textsuperscript{173} and Achilles before him, but both of these figures point directly back to Ajax himself. They are of the same mould and are therefore not “genuine others.”\textsuperscript{174} Rather, they serve to reinforce the norms of behaviour that Ajax already knows; indeed, they

\textsuperscript{171} Williams, \textit{Shame and Necessity}, 103. For Williams, Ajax’s intransigence and suicide can be traced to his inability to live with himself—that is, to live with the expectations he as a hero would judge himself against—once he had committed horrible acts, because these were not deeds that a hero would commit. This interpretation overlooks the fact that Ajax’s suicide is first precipitated by a shift in external conceptions of justice as well as Ajax’s continued insistence that Athena was to blame for his madness. Ajax clearly does not feel shame in his intended attempt to kill his enemies, and in this respect his suicide has much more to do with the fact that he is unable to restore the old order and cannot accommodate to the new order. Still, Williams’ analysis of the structure of shame leads to his formulation of an “internalized other” and this is invaluable to our understanding of why Ajax was so hopelessly intransigent.

\textsuperscript{172} In this context it is also useful to consider Aristotle’s account of shame as responsive to an ‘other’ who is not necessarily present and whose potential judgments provide a sense of guidance for action. “And [people feel shame] whenever they have in their backgrounds deeds or facts that they will [be seen to] disgrace, whether these are their own or those of their ancestors or certain others with whom there exists to them some tie of kinship. And on the whole [they feel shame] on account of those on whom they themselves bring shame. These are the people mentioned and those who have been entrusted to them, either those of whom they have been teachers or advisers or if there are others like themselves to whose rank they aspire. For people do and do not do many things out of a sense of shame because of the existence of such people. 26…. And if they are going to be seen and be associated in public with those who know their guilt, they are more embarrassed. Thus, too, Antiphon the poet, when on the point of being crucified and beaten to death on the orders of Dionysius, made this remark, seeing that those who were going to die by his side covered their faces as they went through the gate: “Why do you cover your faces?” he said. “You don’t think, do you, that any of these [standing near by] will see you tomorrow?” (\textit{Rhetoric} 2.6.25-26).

\textsuperscript{173} Ajax’s shame at the thought of having to face his father as a failure is evident: “And what kind of face shall I show my father Telamon when I appear? How ever shall he bring himself to look at me when I appear empty-handed, without the prize of victory, when he himself won a great crown of fame? The thing is not to be endured!” (462-466).

\textsuperscript{174} As Gill perceptively points out, the options that were open to Achilles are not open to Ajax; “Ajax is not in the position of being able to set terms to his \textit{philoi} for what should count as ‘paying back all his spirit-grieving insult.’ His position is rather that of having tried and failed, to make the Greek leaders ‘pay back’ his insult, and of experiencing the more intense humiliations, as well as the greater enmity, that is the result of this. He also regards it as ethically and emotionally impossible for him to take the step threatened by Achilles, of going home.” Gill, \textit{Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy}, 206.
are already thoroughly fused to his fixed conception of self and his understanding of how that self should act in the world.\textsuperscript{175} As Bernard Knox puts it,

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Ajax, like Achilles before him, is a law unto himself; his idea is the Homeric one: “always be the best, and superior to the others.” The virtues demanded of a man in a society of equals—tolerance, adaptability, persuasiveness—have no place in his make-up.\textsuperscript{176}
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Ajax does not have an internal other whom he sees as equal to himself and who is a genuine other, nor indeed, is he motivated by his regard for others, either out of obligation, respect, or recognition of some shared equality.\textsuperscript{177} For, once again, Ajax’s self-knowledge is rooted in his conviction of his own superiority to others, and this conviction leaves him in a confusing state of being psychologically isolated from the guidance of genuine others, and yet nevertheless dependent on their approval. For Tecmessa’s rhetoric to have been persuasive, he would have needed to be able to identify with and respect an other-oriented conception of good sense. Moreover, he would have needed to demonstrate not only an awareness of the mutability of hierarchy and conventions in time but also—as Odysseus will grasp, and as Tecmessa implies—an awareness of the fundamental equality between nature’s weakest and most formidable powers. Ajax’s dramatic suicide magnifies the

\textsuperscript{175} It is worth adding that Aristotle's attempt to reconcile his supreme virtue of self-sufficiency with his equal claim that friendship is required for happiness, and therefore that a good man's friend is "another himself," only makes sense in terms of this conception of a genuinely different internal other." For whether or not this was the way Aristotle intended this sentiment to be taken, Sophocles shows us that self-sufficiency is really only possible if one is self-sufficient in this other-oriented and psychologically elastic way. I am indebted to Bernard Williams for his reminder of the significance of this problem in Aristotle. See Williams, \textit{Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy}, 35; 208n7.

\textsuperscript{176} Knox, “The Ajax of Sophocles,” 22.

\textsuperscript{177} We learn later of the impact of Ajax’s suicide on his Chorus of seamen. In their lament they make clear that Ajax’s heroic status is not enough to compensate for his lack of care for their well being and for the future he robs them of in his death: “That man should have first entered the mighty sky or Hades, common to all, who first showed to the Greeks how to league in war with hateful weapons! O sorrows progenitors of sorrows! for he was the ruin of mankind. It was he that denied me the pleasure of garlands and of deep cups, and the delightful sound of pipes, to my sorrow, and the delight of sleep at night. And he cut me off from love, alas, from love! And I lie here uncared for, my hair drenched by the heavy dews, reminding me of miserable Troy” (1192-1210).
fragility of the heroic type and of a cultural framework that elevates the excellence of single individuals over the good sense and well-being of the community. For, without such internal recourse to good sense and respect for the genuine worth and equal vulnerability, in spite of difference, shared between himself and other members of his community, Ajax must face death deaf and alone.178

Odysseus’ Rhetoric of Good Sense

In contrast to Ajax, whose heroic conception of self meant that he could not live as anything other than a hero, Odysseus understands his fundamental equality to others. In place of the solipsistic internal landscape that left Ajax paralysed, Odysseus has a generalized conception of good sense rooted in an understanding of his existential equality with his enemy. He understands that all men can fall from great heights and, for this reason, he does not laugh at Ajax when prompted to do so by Athena (79-80). He does not cling to a fixed conception of himself, nor does he adhere to a fixed internal “other” or witness whom he considers noble or good, beyond his basic respect for a sense of existential equality with all others. To use Jonathan Lear’s language, he recognizes the limitations of a “thickly” conceived internal other because he sees the underlying “thinness” in fixed cultural conceptions, such as nobility, given that “all of us who live are nothing but ghosts,

178 To use Patchen Markell’s language out of context, “invoking identity as a fait accompli precisely in the course of the ongoing and risky interactions through which we become who we are (or, more precisely, who we will turn out to have been), at once acknowledges and refuses to acknowledge our basic condition of intersubjective vulnerability.” Markell, Bound by Recognition, 14.
or a fleeting shadow” (125-26).

Odysseus’ denial of Athena’s desire for retribution and punishment shows the old world has clearly lost its power.

What is most interesting is that Odysseus does not take his perception of the ephemeral quality of human life and convention as either an indication that life is not worth living or as reason to reject convention. Rather, we see Odysseus use this insight as an impetus to challenge the existing conception of justice as vengeance and to propose an alternative conception rooted in “good sense”—a conception which is very close indeed to Tecmessa’s emphasis on forgiveness and friendship.

Nature, Convention, and Good Sense: The Quarrel

Odysseus does not re-enter the drama until its final moments, when he appears to interrupt a heated debate between Ajax’s enemies, the sons of Atreus, Menelaus and Agamemnon, and Ajax’s brother Teucer, over the burial of Ajax’s body. The conflict begins with Menelaus’ aggressive and unaccommodating rhetoric. Menelaus’ rhetoric hinges on adherence to the same principles of justice as vengeance and conventional hierarchy that were so fateful for Ajax; in this respect, he mirrors the fallen hero. For Jon Hesk, Menelaus’ “vileness has a deliciously transgressive quality which the audience must have enjoyed hating;”

But this seems to go too far. Rather, his reaction highlights the power and intuitiveness of the maxim that it is just to help friends and punish enemies. His reason for not burying Ajax is simple: “We hoped that we were bringing him home to be the ally and

179 Cf. Lear, Radical Hope.
180 In fact, Athena’s preoccupation with vengeance and her insistence reveals her as much closer to the old values represented by Ajax than the new values that Odysseus will espouse. It is important that Odysseus first reveals that he has adopted new set of values when he looks to his own judgment and ignores the prompting of Athena to laugh at Ajax and instead expresses his pity (See the Prologue 1-133)
181 Hesk, Sophocles, 80.
friend of the Achaeans, we have found him in our dealings with him to be a worse enemy than the Phrygians” (1052-54, trans. Garvie). This logic is hard to argue with and is arguably subdued. Ajax was a traitor. He did attempt to murder the leaders of the army. The attempt to rob Ajax of a proper burial is surely no different from Ajax’s attempt to murder his commanders for robbing him of his identity. This is the problem with retributive justice: it does not end with one punishment, unless it is rigorously controlled by the community, as in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. However distasteful he may appear personally, Menelaus articulates well the logic of retributive justice and of the conventional basis for authoritarian government:

> The laws of a city can never function well where no one is afraid, nor can an army be sensibly controlled, when it has not the protection of fear and respect. Even if a man has a mighty frame, he must remember that he can be brought down even by small mischief. Know that when a man feels fear and shame, then he is safe! But where he can be insolent and do as he pleases, believe that that city, though at first it has sailed along easily, will in time sink to the bottom! (1073-86)

Teucer responds to this claim by calling into question the legitimacy of the hierarchical order on which Menelaus’ claims to authority rest. Teucer reminds Menelaus that, just as was the case with Ajax, his authority is effective only to the extent that it is recognized by others. Because Ajax did not recognize Menelaus as his superior, he was his own master (1097-04). Between Menelaus’ defence of conventional law and Teucer’s defense of Ajax’s vigilantism, there is no hope for resolution, since neither is legitimate in the other’s

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182 Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* famously dramatizes the problem of intergenerational and retributive justice. In Aeschylus’ presentation, the cycle ends in the *Eumenides* with the persuasive intervention of Athena and the creation of courts of law. Athena intervenes in the judicial process aimed at solving the intergenerational cycle of vengeance that had plagued the house of Atreus by renaming the avenging Furies the “Eumenides,” or “benevolent deities,” and offering them status as partial rulers of the city. Aeschylus’ presentation of the same problem therefore suggests that they only way out of retributive justice is to somehow conceptually fuse persuasive skill with the appearance of due procedure.
view. Menelaus accordingly departs, on the grounds that “it would be disgraceful for me if anyone learned that I was chastising with words when I could use force” (1159-60).

It is at this point that Agamemnon enters and brazenly takes up Menelaus’ case, only with greater force and greater insult. His points are, however, more persuasive and therefore more problematic. On the one hand, he allows the argument to degenerate by chastising Teucer’s illegitimate birth and pretending to be ill-equipped to understand Teucer’s barbarian tongue (1262-62). Yet, on the other hand, he justifies the decision to deny Ajax the arms on legitimate grounds: it was a majority vote. As Jon Hesk frames the dilemma, “Agamemnon’s argument should make us uneasy. If the majority of judges genuinely voted in favour of Odysseus, then surely Agamemnon is right to point out that majority verdicts must be accepted?”

This argument reveals that the shift from celebrating natural strength to celebrating good sense was generally supported (1239-52). All the same, it is not clear that this is a relevant point in this debate. Teucer is not insisting that Ajax be retrospectively awarded the arms of Achilles; he is simply requesting that the commanders take into account the understandable role that this played in motivating Ajax’s defiant action. Regardless of his transgression, Ajax deserves accommodation through burial.

Teucer responds emotionally and with equal aggression, yet his is the perfect retort. First Teucer scoffs at Agamemnon’s “ethnocentric” or conventional claims to superiority by questioning the ethnic purity of Agamemnon’s line (1291-98).

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183 Hesk, *Sophocles*, 123.
184 Agamemnon’s grandfather Pelops was the son of a barbarous Phrygian and his mother was a Cretan who was drowned by her husband and father for adultery. Cf. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*. Hall argues that Greek tragedy helped to advance the Greek conception of the barbarian as the antithesis of Athenian virtues.
same time, Teucer calls into question the legitimacy of Greek views on conventional slavery by defending his own honourable birth. (In doing so, he incidentally elevates the status of Tecmessa and Eurysaces, who were both also noble foreigners.) Even though Teucer’s mother was made a slave in war, she was born a queen (1301-2). This heritage is surely superior to the ignoble bloodline on which the Atreidae’s conventional authority rests.

Even though Teucer’s defense of Ajax is equally powerful and challenging, it is also characteristically emotionally defensive and therefore unpersuasive to his enemy. In short, Teucer defends Ajax’s natural strength and points out that Agamemnon was a coward in battle, meaning that he therefore owes not only much of the victory, but also his very life to Ajax (1267-80). Underlying this point, however, is a much more significant challenge. The general’s defence of the decision against Ajax may reflect the legitimate will of the army, yet this will is expressed in the luxury of a relative peace enjoyed thanks to Ajax’s heroic contribution in war. Ajax risked his own life in the good faith that his deeds would be recognized, yet this was all for naught if these generals and their subjects can, at a whim and merely when it is convenient, identify a change in the times and reject the past (1266-70). It would be unjust to reap the benefits of a shift toward peace while insulting the man on whose shoulders the army’s strength in large part rested. While peace may operate according to an instrumental logic, war certainly does not. Much more is at stake. The sacrifices demanded in war are therefore inherently unjust—indeed, they are absurd—if the leaders of war do not make a point of preserving the memory of these

This speech, which forces its Greek audience to imagine Homeric Greek leaders as barbaric, is certainly an exception to Hall’s rule, as is Sophocles’ presentation of Tecmessa in the first half of the play.
sacrifices through recognition. Teucer’s retort fairly calls into question Agamemnon’s conventional claims to authority, but, more importantly, it exposes Agamemnon’s “new” instrumental conception of justice to be as unstable, excessive, and destructive to the common good as the retributive heroic code, based on natural strength, which he aimed to supplant. Teucer’s claims are all in fact perfectly sensible and troubling, yet Teucer’s understandably heated temperament and his subordinate position mean that his arguments fall on deaf ears.

It is at this point that Odysseus re-enters the dialogue. He has heard from a distance “loud cries of sons of Atreus shouting over this valiant corpse” (1318-20) and has come to mediate. Odysseus’ sense of equality and prudence are immediately evident. For, though his commander accuses Teucer of having issued “shameful insults,” Odysseus responds neutrally: “I can feel with a man who hurls insults when he has heard hard words” (1322-23). Odysseus is not interested in name-calling. He quickly demonstrates his rhetorical deftness in changing the discussion from injuries incurred to the justice owed to the dead. Though he himself learned to hate Ajax “when it was honourable to hate him” (1349), he is still capable of acknowledging that Ajax was “the most valiant man among the Argives, of all that came to Troy, except Achilles” (1338-40). Dishonouring Ajax in light of his clear excellence destroys not only Ajax’s identity, but also “the laws of the gods”—for it “is unjust to injure a noble man, if he is dead, even if it happens that you hate him” (1343-45). Successful leadership requires more than convention or coercion: it must hinge on sensible

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\textsuperscript{185} We might recall that Odysseus exhibited similar behaviour in the Prologue, when he listened to his own internal good sense and refused to laugh at his fallen comrade rather than defer to Athena’s wishes (80). Though he is both pious and respectful of authority, his own good sense supersedes his deference.
judgment and the ability to show that one is willing to listen to the sound advice of friends (1351, 1353).

Odysseus thus mediates between the positions of Ajax (as represented by Teucer) and Agamemnon by paying honour to both claims while at the same time exposing the limits of each. As Agamemnon has already established, natural strength is limited and may not be in the best interests of the community; this makes it necessary to have recourse to a more developed conception of justice rooted in prudence and deliberation. And, as Teucer has argued, conventional accounts of justice that shift according to circumstance and the judgment of the day are equally weak because they cannot account for themselves within the longer time horizon in which political communities are built and obligations formed. Agamemnon may be correct in speaking of privileging sound judgment and good judgment over natural strength; and yet, his judgments lack both hindsight and foresight and are therefore equally disruptive of the common good. Odysseus further reminds him that self-interest is also satisfied through attending to others and acting with a view to the whole, given that no one, including themselves, can foresee the future. It is therefore better, in Odysseus’ presentation, to set a generous precedent of forgiveness to guard against equal evils that necessity might throw one’s way. For, given the mutability of human relations and conventions, it is not implausible to imagine Ajax’s fate as applying to themselves:

Agamemnon: On this day you will make us seem cowards.
Odysseus: No, men who are just in the sight of all the Greeks.
Agamemnon: Then you are telling me to allow this body to be buried?
Odysseus: I am; why, I myself shall come to this same pass!186

186 (1362-5). Lysias’ Oration 2 draws on similar ‘good sense’ in highlighting the universality of luck (tychē) in war and, subsequently, on the need to universally respect the right of the dead to burial (2.9-10). Odysseus
Echoing Tecmessa’s earlier appeal, Odysseus teaches that a conception of justice rooted in good sense requires the capacity to judge an individual’s life or the interests of a community as a whole. It is this complete picture that allows Odysseus to forgive Ajax, “for his excellence prevails with me more than his enmity” (1357, trans. Garvie). For, if justice is rooted in the maxim of helping friends and harming enemies, it is important to know how to discriminate who is a friend and who is an enemy based on that person’s contribution as a whole.

With this, Agamemnon departs, not completely persuaded, but willing to yield to good sense. Odysseus extends his arm in friendship to Teucer and Ajax’s family and offers to help with the burial. Teucer rejects the offer as offensive to Ajax, but accepts the gesture of reconciliation. The play concludes with the reconciliation of these two sides in friendship.

Conclusion: Good and Common Sense

Odysseus’ successful intervention depended on more than one factor. For, as we have seen, the “good sense” that he endorses is not particularly unique, nor does it indicate that his judgment is exceptional. Tecmessa’s justification for a revised conception of justice, nobility, and friendship was rooted in principles similar to those that Odysseus here champions. She recognized that necessity compels many into situations that they might have previously deemed abhorrent, and that, for this reason, one must be forgiving of others and willing to relinquish grievances for the sake of living together well. Teucer’s claims are

takes this logic slightly further in forcing Agammenon to acknowledge that luck applies not only to victory but also to determining who will be friends and enemies. Accepting the universality of this principle thus means identifying oneself as a potential traitor who will nevertheless deserve safe passage to the afterlife.
slightly different. He emphasizes the arbitrariness of conventional authority and the injustice in ruling with a view to the present rather than one encapsulating past, present, and future simultaneously. He does not reflect on the mutability of friendship other than to draw attention to the consequences for a political community if grievances are privileged over obligations. In both of these presentations, we encounter a presentation of good sense that is rooted in concern for oneself and for the other. Both Tecmessa and Teucer seem to have healthy psychological dispositions that allow them to speak reflectively and sensibly. However, it is also true that neither is effective in persuading or effecting any kind of desired shift in the immediate audience, and this has important implications for our understanding of the rhetorical effectiveness of good sense.

Odysseus in many ways harmonizes the best of both of these perspectives in a rhetoric that is accessible and measured. In this respect, however, his arguments are quite literally based in good and common sense; that is, he represents a synthesis of concerns, anxieties, and reflections that are shared with others and which he has gained through experience and observation. However, he also has the advantage of status and is therefore able to influence his audiences in a way that a slave woman and a bastard brother could not. This is also instructive: it seems as though good sense, at least for Sophocles, even though commonly accessible, still requires an eloquent and persuasive champion.

Yet there are other aspects of Odysseus’ good sense that separate him from Tecmessa and Teucer. He, like the audience, experiences tragedy at some remove: he has had the luxury of being a witness to someone else’s tragedy and therefore of being able deliberately to reconstitute himself according to this experience. In this respect, we might think of the tragic audience and of the rhetorical intention of the drama itself, for, unlike our
experience with the *Antigone*, we are permitted to walk away from the *Ajax* with a feeling of optimism in the power of good sense to produce just consequences. Considering tragedy as a rhetorical mode helps us to consider the persuasive power of the drama over the audience and the possible outcomes such a performance might hope to achieve. Like Odysseus before Ajax, we are thus invited as spectators and readers to see our equal vulnerability before necessity, yet without suffering the immediate consequences that actual tragedy imposes on real life. We are permitted to bask in our shared vulnerability and required to reflect on our contexts as wholes. Is it too much, then, to speculate that Sophocles also hoped to persuade us to champion the good sense that results from these reflections?
Chapter IV

Deception, Persuasion, and Isolation in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*

*A sentence uttered makes a world appear
Where all things happen as it says they do;
We doubt the speaker, not the words we hear;
Words have no words for words that are not true*

– W. H. Auden, “Words”187

Introduction

*Philoctetes* is a drama that deals primarily with the problem of frustrated persuasion. Whereas good sense is detectable in the Chorus in *Antigone* and in various characters in *Ajax*, *Philoctetes* draws attention to the marked absence of good sense. Like *Antigone*, *Philoctetes* presents the problem of a narrowly conceived vision of political justice and the instrumental rhetoric that is deployed to this end. Yet there are important ways in which *Philoctetes*’ presentation of Odysseus as a clever *rhētor* adds to and sharpens our understanding of the pernicious impact of instrumental rhetoric. Unlike the tyrant who can impose his will as law, irrespective of the will of the people, Odysseus is a savvy politician who depends on the persuasive power of his words alone. But insofar as the logic underpinning his words is corrosive, Odysseus arguably poses the greater threat. For whereas Creon’s will is issued as decree and is therefore immediately open to scrutiny, Odysseus shapes the world around him—for good and bad—insidiously, by influencing the way others think. In *Ajax*, this Odyssean trait carried positive connotations, for there he seemed to be motivated by good sense and a genuine feeling of solidarity with his enemy.

187 *Collected Poems*, 622.
In *Philoctetes*, however, he is an unscrupulous ambassador of ends that are deleterious both for the individual, and, ultimately, for the community.188

My analysis focuses first on Odysseus’ rhetorical *technē* and the logic he uses to advance his instrumental claims on behalf of the Achaean army.189 I then turn to a study of Neoptolemus’ transition from being an instrument of Odysseus to an ally of Philoctetes. While most readers attribute this transition to Neoptolemus’ ethical maturation,190 I see Odysseus’ influence as lasting and Neoptolemus’ ethical transformation as therefore precarious. Finally, I read the play as a comment on the radical injustice suffered by Philoctetes. While most interpreters are willing to lump Philoctetes together with other excessively stubborn and unyielding tragic characters, I argue that to do so overlooks the extent to which Philoctetes is entirely a victim of injustice and therefore blameless in his suffering. Moreover, despite his excessive isolation, Philoctetes is affable and open to friendship. For, unlike Ajax, who might have found new meaning in protecting his wife and child from harm, or Antigone’s reckless defense of the dead at the expense of living friends and relatives, Philoctetes, in spite of his isolation, demonstrates resilience in the face of hardship, persistent hopefulness, and loyalty to conceptions of justice and friend-

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188. This Odysseus is, of course, markedly different from the Odysseus we encounter in *Ajax*. In *Ajax* Odysseus urges his commanders to understand justice in the context of the wellbeing of the community as a whole and to be sympathetic to the impact of luck in assessing who is a friend and who is an enemy. Here we will see the opposite approach. I will suggest that one way of reading these two plays is to imagine Odysseus as representative both of Athenian democratic virtues of adaptability, deliberation and prudence on the one hand, and on the other as reflective of the darker side of Athenian democratic politics.

189. Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice*, 71. Shklar ascribes this form of rhetoric to the influence of Machiavelli on modern political discourse. My reading of instrumental rhetoric in Sophocles aims to add nuanced examples to our understanding of the way in which pernicious rhetoric is deployed and justified – for unlike Machiavelli’s princes, the characters of the Sophoclean stage still manage to seduce and garner sympathy from modern interpreters. For a sympathetic reading of Odysseus that bears some resemblance to modern interpreters’ attempts to redeem Antigone’s Creon, see Martha Nussbaum, “Consequences and Character in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*.”

ship, even if, to sustain these concepts, he must divorce them from his practical experience. To the extent that he is solipsistic and unyielding, he merely mirrors the isolated landscape imposed on him by others. I conclude by considering the *deus ex machina* as a Sophoclean “likely story” that is intended to highlight the extent to which injustice on the scale suffered by Philoctetes is simply beyond the scope of good sense and human reparation. I maintain that the use of a *deus ex machina* at the end of the drama, a device which has typically troubled both ancient and modern interpreters,\(^{191}\) helps, in fact, to reinforce its central theme of frustrated persuasion.

**Odysseus as Unarmed Prophet**

Scholars have often drawn attention to Odysseus as a prototype of one-sided political opportunism, and by extension, of the most degenerate aspects of the fifth-century sophistic movement.\(^{192}\) Like *Antigone*’s Creon, Odysseus harnesses piety and necessity to support instrumental ends and thus helps us to see the way in which claims about justice, divine and human, can be advanced in support of markedly unjust ends.\(^{193}\) To use Judith

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\(^{191}\) Aristotle was the first to criticize tragic plots which change from bad to good fortune (*Rhetoric* 1451a14).\(^{192}\) I see in Odysseus Sophocles’ criticism of the most aggressive elements of Athenian political rhetoric: an instrumental Odyssean approach to justice is simply not sustainable, for this logic is as easily applied to members of the community as it is to foreign enemies. For an excellent discussion of the influence of the sophistic movement on the structural concerns of the play, see Rose, “Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* and the Teachings of the Sophists” for his discussion of Odysseus as a model of sophistic stereotypes see ibid., 90; see also Knox, *The Heroic Temper*, 124–5 and Tessitore, “Justice, Politics, and Piety in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*.” Jon Hesk also somewhat attempts to rehabilitate Odysseus by placing him within an Athenian understanding of both the benefits and dangers of the noble lie. Hesk, *Deception and Democracy in Classical Athens*, 188–199, esp. 194-195.\(^{193}\) In this respect, he is like many of Thucydides’ Athenian speakers. As such one might see this incarnation of Odysseus as representative of the darker side of Athenian political culture. I follow Harvey Yunis in understanding political rhetoric as “the means of leadership in a political community where leadership is exerted through speech” (*Taming Democracy*, 16). Yunis argues that Thucydides, Plato and Demosthenes shared a common critical project motivated by the question: how can political rhetoric be made useful for the polis? In all three cases Yunis points to these thinkers’ preoccupations with the problem of sophistic rhetoric and mass deliberation as well as to the alternative conceptions of political rhetoric put forward by these
Shklar’s helpful formulation out of context, he models the destructive way in which politicians use necessity “to paper over the tension between ethical restraint and political ambition in an effort to exploit the language of doom for the exculpation of rulers.”

This sophistic skill is clear in Odysseus’ initially unsympathetic and savage portrait of Philoctetes. The play begins on the deserted island of Lemnos, as Odysseus sets the scene for his apprentice, Neoptolemus. Lemnos, he declares, is uninhabited, “untrodden by mortals” (2). Of course this is not true; it was here that Odysseus once, on the orders of the commanders of the army, deserted a fellow Greek and the island’s lone “mortal” inhabitant; it is because of this lone inhabitant that Odysseus has now returned. Odysseus’ choice of language is deliberate; the image that he intends to conjure up for his young study is not that of an isolated fellow Greek, but of a wild subhuman adversary. As Odysseus tells it, this savage man, Philoctetes, was abandoned because his ill-omened and savage screams (agriais dysphēmias; 9-10)—the result of his ulcerous and dripping foot infection (1029)—prevented the army from making sacrifices.

Odysseus does not spend long on his unsympathetic portrait of his former friend and ally. He does not leave time for Neoptolemus to inquire into the cause of Philoctetes’ injury, his contribution to the war effort, or in what manner he was left behind. Instead, he cultivates an immediate sense of urgency and fear. Neoptolemus must go check to make

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194 Shklar, The Faces of Injustice, 71.
195 All translations are from Lloyd-Jones unless otherwise indicated.
196 Odysseus’ successful attempt to turn Philoctetes into a political instrument through dehumanizing rhetoric is not an uncommon mode of dealing with political enemies and “others”. For a well-known example of this phenomenon, see Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 7.
sure that Philoctetes is not nearby, “so that for the rest of our discussion you may listen [kluēis] while I explain [phrazō], and each may make his contribution” (21-5). This caution is convincingly enforced by his insistence that they first guard themselves against Philoctetes’ return (45-49). Once a guard has been appointed to protect against the cripple’s unexpected return, Odysseus explains their mission: they are on Lemnos to beguile the mind of Philoctetes, as his bow is necessary for victory at Troy. This is a task that must fall on Neoptolemus, for he was not part of the original expedition and therefore will not be associated with the army’s decision to abandon the hero. In order to do this, Neoptolemus must lie and present himself as an enemy of the army and of Odysseus. The reward for this deceptive scheme will be victory for all and acclaim in particular for Neoptolemus.

Odysseus understands the world-shaping impact of rhetorical stratagems. As he later asserts in a statement that will be held up for scrutiny for the remainder of the play: “it is the tongue, not actions, that rules in all things for mortals” (99). He thus begins by issuing a command that Neoptolemus must (dei) live up to his inherited noble (gennaion) nature. The term gennaios, which is related to the word genos, meaning stock or family, has aristocratic connotations and is intended to appeal to Neoptolemus’ sense of inherited nobility as Achilles’ son. As Blundell points out, this was a term that was used by Pindar,

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197 As Liddell and Scott note, phrazō differs from legō, as telling and declaring differ from simply speaking. See Liddell and Scott, An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon.
198 The story that Odysseus supplies is itself rhetorically clever. Neoptolemus should tell Philoctetes the truth: that the arms of Achilles were awarded to Odysseus rather than to Neoptolemus himself (cf. Ajax). As a result of this slight to his inheritance, Neoptolemus’ thus left Troy with a desire for vengeance against Odysseus. There is no textual evidence to suppose that Neoptolemus in fact perceived the awarding of the arms of Achilles to Odysseus as an insult, yet it is nevertheless possible that in using fact as a source of corroboration, Odysseus was attempting to pre-empt and foreclose the possibility that Neoptolemus would use this as a future source of hostility.
199 This is not the only characteristic that Sophocles’ Odysseus will be shown to share with Machiavelli’s infamous Prince.
“for whom the *gennaios* spirit passes by nature (*physis*) from father to son.” Odysseus invokes this word cleverly, knowing that Neoptollemus’ honesty and noble birth will serve as his principal objection to the plan. Bringing Neoptollemus’ status as *gennaios* to the fore is an important tactical strategy as it is precisely these connections with the supposedly noble and heroic past that Odysseus knows he must transform and ultimately sever in his listener. In this way, Odysseus manipulates the language of inherited nobility in order to exhort Neoptollemus to agree to deceitful acts that should violate his sense of inherited nobility, as when he tells him,

> Son of Achilles, the mission you have come on demands that you show your nobility; not only with your body, but if you are told something new, such as you have not heard earlier, you must give your help, since you are here to help me (50-54).

This tension between Neoptollemus’ noble heritage and the nature necessary for future success is an important motif in Odysseus’ rhetorical strategy. By shifting emphasis from the nobility of the body—and therefore from deed to speech, mental agility, and an openness towards what is new (*kainon*)—Odysseus introduces the idea that a noble nature might have as much to do with flexibility and novelty as it does with upholding the past and custom.\(^\text{201}\)


\(^{201}\) Adam Parry traces the development of the relationship between *logos* and *ergon* in his dissertation, *Logos and Ergon in Thucydides*. As Parry presents it, the basic tendency from writers leading from Hesiod through to the Athenian dramatists is “a basic distrust of the intellect. The man of action is admired, the man of intelligence and words looked on with suspicion. The philosophic writers emphasized the split by turning the distinction around. The man of intelligent words knows reality, the man of action becomes a brute or a fool. Gorgias, and much more profoundly, Thucydides, see and dramatize a possible equilibrium” (*Logos and Ergon in Thucydides*, 21) Parry shows that Sophocles disentangles the relationship between thought and deed in *Philoctetes* in order to isolate the destructive impact of *logos*, represented by Odysseus, in contrast to the honest symbolism of deed. It is true that the tension between *logos* and *ergon* structures the oppositions between deception and truth and instrumentality and pity that form the central thematic dialectics of the play. I would add to this that Sophocles amplifies these tensions in *Philoctetes* in order to point to the danger of allowing these poles to calcify.
Continuing with this motif, Odysseus acknowledges that it is not in Neoptolemus’ nature (\textit{physis}) to “speak such words or to plot to harm others” (79-80), yet no sooner has he said this than he introduces victory, justice, honour, and piety as a set of favourable outcomes which potentially conflict with and even supersede the limitations associated with a noble character. Victory is a pleasure that requires Neoptolemus to act with daring (\textit{tolma}; 81-2). Neoptolemus must apply this daring not only to his actions, but also to his prior conceptions of what is good or bad, honourable or shameful; he must suspend deliberation and act quickly (111). Victory will therefore require that he give himself over to a “few hours of shamelessness [\textit{anaides hēmeras meros}],” but the future will show them “to have been in the right [\textit{dikaioi}]” (82-84). That is to say, Odysseus asks Neoptolemus to see shamelessness as a requirement of justice and justice as a corollary of both personal and collective advantage. Justice thus emerges as a calculative art that occasionally requires its practitioner to forgo nobility for the sake of reward, whether individual or collective or both. In return for taking this risk, Neoptolemus will “for the rest of time be called the most pious [\textit{eusebestatos}] of mortals” (85). Odysseus’ assurances of future advantage are circumscribed within a carefully authored presentation of necessity. It is necessary (\textit{dei}) that Neoptolemus “beguile the mind of Philoctetes with [his] words” (54-55), and, further, that he steal Philoctetes’ bow by treachery (77-78), for without it victory at Troy—an outcome in which Neoptolemus has previously been assured a central role (68-69; 114)—will be impossible (81). Odysseus’ tactic is to minimize as much as possible the appearance of choice by aligning deception with a necessary victory.\textsuperscript{202}

\textsuperscript{202} For a brief but instructive discussion of the significance of \textit{chrē} and \textit{dei}, two impersonal words for “must” that are used to denote subjective and objective necessity, respectively, see Seth Benardete, “\textit{Chrē} and \textit{Dei} in Plato and Others,” 297. Nussbaum builds on this study to argue that \textit{dei} is used to characterize Odysseus’
It is important that this rhetorical move plays on Neoptolemus’ connection to his noble past. As Bernard Knox has observed, this is Neoptolemus’ first exposure to the war effort for which his father died fighting. Neoptolemus never met this famous father and therefore only knows of his father’s nature through the renown Achilles achieved as a war hero. In this respect, it would be as strange for him to deny the opportunity to play a role in vindicating Achilles’ death through victory at Troy, as it would be to act treacherously. It would be nearly impossible for Neoptolemus to isolate his identification with Achilles’ nobility, and his subsequent nobility as Achilles’ son, from the list of military successes assured by Odysseus. Yet in order to achieve these successes, it is also clear that Neoptolemus’ only chance to vindicate his father and to serve the Greek army requires a departure from the stable virtues of character, such as honesty and loyalty, that Achilles represents. In fact, part of Odysseus’ genius is rather to expose the Achillean model as itself unstable. For while Achilles himself may have chosen honour over the promise of victory, it is likely that he would not have had the rhetorical resources to justify or support this choice. Indeed, Achilles is much more motivated by honour and pride than he is by fame, even though his pride stems from his knowledge that he is the most famed among the Greeks, since he is the most likely to assure their victory. But whereas these were contradictions that Achilles did not need to confront, for Neoptolemus they are brought into direct conflict. Advantage, victory, and renown necessitate shameless sacrifices of honour and excessive concern with an objective utilitarian good, while Tessitore, in a suggestive footnote that he does not explicitly return to, argues that this language “grounds the theological-political problem at the center of the play.” My study will attempt to unpack the significance of Tessitore’s incisive comment for an understanding of rhetoric in the play. See Martha Nussbaum, “Consequences and Character in Sophocles’ Philoctetes;” and, Tessitore, “Justice, Politics, and Piety in Sophocles’ Philoctetes,” 76n25.

Knox, The Heroic Temper, 122.
loyalty to the past. Justice, as framed by Odysseus, is an instrumental good that requires these sorts of calculations.

Neoptolemus thus agrees with Odysseus’ objective, though he resists his method. He accepts that Philoctetes must be captured, but he does not understand why treacherous plotting is necessary. And, reasonably, he does not accept the threat posed by a cripple (91-92). He will take the man by force (bian), not by cunning (doloisin; 90-91). Odysseus responds to these objections by going further in his attempt subtly to reform Neoptolemus’ nature. He invites Neoptolemus to see that the Achillean focus on strength is the hallmark of youth, and therefore must be superseded by a more refined conception of authority rooted in persuasion rather than physical strength: “Son of a noble father, I too when I was young had a tongue that was inactive but an arm that was active; but when I come to put it to the proof I see that it is the tongue, not actions, that rules in all things for mortals” (96-99).

This revealing statement is a pithy summary of Odyssean ethics. It is suggests an approach to politics that is in direct opposition to the Achillean heroic archetype. Whereas Achilles represents a heroic model in which strength is marked by deed, loyalty, and intractable commitment, Odysseus presents a conception of rule based on the art of persuasion and thus of rhetorical cleverness, instrumentality, and malleability. If indeed it is the tongue that rules over action, then, by extension, the shifting parameters set out by speech leave politics, justice, and even remembrance, mutable. Advantage, an outcome that was once understood as intrinsic to the excellence of the Achillean paradigm, is now
presented as an independent end to which all else, including Achillean virtue, must be subservient.\footnote{For while Achilles could pointedly say, “I detest that man, who hides one thing in the depths of his heart, and speaks forth another” (\textit{Iliad} 9.312-3) Odysseus would respond with, “actions have no audience or consequence in the absence of a sympathetic author”. That is to say, Odysseus requires us to see that Achilles’ nobility is dependent on the master of words and the recorder of deeds. As Arendt puts it, “Even Achilles, it is true, remains dependent upon the storyteller, poet, or historian without whom everything he did remains futile.” (\textit{The Human Condition}, 194).}

Neoptolemus is out of his depth. He circles the information for an alternative solution, knowing that such alternatives have been precluded by Odysseus’ presentation of the facts. Why, he asks, “must \textit{[dei]} I take him by a trick rather than by persuasion?” Is Philoctetes really so strong and threatening that he may not be taken by force? Doesn’t Odysseus think “it disgraceful to tell lies” (110)? Odysseus does not seem troubled by this, offering instead a different standard for assessing right and wrong, against which Neoptolemus cannot argue: “When you are doing something to gain advantage, it is wrong to hesitate” (111). This reasoning inflames Neoptolemus’ desire for honour and victory—both of which, he learns, depend entirely on his ability to capture Philoctetes’ bow (112, 114). To cement their pact, Odysseus offers two additional prizes. Neoptolemus’ reformed nature will earn him the praise that combines his debt both to his teacher and his father: he will be called clever (\textit{sophos}) and at the same time good (\textit{agathos}; 119). With this promise, Neoptolemus is won over: “Let it be! I will do it, casting off all shame!” (120).\footnote{His acquiescence also by extension ensures his complicity in the logic that leads to Philoctetes’ initial abandonment.}

Having successfully managed to appeal to the young man’s desire for future glory over nobility, Odysseus departs smugly, paying homage to two unconventionally paired divini-
ties: “May Hermes the escorter lead us with guile, and Athena of the City, who is Victory, always my protectress” (133-34). \(^{206}\)

**Easy Prey: Neoptolemus’ Deceit and Philoctetes’ Friendship**

The Neoptolemus who parts from Odysseus is fully committed to the Odyssean plan. He is in fact such a quick study that he shows no remorse when confronted with the Chorus’s empathetic corrective to the Odyssean portrait. Being sent along with Neoptolemus as accomplices in the scheme, they have not been corrupted by Odysseus’ manipulation and are capable of feeling pity and empathy for this unknown savage. Whereas Odysseus emphasized his wild and ill-omened cries, the members of the Chorus think of his lonely lamentation:

> This man, inferior, perhaps to none of the houses of the first rank, lies without a share of anything in life far from all others, with beasts dappled or hairy, and pitiable in his pain and hunger he endures affliction incurable and uncared for. And she whose mouth has no bar, Echo, appearing far off responds to his bitter cries of lamentation (180-90).

Neoptolemus is, however, impervious to the humanity of this portrait. He accepts that Philoctetes’ suffering must be the result of divine will and he is therefore not interested in entertaining the Chorus’s pity: “Those sufferings came upon him from cruel Chryse, and his present troubles without companions must be the work of the gods, so that he cannot direct against Troy his irresistible weapons until the time has arrived when it is fated to be

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\(^{206}\) As Martha Nussbaum points out, there is no pre-Sophoclean treatment of Odysseus in which he invokes Athena as Goddess of the City. This particular title is associated with her fifth century patronage of Athens and thus is clearly anachronistic for a Homeric hero. Nussbaum also alerts her reader to the strangeness of combining Athena with both the city, victory and the guile of Hermes, for there is a suggestion that Athena, too, will lead with guile in her guidance over the city and over victory (“Consequences and Character in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*,” 29). If we build on this insight, we find that the divine escorts that Odysseus invokes are an Odyssean innovation invoked to add legitimacy to a scheme in which guile, victory and the community must supersede traditional commitments. I will briefly return to a discussion of the significance of this innovation in piety in the final section of this chapter.
conquered by them” (193-200). Neoptolemus’ adoption of this logic reveals the extent to which he has bought into Odysseus’ instrumental conception of justice. He does not think to ask, as Philoctetes will later, about the justice of gods who inflict pain and suffering in the present in order to realize future goods. He does not, moreover, ask whether the decision to betray Philoctetes could be adequately justified on pious grounds (if piety now demands that he now be retrieved) or whether it is pious for him to lie and “cast aside shamelessness,” as Odysseus had earlier insinuated. Rather, he draws on a narrative of divine providence as supplementary evidence to support his decision to abandon Philoctetes, just as Odysseus earlier evoked piety to support his own decision to abandon Philoctetes (8-12).

And yet, contrary to the dangerous (75-76), savage (9), and suspicious (135-6) language surrounding their anticipated encounter with Philoctetes, the man who greets them is disarming, even friendly. Observing that their familiar clothing must mean they are Greeks, Philoctetes requests that they not “be repelled at my wild state, but take pity on an unhappy man, alone, afflicted like this without a companion or a friend” (223-231). Friendship, surprisingly, is an important motif for the isolated man. After all this time he longs most for a Greek voice (225-231). Neoptolemus’ speech, since it is in Greek, is, therefore, “the dearest of sounds [philtaton phonēma]” for Philoctetes (234); when he later learns that Neoptolemus is the son of Achilles, he addresses Neoptolemus warmly as “son of the dearest of fathers [philtatou pai patros] of a dear land [philēs chthonos]” (242-244).

Philoctetes is surprised to learn that Neoptolemus does not know his story, yet the suggestion that he has been all but forgotten by his own former friends, such that “no news of [his] plight has made its way home or to any part Greece” (254-6) does not significantly
darken his mood. Philoctetes tells his own story, explaining that it was the Achaeans who threw him out “in unholy fashion” (257), abandoning him surreptitiously without warning while he slept on the shore recovering from seasickness. Left with only a few rags, Philoctetes had to rely on his mighty bow alone, and so became a master of catching live prey, creating fire from stones, and learning how to be entirely self-sufficient, at least as far as mere life is concerned (254-316). In his years on the island, he encountered a few travelers who showed him pity, yet none willing to rescue him from his isolated condition (300-316). Philoctetes’ tale is necessarily bitter, but it is also a story of exceptional endurance. For, where others might have withered or lost their minds under the weight of pain or solitude, Philoctetes persevered. Moreover, his immediate willingness to extend the language of friendship to this group of strangers reveals an unusual and persistent hopefulness and faith in friendship, even though this is wholly unwarranted by his experience.

Neoptolemus counters by introducing his own false tale of grievance (319-21). He explains that he was also wronged by Odysseus, who laid claim to Achilles’ arms without first offering them to him, Achilles’ son. In reaction to this offence Neoptolemus left Troy cursing “the most evil Odysseus.” Philoctetes’ reaction to Neoptolemus’ deception story is not as aggressive or retributive as one might expect. Instead, he is nostalgic and shifts the conversation to the subject of his old friends (242-4; 332-3; 336-8; 341-2; 414; 426-3; 433-4). He is not surprised that Odysseus would have betrayed the young man, yet he is

207 Philoctetes does lament that he is hateful to the gods (254), yet it is notable that he reserves his lamentation on the justice of the gods for his discovery that his former friends met an untimely death (446-452).
208 The Chorus will later reflect powerfully on Philoctetes’ astounding self-sufficiency in the absence of all human relishes (676-719). In this respect Philoctetes paradoxically embodies the virtue for which Odysseus was principally known in the Odyssey.
209 As mentioned in a previous footnote, it is most likely that the only falsehood in this story is Neoptolemus’ bitter reaction.
surprised that Ajax, the better man, would have let this happen (403-11). Couldn’t Nestor of Pylos “have checked their evildoing by his wise counsel” (420-3)? Philoctetes’ confidence in the goodness of speech to overcome treacherous action and in the relationship between good character and good speech is striking, and all the more ironic given that this confidence is precisely what makes him such an easy target for deception. When he learns that, for the most part, the best of the men he used to know have died—friends who, he is led to believe, have long forgotten him—Philoctetes is deeply grieved:

Why, nothing evil has ever perished, but the gods carefully protect it, and somehow they delight in turning back from Hades cunning and villainy, while righteousness and valour they are forever sending away. How can we account for this, and how can we approve it, when if we survey the actions of the gods we find that the gods are evil? (446-452)

This question is more revealing than it initially seems. Philoctetes is not simply asking why the courageous must die and the narrowly self-interested prosper, for as Martha Nussbaum points out, this question is self-explanatory. Nor is he merely asking, as Tessitore frames it, why the good are punished and the bad rewarded. If this were the extent of Philoctetes’ question, it would speak to a central theme of the faithful, but it would give us little insight into his persistent humanity in the face of his suffering and the god’s unjust punishment. Clearly, Philoctetes accepts that he lives in a universe in which there is no necessary recompense for friendship or good will, and yet still he continues to uphold these standards. Rather, the much more radical question he is asks is how a human can approve of the gods if their standards of justice are so inferior to men’s. The question does not call piety into question in the traditional way in that it does not ask why one

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210 Compare his praise of Nestor to his criticism of Thersites—the proverbial know it all who “was never content to speak once and for all, even when no one wished to let him talk” (443-444).
should be just if the gods are capricious; rather it asks why one should allow manifestly unjust gods to guide human life, when a better guide would obviously be humanity’s own well-developed sense of justice. Indeed, the question of belief in the gods altogether becomes only a secondary concern.

The basis of Philoctetes’ reflections on the gods is a remarkable faith in friendship, for these reactions are, importantly, triggered in reaction to news about others. Philoctetes understands, of course, that these standards have failed him and also that they failed the army’s leadership. He nevertheless seems to believe that such things as goodness and nobility objectively exist, for, if it weren’t for this belief, then the gods would not disappoint and his persistent hopefulness in friendship would be absurd. Yet, in this crucial respect, Philoctetes’ own commitment to standards of piety, friendship and justice may be absurd. For in order for Philoctetes to sustain these commitments he must deny his experience of both men and gods. The tragic paradox of Philoctetes’ ethical predicament is that he has chosen to adhere to a standard of justice that is insulated from his experience of both men and gods and that cannot therefore be reconciled with the limitations of either.

However, just as Philoctetes’ reflections on both human and divine justice reflect his solitary ethical landscape, so too are they lost on Neoptolemus. Neoptolemus’ commitment to carrying out his plan precludes sensitivity to Philoctetes’ speech; in this respect, he too inhabits an ethical island. For it would seem that the ability to understand

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213 Compare this to Glaucon and Adeimantus’ defense of injustice at *Republic* 359a-367e.
214 I would disagree with anyone who would see Philoctetes’ persistent friendship as wholly self-interested. One might imagine a situation in which a man with Philoctetes’ injury, experience and talent would take a visitor to his island hostage in exchange for a ride home.
215 Sophocles thus helps us to see the paradox of Philoctetes’ seemingly noble ethical compass: it only provides comfort in the liminal and isolated landscape of Lemnos. While a more sympathetic character, Philoctetes’ sense of justice, because it is uncompromising, is as limited and inward-looking as Antigone’s solipsistic morality.
another as a political instrument requires that capacity to remain aloof and indeed imper-
vious to the other’s concerns. Neoptolemus’ response—“where the worse man has more
power than the better, what is good perishes, and the coward [ho deilos] is in power, the
men in that place I will never tolerate” (456-458)—is therefore both naïve and crafty. For
not only does it avoid the important question of divine justice raised by Philoctetes’ la-
ment, but it is also terrifically redundant. No one, including Philoctetes, worries about the
triump of cowards or expects that it is possible for the good not to perish. Rather, the
obvious problem is the deliberately inflicted suffering of the noble at the hands of the
wicked—a problem that is, in Philoctetes’ view, aggravated by the injustice of the gods.

With little else to say—perhaps because, on some level, he recognizes his own
complicity in this complaint—Neoptolemus’ makes a calculated movement to leave,
thereby provoking Philoctetes to ask to join him (453-65). This evokes an eloquent supple-
cation speech that serves as Philoctetes’ first and most direct, albeit unintentional,
challenge to the influence of Odysseus. Referring to Neoptolemus as “noble” (gennaios),
Philoctetes also deliberately evokes Neoptolemus’ aristocratic status to serve his purpose.
He reminds Neoptolemus that the virtues of honesty and character he has inherited as part
of his father’s ethic are not a means to another end, but rather are ends in themselves, from
which follow fame and honour: “For noble men [gennaios] meanness is shameful and
generosity brings fame!” (475-6) Philoctetes’ language is charged with paternal expecta-
tion, yet he does not let the appeal to Neoptolemus’ nature do all the work. Like Odysseus,
who attempted to replace Neoptolemus’ conception of nobility with a new, more malleable
conception of nature rooted in victory (50-53), Philoctetes attempts to anchor Neoptole-
mus’ understanding of his status as gennaios in pity. He encourages Neoptolemus to
ponder the very real vulnerability and equality that all men share before time and fortune, and, in doing so, to come to feel pity for the fortune of another. Philoctetes thus invites Neoptolemus to reconsider nobility as the capacity to transcend one’s particular set of attributes in order to recognize one’s fundamental equality with others: “Take pity on me, seeing that for mortals all things are full of fear and of the danger that after good fortune may come evil” (500-503). Put differently, being noble involves the capacity to extrapolate from one’s circumstance in order to empathize fully with the predicaments and fears of others, thereby remaining cognizant of the tenuous basis on which good fortune rests. This new conception of nobility is not altruism, but rather an enlightened version of self-interest—for Neoptolemus too might one day share a similar fate to Philoctetes and should therefore treat him as nobly as he would hope to be treated himself.216 It is therefore a conception of nobility rooted in mutual vulnerability that recognizes the advantages of friendship, loyalty, and forgiveness. Whereas the instrumentalist conception of self-interest implies that all are necessarily vulnerable to the instrumental imperatives of the common good, the good sense that Philoctetes describes suggests that the common good can be coherently sustained only if it attends to the vulnerability of each of its members.217

216 This reasoning is similar to Odysseus’ appeal to Agammenon’s self-interest in advocating Ajax’ burial. See Ajax lines 1362-5 and Chapter Three, footnote 186.
217 It is important that Philoctetes is able to identify the characteristic features of good sense in the abstract, just as he is able to feel allegiance to conceptions of piety, justice and friendship. What Philoctetes lacks, tragically, is the capacity to reconcile this good sense and the emotional agility it requires with the extraordinary suffering and injustice he has endured. Sophocles leaves open the problem of forgiveness of radical injustice. I will return to this question in the discussion of the deus ex machina.
Neoptolemus’ *Aporia*

Neoptolemus’ commitment to falsehood makes him deaf to Philoctetes’ supplication speech and the challenge posed therein to his new ethos. Insofar as he continues to see Philoctetes as an instrument for the satisfaction of his own goals, this deafness will necessarily persist. He is thus ready to depart with Philoctetes and the bow when the latter interrupts the action, on the grounds that he cannot leave without the herbal remedy he uses for his illness, which is inside his cave (649-50). Philoctetes would like Neoptolemus to join him inside. Until now, Philoctetes’ injury has been largely in the background, but when confronted with the real possibility that he will finally escape, Philoctetes begins to unravel (731).

Philoctetes at first tries to downplay the extent of his illness. “I think I am just getting better,” he says, between cries (735), although before long he fully degenerates. As he cries, prays, and begs for mercy and death, Philoctetes’ speech devolves into erratic bursts of pain, inarticulate helpless pleas for relief, and vengeful curses. In the midst of this episode, however, Philoctetes shows his friendship by entrusting his bow to Neoptolemus for safekeeping until the pain subsides (763-5). In return, he extracts an oath from the young man that he will remain by his side (815-6). Neoptolemus, having secured his victory, promises truthfully to take care of it and prays, guardedly, for good luck to come of it (775). And yet, faced with the gravity of his captive’s pain and the depth of his suffering, Neoptolemus’ own resolve begins to weaken. For the first time, he seems touched by the man’s trusting gestures of friendship, and, with the bow in hand, starts to lose his ease with words. When pressed, he admits that his silence is a result of his own pain, for he has
been “lamenting for [Philoctetes’] woes” (806). With this, Philoctetes finally crumbles into a deep sleep.

When Philoctetes recovers, he finds Neoptolemus unmasked and in a confused state of *aporia*. “What am I to do next?” the son of Achilles ponders out loud, realizing that the time has come to implement the plan. But although there is an urgent need for action, Neoptolemus is no longer able to see the advantage in his lie, since “everything is distasteful, when a man has abandoned his own nature and is doing what is unlike him!” (902-3) It is important that Neoptolemus’ primary emotion is not pity for Philoctetes, but shame at himself, for he sees that he cannot escape Philoctetes’ judgment and worries that he will “be seen to be a traitor; that is what has long been paining me” (906). Shame is, indeed, a powerful emotion. As we have seen in our discussion of Ajax’s suicide, shame has the capacity to motivate Sophoclean characters to reconstruct or improve their internal dispositions by orienting them toward the opinions of others whose opinions they respect. The “internal other” described by Williams has a powerful capacity to provoke actors to strive towards internal coherence, since one’s transgressions are most troublingly felt when one is forced to live with an internal other who one knows disapproves of one’s actions.218

If we attempt to understand Neoptolemus’ unraveling from the perspective of the internal other, we will more fully grasp his internal discord. Odysseus’ attempt to replace Neoptolemus’ internal model of nobility with a new model of advantage and future success has left Neoptolemus in a weakened psychological state. For accepting Odysseus as an internal guide necessarily means quieting the influence of his father, Achilles, and

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218 Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 75–103. See also Tarnopolsky, *Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants*. 

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betraying the *physis* which he shares with Achilles, and to which Philoctetes so trustingly appeals. Yet it might nevertheless strike us as puzzling that Neoptolemus begins to feel affection for Philoctetes the moment his captive abandons *logos* and gives in to pure *physis*. 219 Was this not the repulsive savageness that led the Greek army to reject him in the first place? Shouldn’t the deeply personal nature of Philoctetes’ pain increase the distance between these two actors? 220

I would suggest that Philoctetes’ pain had greater persuasive power over young Neoptolemus, not because he felt genuine pity for Philoctetes, but rather because the overwhelming and unexpected immediacy of Philoctetes’ trauma forced him out of the future-oriented thinking required to execute his deception. Exposure to Philoctetes’ suffering collapsed the distance that Neoptolemus had been able to cultivate between his present shamelessness and a future self that would reap the rewards of this action. Now, all of a sudden, Neoptolemus finds himself recalled to his present, and therefore to the Achillean standard of justice and nobility which he once understood as inseparable from his *physis*. He must now confront the problem that the standards of honesty and nobility he once associated with his nature are incompatible with Odyssean ends, and that he must in actuality sacrifice his *physis* in order to reinvent himself as a war hero. It is possible that he had not fully recognized that one cannot cast aside shamelessness for a few minutes without forever altering one’s internal landscape. And this internal landscape is the site of the reprimand of his *physis* or internal other.

219 As Blundell observes, “He is distressed not by the physical discomfort of witnessing Philoctetes’ disease, but by the discomfort of betraying his *physis* and being shown up as shameful and *kakos.*” Blundell, “The *Phusis* of Neoptolemus in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes,*” 140. Yet, the question remains, why now? Why did Philoctetes not evoke these feelings of betrayal and confusion earlier when he appealed directly to Neoptolemus’ nobility (475-6)?

And yet, while realizing the presence of this internal conflict is enough to stop Neoptolemus from going forward with his deception, his ethical self is still very much in a state of aporia, for he is also still committed to justice (to t’endikon) and the greater good (sympheron) entailed in his commitment to Odysseus (925-6). Neoptolemus’ grief in his confusion and inability to decide what to do mark the waning of Odysseus’ influence, yet the impact of this aporia is not immediately formative or ethically substantial. Rather, Neoptolemus expresses his desire to withdraw from action altogether, with the selfish exclamation that it would have been better for him “never to have left Skyros” (969-70).

The Return of Odysseus

The reappearance of Odysseus in the midst of Neoptolemus’ aporia forces a return to the action of the drama. With Philoctetes safely disarmed, Odysseus wastes no words softening his injunction: Philoctetes must (dei) agree to come to Troy or he will be brought by force (biai; 982-3), a command that Odysseus issues with the authority of the god. He repeats three times that “Zeus” has decided this, and that “I execute his will” (989-90). In other words, Philoctetes must obey (994).

221 Avoiding this sort of torturous internal conflict is the basis of the Socratic precept that “It is better to suffer than to do harm” (Gorgias 469cd). Arendt later develops this statement as the basis of her conception of moral “thinking.” For Arendt the Socratic “two in the one” provides the ultimate litmus test for morality, for the reason that it is better to suffer than to do harm, because no one wants to have to live with himself as a murderer. The question of moral probity for Arendt, or psychological health for Socrates, thus comes down to the capacity to live a life in which one is prepared to live under the scrutiny of one’s own internal audit. See Arendt, The Life of the Mind, 179–93; Arendt, Responsibility and Judgment. To avoid one’s own scrutiny would require the capacity to view one’s nature as perfectly fluid and therefore to view nothing in one’s internal landscape as fixed, including the self to whom one is accountable. This fluidity seems to be the ethos underlying Odysseus’ politics; it is an ethos that can therefore escape from shame, and which poses a direct challenge to Socratic and Arendtian morality. Yet, if Neoptolemus’ aporia reveals anything, it is that this ethos is difficult to sustain, for it requires almost complete immunity to shame in the face of the judgment of others.
For Philoctetes, however, the god’s authority has no significance, particularly when invoked by Odysseus. In fact, Odysseus only makes the gods look worse by using them to shelter his own imperatives (991-2). Philoctetes would freely choose to end his life rather than acquiesce as a slave to Odysseus’ plan (995-6; 1002-3). He recognizes that he is shackled in the absence of his bow, yet he does not give up. Performing for the benefit of Neoptolemus, who, newly sympathetic to his plight, remains in charge of the bow and therefore his fate, he exposes the false pretence of piety underlying Odysseus’ attempt to author necessity:

How, if I sail with you, can you make burnt offerings? How can you still pour libations? [For that was your pretext for throwing me out.] And you will perish for the wrong you did this man, if the gods care for justice. And I know that they do care, for otherwise you would never have sailed on this voyage for the sake of a miserable man like me, unless some prompting from the gods had led you to it (1020-1039).

Philoctetes shows that Odysseus’ attempt to align his own authority with piety is spurious. Either the gods care about justice, in which case the pretext under which Odysseus and his commanders deserted Philoctetes was false, or the gods do not care about justice and favour the wicked, as Philoctetes has earlier speculated (446-452). If the latter is true, then the gods are as mercurial and evil as Odysseus their mouthpiece, and therefore not to be taken seriously. Yet if the former is true and the gods desire atonement for human injustice, then they remain unpersuasive as figures of authority in choosing Odysseus as their spokesman.222

222 As Tessitore puts it, “Philoctetes’ statement implies that the gods have an existence independent of human beings and that politically motivated invocations of the gods cloud human judgment about the divine in such a way as to obscure the truth about them. If divine will is used to justify the shifting political courses of human beings, the gods appear no less capricious in their allegiances than their all-too-human mouthpieces.” (“Justice, Politics, and Piety in Sophocles’ Philoctetes,” 69). Yet, while Tessitore is right to point to the problematic relationship between god and men implied by Odysseus’ co-opting of the divine, he does not go
Philoctetes has managed to expose Odysseus’ dubious rhetoric of divine necessity in front of Neoptolemus, but Odysseus is too good a politician to take this as a defeat. Instead, he changes tack to argue that victory is his master, not the gods. While this new argument is not inconsistent with Odysseus’ earlier claims, it is a more overt expression of his selfishness. Human advantage in general, and political advantage in particular, are ends before which all other commitments must bow. Odysseus, too, will cast aside his shame to make his point if it seems rhetorically prudent. Odysseus is clearly so confident in his earlier attempt to appeal to Neoptolemus’ love of victory and honour over loyalty and nobility that he does not fear exposing his rhetorical shamelessness. Rather than continuing to engage him, therefore, he dismisses Philoctetes as an inconsequential adversary: “I could say much in answer to his words, if I had the time” (1047-8). It is not surprising that for Odysseus Philoctetes is expendable—but it may be surprising that he is so convinced of his own influence over Neoptolemus that he makes no attempt to mask his contempt or soften his ruthlessness.

Neoptolemus’ Unpersuasive Resolve

Forced out of his aпорia by the need for action, Neoptolemus faces a clear set of practical alternatives. The good represented by Odysseus, while still a probable outcome, has lost its noble lustre and therefore its capacity to override his internal sense of virtue and shame. It would be impossible, on the heels of this exchange, to understand his own complicity in

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223 Far enough in connecting this statement to Philoctetes’ earlier dismissal of the gods on the grounds that they are unjust. It follows from my reading that for Philoctetes the “truth about the gods” is only of interest to the extent that they are revealed to be more committed to human standards of justice, and therefore less capricious than they appear. For only moments earlier he insisted that it was Zeus’ will that Philoctetes be present at Troy (989-90).
Odysseus’ scheme as anything other than ignoble, and he therefore must choose whether this injustice is worth the promise of victory and renown in a world in which justice and honour are shown to exist imperfectly and perhaps in a state of deeper tension than Neoptolemus is ready to accept. The alternative option is equally grave, for aligning himself with Philoctetes will mean making enemies of Odysseus and the Achaean command. In doing so, Neoptolemus will stand no chance of honouring his father in battle and will need to live as an outcast away from his newly found political community. Moreover, there is Philoctetes’ disease. While this was clearly not so gruesome as to repel Neoptolemus absolutely, it nevertheless remains a serious liability for which he will need to assume some responsibility.

Neoptolemus’ break from Odysseus is his first display of nobility and firm judgment in the play, yet it is nevertheless an ethically questionable move. He informs Odysseus that he is returning to “put right the wrong I did before” (1224). His mistake, he claims, was “obeying you and the entire army” (1226) and overcoming a man with trickery and deceit (1228). He thus finally commits himself—in a move that provokes Odysseus’ disbelief (1225-39)—to pity and compassion (1224). Yet the potential costs of this defiance are grave, for Odysseus will turn the entire army against him, with the result that he will be hunted and punished, more hated even than the enemies at Troy (1253). Neoptolemus’ only hope is to persuade Philoctetes to relent and return with him to Troy. Yet Neoptolemus’ words have already worked once on Philoctetes, and Philoctetes is not willing to make the same mistake twice (1271-2; 1273-4).

Neoptolemus clearly did not calculate the effect that his earlier deception would have on his credibility. After much resistance, he finally grasps that the only way out of
his dilemma is through actions, not words. He attempts to right his wrong by returning Philoctetes his bow. Yet this, too, is a questionable tactic, for in returning a weapon to a man mad with rage, Neoptolemus puts Odysseus in potential danger (1299). As it turns out, however, Neoptolemus’ gesture is sufficient to restore Philoctetes’ warm judgment of him, and in this way Neoptolemus has shown his nature to be worthy of his famous parentage (1310-1313). With trust thus re-established, Neoptolemus brings his rhetorical skill to bear once more on the problem of persuading Philoctetes to be sensible and return to Troy. He points out that Philoctetes’ intransigence has made him become savage (agrios). As a result, he will miss the opportunity not only to have his wound healed by Asclepius at Troy, but also, together with Neoptolemus, to conquer the enemy city. Neoptolemus grounds these facts on the authority of Hellenus, the “noble prophet,” who predicted these outcomes beyond a doubt and gave the Trojans permission to kill him if he were found to be lying (1314-47). Unfortunately, though Neoptolemus was a quick study in deception, he is clearly weaker in the art of ethical persuasion or “good sense.” Though Neoptole-

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224 Lucky Neoptolemus is quick enough to intervene and persuasive enough to block this outcome. See also Plato’s Republic Book 1 (331e-336b) for a discussion of the limitations of putting a retributive notion of justice ahead of judgment. The point, of course, in the Republic is to clarify the limitations of such conventional understandings of justice as paying one’s debts, limitations that Neoptolemus, in his quick transition to manhood, clearly has not yet had the chance to work out.

225 Hellenus’ prophesy is revised three times throughout the course of the drama. At first Odysseus claims that it is only Philoctetes’ bow that is needed (77-80); later a merchant, sent by Odysseus to expedite the deception scene (somewhat superfluously, for this was already well-underway), reveals that both Philoctetes and the bow are necessary for Troy (610-16) (it is also important that, as the merchant indicates, this prophecy was publically revealed among many Greeks, for this helps to explain why Odysseus would bother returning to Lemnos in the first place), with the addition that Philoctetes’ return to Troy will bring his relief from sickness at the hands of Asclepius’ sons (1329-1343). These mutations of the prophecy add several oddities to the play. For example, Neoptolemus’ claim suggests that he was either already in Troy and heard this prophecy for himself, thus making strange his seeming ignorance in the opening scene with Odysseus. Alternatively, Neoptolemus might be using this last piece of information simply to bait Philoctetes – in which case his ethical transformation must be viewed as purely superficial. I would suggest that whereas Odysseus’ manipulation of the prophecy is wholly in keeping with his persona and instrumental aims, Neoptolemus’ presentation is an earnest if not hopeful representation of the facts. For a presentation of the oracle as misunderstood and manipulated throughout the tragedy see Bowra, Sophoclean Tragedy, 261–306.
mus’ catalogue of goods may find some common ground with Philoctetes in positing the first benefit as being to “come to healing hands,” the next on the list—“to take Troy, the cause of so much mourning, and win the highest fame!” (1345-7)—fails to take account of how insignificant promises of victory or honour are for Philoctetes at this point,\footnote{226} to say nothing of his understandable reservations about reconciling with the men who will confer such things.

Philoctetes’ dilemma is whether or not to yield to his one and only friend. As he considers this problem, he reveals that his chief concern is not glory, but rather shame—the shame he will feel in having to account to himself for having reconciled with those who harmed him:

Then how can I come into men’s sight, unhappy one, after doing this? Who will speak to me? How can you, eyes that have witnessed all that has taken place around me, put up with this, my being with the sons of Atreus who were my ruin? (1352-6)\footnote{227}

For all of Neoptolemus’ experience of the persuasiveness of shame, he still overestimates the value of honour as a countervailing good capable of balancing out the shame of betraying oneself. Yet Philoctetes also knows that holding to his conception of nobility will mean forsaking the opportunity to be healed. Avoiding Troy means forsaking a remedy for his pain and instead accepting considerable risk of retaliation.

\footnote{226} It is useful to consider the relationship between Neoptolemus’ reliance on shame as a source of ethical guidance and his stunted ethical development. Neoptolemus’ reliance on shame might, for example, be taken as a significant indication that his moral transformation was not complete. In this last exchange Sophocles’ helps us to see that while Neoptolemus may be motivated to avoid injustice, he lacks the good sense to do so for the right reasons. One piece of supporting evidence for this theory is that, in accordance to the traditional narratives, Neoptolemus returns to Troy as a sociopath who goes on an aggressive killing spree (killing Priam and four others). It is also significant that his name means “new war” (neo + ptolemos).

\footnote{227} It is important that in the isolated landscape of his confinement on the island, Philoctetes has learned that the only internal other to whom he can reliably appeal is himself. The consequence of this is that, like Ajax, but for drastically different reasons, Philoctetes lacks the internal resources to be swayed by another or to modify his conception of self for the benefit of himself and others.
Neoptolemus’ attempt at persuasion accordingly ends in a predictable impasse. The son of Achilles persists in attempting to motivate Philoctetes to see the value in returning to Troy, while Philoctetes continues to return to the shamefulness of betraying one’s honour by reconciling with enemies, notwithstanding the enticement of future benefits. So far afield is Neoptolemus in his attempt to bait Philoctetes with honour and victory, and so far entrenched is Philoctetes in his decision to upset the aims of his enemies, even to his own detriment, that no resolution is possible save one highly far-fetched compromise: Neoptolemus must give way and follow through on his promise to take Philoctetes home. In return, Philoctetes will use his mighty bow to protect Neoptolemus against the onslaught of the Greek army (1403-8). Neoptolemus’s continued reliance on a vocabulary of honour and victory—goods which are clearly unsuitable enticements for Philoctetes—reveals the extent to which he has been irreversibly corrupted by Odysseus’ world-view. For even if these were his ideals prior to his conversation with Odysseus, and the means by which Odysseus was able to persuade him, he nevertheless lacks an appropriate awareness of all that Philoctetes has gone through and why these goods would therefore be very undesirable to him. We are left to speculate whether the residual impact of Odysseus will continue to haunt Neoptolemus.

At this point in the play, however, such future possibilities remain remote. For the two newly allied heroes, being left to their own devices comes with dire consequences. For Philoctetes, it means the prospect of remaining a cripple. As for Neoptolemus, he will have to accept the destiny of an outsider who has simultaneously betrayed the community on behalf of which his father died fighting and give up all hope of avenging him, since Troy can now no longer be taken. And yet, this is not how the play ends. Instead, in a
stunning reversal, Sophocles has Heracles descend from the rafters to salvage Neoptolemus’ failed attempt at mobilizing Philoctetes, thereby revealing the limitations of each actor’s ethical compass. Philoctetes suddenly finds himself convinced of the need to reconcile with the Achaeans, thus ensuring the return of these two outsiders to Troy; and yet, the wounded hero does so out of a sense of obedience rather than justice. Neoptolemus, for his part, is reconciled with the community but he is not able to expel Odyssean instrumental reasoning from his psyche – for not only does he tactlessly try to entice Philoctetes to return to Troy with a promise of status. Sophocles’ Athenian audience would have known from other popular representations of Neoptolemus that he would go on himself to become a ruthless murderer.\textsuperscript{228} In this respect we might understand Odyssean political rhetoric as more corrosive to the collective good than the god’s capacity to restore justice is ameliorative. For the spectators in the audience, this surprise ending seems to render insignificant the very real catastrophe that looms as a consequence of impotent good sense. How are we to make sense of it?

\textit{Deus ex Machina}

When reading this play from the perspective of political theory, one cannot afford to overlook this strange moment. If the \textit{deus ex machina} is simply a plot device, then we are forced to question the play’s portability as one that might shed light on contemporary concerns.\textsuperscript{229} It is more plausible, however, to understand the \textit{deus ex machina} as an ending

\textsuperscript{228} Cf. Apollodorus, \textit{Epitome}, Book E, chapter 5.
\textsuperscript{229} In contrast to the arguments presented here, see Kitto for a reading of Neoptolemus’ journey as ethically complete. “The mental and moral journey that Neoptolemus makes we are to follow for its own sake, not, as we follow Oedipus’, for its own sake and also with the feeling that we are apprehending something about Man himself. When the journey is finished we are satisfied; no catharsis is wanted and we do not wait with
that presents an alternative to what occurs in the day-to-day reality of the play’s spectators. That is, it depends upon possibilities that exist only in the world of heroes, where the question of the gods’ justice necessarily fails to spill over into the question of their existence. In the world that this ending permits us to step into, the proximity between men and gods is such that they can call on ties of friendship that supersede men’s loyalty even to themselves. Thus, it is sufficient that Heracles is motivated by a pre-existing friendship in order to intervene and right wrongs against whose magnitude human words fail—and yet, in doing so, he also restores the privileged place of friendship, justice, and piety within the doubtful mind of the cynical Philoctetes.230 In this way, Sophocles uses the deus ex machina to reassert the gods’ influence over the world of his play. For the spectator, on the other hand, the device merely underscores the rift between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes and emphasizes the consequences of human culpability. It is clear that in the absence of the spectacular intervention of a god, there is no persuasive technique capable of reconciling Philoctetes to the soldiers who left him at Troy. In the world of Sophoclean Athens, just as in that of twenty-first-century liberals, there are simply no such remedies (and often no remedies at all) for injustices of the magnitude that he has suffered. The deus ex machina therefore points, not to the need for divine correctives to the limitations of justice, but baited breath for some larger consummation. If it happens that part of the story is left over, that is a minor matter; a god can put it right, it being, in a real sense, ‘outside the play,’”"Greek Tragedy, 320).

230Blundell also understands that the “arrival of Heracles pinpoints the insoluble nature of the conflicting demands on Neoptolemus and Philoctetes” and Tessitore argues that “The play suggests an irreconcilable conflict between Philoctetes’ troubled hope in the gods and Odysseus’ exclusive attention to the world of politics”. Gellie claims that Heracles' speech is an unconvincing device (Sophocles, 157-58); while Segal understands the plot as motivated by a sense of piety and in this way sees the deus ex machina as the drama’s final assertion of piety over reason (Segal, Sophocles` Tragic World, 95–97); Nussbaum makes very little of piety or of the deus ex machina (Nussbaum, “Consequences and Character in Sophocles` Philoctetes”), and others, following Errandonea, see the ending as the final rhetorical triumph of Odysseus who merely impersonates Heracles to secure victory in the end. See Ignacio Errandonea “Filioctetes,” 72-107. I am not entirely closed to this latter possibility. In another expression of this proximity between man and god, Odysseus innovates with Athena, fusing her with Apollo and attaching her to the political community (133-4).
rather to our own obligation to recognize and form judgments through reflection on the corrosive commitments of the play’s characters.

Good sense, born of exposure to the tragic and of cultivated feelings of mutual vulnerability, is not a corrective that can be inserted into human drama like a *deus ex machina*. It does not always develop, and, when it does, it is not always persuasive. Yet good sense is nevertheless the only corrective that might pre-empt Odysseus-style rhetoric from disabling its development. It is true that Sophocles ends the play by pointing to the redemptive role of piety. Perhaps something like faith in justice would be enough to ensure that Odysseus-style speech does not impose a horizon that precludes the possibility of either faith or good sense. Yet, as the play also shows, pious faith is not sufficient to counteract the corrupting ethos of Odyssean political rhetoric, for it can easily be coopted in the service of this ethos. So too is faith in human goodness, truthfulness, and friendship a mirage if the only way to secure a commitment to these goods is to withdraw from political realities, as Philoctetes must do in order to sustain his commitment to justice and friendship in the face of injustice and isolation. Philoctetes’ virtually spiritual commitment to justice and his insular conception of friendship are consequences of the actions of others, yet they nevertheless impede his ability to live in the world and to reconcile with his enemies. It is not entirely clear, moreover, whether reconciliation in the aftermath of such extensive injustice is even possible. Indeed, in my reading, the play helps to highlight a situation that has gone drastically too far, and is therefore beyond the scope of human intervention. *Philoctetes* is not, therefore, a play that provides one with a sense of unity or with comfortable answers. Rather, Sophocles ends this play by pointing outside the drama to the redemptive possibilities of the spectators’ reflective judgments.
Chapter V

Kings’ Speech: A Study of Political Rhetoric in Sophocles’ Oedipus at Colonus

Have not all railings and bridges fallen into the water?

− Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra\textsuperscript{231}

All of the plays discussed in this dissertation explore themes of prudence and rhetoric, yet they do so with varying degrees of pessimism and optimism. In each specific reading I have tried to draw out the richness of Sophocles’ own ethical presentation of good sense as well as the relationship between this good sense and effective persuasion. I have shown that while the two are sometimes aligned they are also often divorced.

In this concluding chapter I present Oedipus at Colonus\textsuperscript{232} as a synthesis of the major themes explored in each of the central chapters of the dissertation. Here we find Sophocles’ clearest portrait of an ethical spectrum. We see good sense embodied in Theseus, the paradigmatic leader, while Creon gathers together all of those negative qualities we associated with a pernicious model of self-serving rhetoric. Wedged between these stable boundaries of virtue and vice is Oedipus, whose arrival at Athens represents all of the ambiguity, passion, and extreme luck characteristic of a tragic universe. Whereas Theseus and Creon represent clear political and rhetorical models of both good and evil, and therefore provide a sort of “ethical” spectrum, Oedipus points to something altogether unpredictable. This unpredictable “middle” represented by Oedipus, is, I argue, a realistic

\textsuperscript{231} Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, in The Portable Nietzsche, 313.

\textsuperscript{232} Oedipus at Colonus was written at the end of Sophocles’ long life and was performed posthumously in 401 BCE.
portrait of the tragic nature of our human condition and is reflective of the substance with which political life has to contend.

Oedipus at Colonus operates in two modes. First, it attempts to parse out an ethical system of virtue and vice, justice and injustice, inside and outside, and piety and politics that is more ambiguously presented in his other works. The play clearly illustrates self-interest, deception and betrayal, and juxtaposes these to models of generosity, piety, and friendship. As one might expect, Creon, King of Thebes, exemplifies these vices, while Theseus, King of Athens, models the corresponding virtues. Yet on another level the play is more mysterious and more religiously ambiguous than Sophocles’ other works. For, wedged between these ethical poles is Oedipus, who by his very nature and in his puzzling allegiance with local goddesses, disrupts and calls into question the stability of ethical norms.

If Creon and Theseus present clear Sophoclean models of virtue and vice, Oedipus represents something altogether mysterious and perhaps unknowable about the human condition. His virtues and vices, which are many, have little to do with his severe punishment and glorious redemption. Indeed, Oedipus’ vices are understandable. He is intractable, excessive, and self-centred yet, knowing his history, we also forgive him these traits. But despite all that we know about Oedipus’ transgressions and his past, he remains unknowable. He is a mythic figure, full of contradictions and inversions, who has suffered catastrophes of a mythic proportion. He is a character with a ferocious and unyielding temper and yet he also finds comfort with the local Eumenides and is blessed with redemption at the end of his life. Oedipus, as the centre of the play, directs us to reflect on the questions a tragic universe poses. Why, for example, should we persevere in a world
that is inhospitable and in which we are, if anything, mere playthings of higher powers?

*Oedipus at Colonus* is a play that offers remarkably clear insight into Sophoclean universals and standards of judgment, and, thanks to these delineated markers, it is a play that also invites the reader to peer into a chasm that can only be expressed in the inversions and paradoxes of myth. As a whole, we are left with a comprehensive portrait that communicates as much about Sophocles’ tragic ethos as any of the individual characters who speak in the Sophoclean corpus.

**Oedipus**

The action begins outside Athens in the neighbouring district of Colonus. Here we meet a decrepit and exiled Oedipus, together with his daughter Antigone. The two have stumbled upon a sacred shrine, identifiable by olive vines and the song of nightingales (14-18). As we soon find out, Oedipus has come to Athens to fulfill a prophecy. He has learned from Phoebus that he will find respite from his “long suffering life” in Athens, and that in so doing he will bring advantage to “those who receive [him]” (84-110). Yet before Oedipus can fulfill this destiny, he must first persuade a local peasant and a conservative Chorus of Elders (the latter are locals who represent the deme of Colonus) to let him plead his case before Theseus, the king of Athens. To complicate matters, he learns that the shrine in which he has taken refuge is the inviolable shrine of the Eumenides, dreaded goddesses who inspire fearful silence amongst the locals and whose territory is forbidden.

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233 Colonus was the birthplace of Sophocles. Many have commented that the setting of the play parallels a homecoming of the poet at the end of his life.

234 All translations of the play are by Lloyd-Jones, unless otherwise indicated.

235 ἄρπα is the Greek word used to describe subdivisions of land in Attica. Each ἄρπα functioned as a small government unit and had its own traditions and festivals.
The members of the Chorus are initially forgiving of this transgression, instructing the outsider to learn quickly to “loathe what the city is accustomed to dislike and to respect what it holds dear” (185-7). They are territorial but also welcoming – within limits. These two traits, in fact, go hand in hand: being welcoming is a defining characteristic of Athens and Athenian piety (258-62; 485-6; 632-36; 1005-1013; 1179-80). But when the Chorus learns of Oedipus’ identity, both fear and the desire to insulate themselves from bad luck take precedence. Their command is now unambiguous: “Go far away, out of the country!” (225)

A less skilled orator would have had a difficult time getting past this initial block. But Oedipus was once renowned for his reason, and, in old age, he shows no signs of slowing down in wit (6-7). If anything, his supplication is inspired:

What help comes from fame, or from a fine reputation that flows away in vain, seeing that Athens, they say, has most reverence for the gods, and alone can protect the afflicted stranger and alone can give him aid? How is this the case with me when you have made me rise up from these ledges and are driving me away, simply from fear of my name? For it is not my person or my actions that you fear; why know that my actions consisted in suffering rather than in doing (258-66).

Here, Oedipus eloquently demonstrates knowledge of local custom and piety while at the same time admonishing the Chorus on these same grounds. To reject him would be to reject the virtues in which Athenians take so much pride and for which they are widely reputed (258-62). He reminds his auditors that because he acted in ignorance he is innocent in his crime—though he has been used and destroyed by others who acted with intent (270-74). For all of these reasons Oedipus implores the Chorus to preserve him. He also adds another, more powerful claim: not to preserve him would be “to consign [the gods] to darkness” (277-9), for they reward the reverent and punish the unholy. Since Oedipus has
come to Athens as “sacred, reverent” and bringing “advantage to the citizens here” the gods favour his protection. To cast him out would be not only cruel, but also unholy and imprudent (287-91).

Oedipus’ attempt to persuade the Chorus that he should be granted a hearing with Theseus is successful. And yet, based on what we learn from the Chorus, they acquiesce not because they are persuaded by Oedipus’ sound arguments, but rather because they sense that his words carry a certain gravity that they should fear (292-4). Oedipus manages to persuade them by appealing to their fear of gods whom they are afraid to name, whom they “pass without looking, without sound, without speech, moving [their] lips in respectful silence” (124-33). By contrast, to Oedipus, the stranger, these local goddesses are welcoming; he finds shelter in their grove and confidently speaks on their behalf. Rather than deferring to custom, he clarifies it. Indeed, where he was first admonished and helped to rise from the Eumenides’ shrine by the Chorus (176-82), he now admonishes and inspires fear with his words (292-3). Oedipus’ strange access to Athenian customs and his dark history serve to highlight his separateness. The more Oedipus sees and knows and says about the unseeable, unknowable, and unspeakable, the more he stands apart from the superstitious Athenian council of elders, as well as from the spectating audience. Indeed, his supplication speech is our first example of Oedipus’ special status, for, though advised and prepared to defer to existing custom (12-13; 170-1; 184-7; 461-506), he quickly inverts political boundaries between inside and outside, customary and foreign.236

236 These reversals are heightened by the dramatic setting; this is the only example in Sophocles’ corpus that is set in Athens and it also happens to be set in Colonus, the small district where he was born. As Froma Zeitlin has persuasively argued, Thebes “provides the negative model to Athens’ manifest image of itself with regard to its notions of the proper management of city, society, and self” (“Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama,” 131). Thebes was an established other in the Athenian imaginary. It was a
Indeed, when pleading his case to Theseus, Oedipus seems at first to have transcended particular boundaries and the attachments that come with such affiliations:

Dearest son of Aegeus, for the gods alone there is no old age and no death ever, but all other things are submerged by all-powerful time! The strength of the country perishes, so does the strength of the body; loyalty dies and disloyalty comes into being, and the same spirit never remains between friends or between cities, since for some people now and for others in the future happy relations turn bitter, and again friendship is restored (607-615).

These reflections command our attention. They are characteristic of a man with a wise nature – a man who, through experience of hardship, has overcome attachment to present commitments to such a degree that he can reflect on all such commitments and loyalty as products of contingency and as subject to fortune. Oedipus’ comments suggest an acceptance of the rule of luck in human affairs and a capacity to see beyond luck to something more stable and constant than human relations. In other plays, this kind of insight is the basis of Sophoclean good sense. In this respect, Oedipus helps the spectator to see that the foreign other is not so radically different from himself; indeed there is a conceptual space between the mythical plane of Thebes and the solid ground of Athens in which particular concerns dissolve and common reflections take shape.

Yet, while Oedipus is in one sense the sage foreigner who can invert and transcend the distinctions between Athens and Thebes, he remains, temperamentally, Theban. Oedipus is not steered by his reflections on time and change toward either forgiveness or a

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place where normative conceptions of nature, convention, political rule, fidelity and piety were revealed in excessive and perverted forms, and Oedipus, above all in his destructive thirst for knowledge, represents these perversions. With Oedipus’ arrival in Athens there is a disruption of the distance that the focal point of Thebes afforded an Athenian spectator and yet at the same time the spectator must accept the integration of Theban excesses into Athenian soil. For a thoughtful discussion of Oedipus’ excessive commitment to abstract reason see Saxonhouse, “The Tyranny of Reason in the World of the Polis.”

Consider, for example, Odysseus’ recognition of human ephemerality in Ajax (125-6).
recognition of his equality with his enemies, as are other Sophoclean characters, such as Tecmessa and Odysseus; instead, he goes on to forecast and even to implicate himself in the destruction of Thebes in graphic detail, predicting that

if now all is sunny weather between Thebes and you, time as it passes brings forth countless nights and days in which they shall shatter with the spear the present harmonious ledges for a petty reason. Then shall my dead body, sleeping and buried, cold as it is, drink their warm blood, if Zeus is still Zeus and his son Phoebus speaks the truth! (608-23)

We are brought back from our enlightened perception of Oedipus the prophet to see him as still vengefully entrenched in Theban politics. This second portrait of Oedipus begins with the arrival of Ismene, who has fled Thebes to find her father and to reveal all that befell Thebes since the latter’s exile. From Ismene, Oedipus learns that his two sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, are at war (365-84). The younger Eteocles usurped the throne and the elder, Polyneices, has escaped to Argos to recruit an army in revenge (365-82). Moreover, new oracles have indicated that Oedipus’ burial site will protect and ensure victory for the surrounding territory, yet it will also destroy his enemies. Creon is now en route to secure this benefit for Thebes by bringing Oedipus home—not to be restored to the monarchy, but to be buried safely outside the city.

Ismene’s news solicits Oedipus’ vituperative side. He immediately curses his sons who put their respective ambitions for the throne above their fidelity to his safe restoration (421-30); he even wishes for their mutual destruction (421-7). He interrupts Ismene before hearing the complete story to lament the neglect of his sons, who, taking the place of women, “sit at home and keep the house like maidens,” while their sisters “bear the bur-
dens of [their] unhappy father’s sorrows” (342-44). Later, when Polyneices arrives in Athens as a suppliant to request his father’s support in the war he will wage against his brother and Thebes, Oedipus is convinced by Antigone and Theseus to give him a hearing out of pious respect for Zeus, the god of suppliants. But when Oedipus finds himself confronted with his child asking for help, his temper only escalates. Indeed, in this last speech, his anger, or thumos, is so violent that it defies old age and any natural inclination a father might feel toward his son:

Be off, spat upon by me who am no more your father, villain of villains, taking with you these curses which I call down upon you, so that you shall never conquer in war your native land nor ever return to low-lying Argos, but shall perish by your brother’s hand and kill him who drove you out! Such is my curse, and I call upon the hateful paternal darkness of Tartarus to give you a new home, and I call upon these goddesses, and upon the war god, who injected this grim hatred into your minds! Now that you have heard this, depart, and go tell all the Cadmeans and your own trusty allies too that such are the prizes which Oedipus has bestowed upon his sons! (1383-96)

This thirst for vengeance is intergenerational, inasmuch as Polyneices is equally intractable. When Antigone attempts to persuade him that he will march on Thebes to his certain death, he insists on persevering because it would be shameful for him to be “mocked like

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238 Oedipus’ anger is not only a result of with his sons’ betrayal but also due to their neglect for his care and well-being. He becomes more furious when he learns the full prophecy and discovers that his warring sons put their quarrel in front of their desire to be with him (indeed, if this is the main point of contention it is difficult to see why Oedipus’ anger escalates only when Polyneices arrives to request his support) (418-20). This preoccupation with his own welfare and the neglect of his sons, accompanied, at least here, by praise for his daughters, might strike us as solipsistic. For while it makes sense that Oedipus would want the affection of his children, he surely did not require four keepers in his exile. Winnington-Ingram makes this point by pointing to the repeated use of trophai and its cognates. Though not every occurrence relates to the issue of maintenance, he points out that this usage keeps the notion of maintenance “insistently before the hero” in a characteristically “Sophoclean use of words”. See, Winnington-Ingram, “A Religious Function of Greek Tragedy,” 16.

239 We should not forget that Oedipus’ own safety is thanks to Theseus’ respect for common laws pertaining to host-guest and supplication (632-5). For a perceptive discussion on the Oedipus at Colonus as a “suppliant” drama see Burian, “Suppliant and Saviour.”
Inability to listen to others, aggressiveness, and intractability are characteristics of Theban men, as represented by Sophocles’ Theban plays. As we will see, these traits are most viciously and unsympathetically pronounced in Creon. And yet, despite Oedipus’ excessive anger and Theban qualities—qualities that are also shared by other intractable non-Theban characters such as Ajax and Philoctetes, the play nevertheless celebrates Oedipus’ redemption. This might strike us as surprising.

In the final scene, he departs with Theseus as the King’s guide to lead him to the secret region in which he will die, and which must not be revealed to anyone, including his beloved daughters. Knowledge of this burial site will provide Theseus “a protection

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240 In this exchange Sophocles provides belated insight into Antigone’s irrational commitment to Polynoeice’s burial earlier dramatized in Antigone. When Polyneices receives this curse on his head from his father, he requests that his sisters pledge to bury him with proper funeral rites (1405-13). When Antigone insists on trying to dissuade him, he directs this request to her specifically before parting (1432-3).

241 In contrast to the single-minded temper of Theban men, Antigone and Ismene, to a lesser extent, are here presented as models of feminine virtue. Throughout the play Antigone is represented as loyal (1249-51), self-sacrificing (345-52), forgiving (1189-1203) and, above all, devoted to family. In her appeal to Oedipus to accept Polyneice’s appeal, she encourages Oedipus to “think not of the present, but of the past, of the sufferings you endured because of your father and your mother, and if you look on them, I know you will realize how evil is the result of evil passion.” (1195-8). Both of Antigone’s attempts to persuade male family members are unsuccessful. This is a reflection of their inability to listen, but it also reflects Antigone’s ineffectiveness, as a rhetorical champion of good sense – whether or not her devotion to caring indiscriminately for her male family members could be construed as good sense is an open question. Yet, if we compare Antigone’s attempts at persuasion to Tecmessa’s speeches in Ajax - who was also unsuccessful (485-524) [compare in particular the closing lines A: “Come, yield to us! It is not right that those whose wish is good should have to implore, nor to fail to make return for the kindnesses one has received”, T: “Think of me also; a man should remember, should some pleasure come his way; for it is always one kindness that begets another, and if a man allows the memory of a kindness to slip away, he can no longer be counted noble” (520-4)] we see Antigone as far less persuasive. For, though both women appeal to their own sacrifices (for a discussion of Tecmessa’s good sense see Chapter Three), Antigone does not know how to turn this into an obligation that Oedipus owes his family (this is partly due to Oedipus’ inability to see his children’s devotion as a gift), nor, in her youth, should we expect her to know how to draw the equation between Oedipus and his son. Still, in yet another respect, we are invited to see that recognition of one’s existential equality with one’s enemy – and the forgiveness that stems from this is a characteristic feature of good sense that is inaccessible for Oedipus, just as it was inaccessible for Philoctetes (see Chapter Four). In both cases the nature of the sufferings endured is so monstrously grave that the capacity to see one’s equality with others or to extend forgiveness is undermined.

242 This excessive anger or thumos is common to other Sophoclean figures such as Ajax and is for Bernard Knox an important indication of the “heroic temper” (see Knox, The Heroic Temper). Yet to the extent this aggressiveness is mirrored in Creon, who is clearly condemned by Sophocles’ dramatic representation, and by Polyneices, who exits the play intractable and cursed to die in a war he cannot win, it seems highly implausible that Sophocles intends us to see Oedipus’ thumos favourably.
stronger than many shields or spears brought in from outside” (1524-5). He will also learn from this site things that “are taboo and that speech must not disturb.” These secret lessons are to be guarded by Theseus until the end of his life, and revealed only then to whoever is the foremost in the city. This knowledge will protect the city from being “ravaged” like other cities, including those which “though well-governed, slip into insolence” when they lose sight of religion (1533-8). Indeed, Oedipus will pass on to Theseus and to Athens a mysterious and secret wisdom rooted in piety that will serve to preserve the city’s greatness. On the one hand, we might be satisfied that in Athens Oedipus finally learns “piety, forgiveness, and the absence of lying speech” (1125-7) and finds safe and holy resting place, yet, on the other, the privilege that Oedipus has earned from the gods and indeed the reversal Oedipus undergoes in Athens should attract our attention.

Oedipus the polluted outsider is now the prophetic speaker; he is no longer a mythical other with a past, but a mythical other who commands awe from an Athenian audience by aligning himself with Athenian gods, whose burial site will protect Athens, and who ultimately transfers his mysterious wisdom to the Athenian king. Oedipus, the blind prophet who sees with his words (74; 138-9), who has come to Athens to die a spiritual death, who is weighed down by past transgressions and by a spirit of revenge that are of mythic proportion and yet all too human is transformed, dematerialized, and deified at the end of the play.

On this basis, we are left to question how to situate Oedipus within Athens, and his puzzling allegiance with the Eumenides within our understanding of the ethical structure

243 Bernard Knox suggests that Oedipus represents a battered image of Athens herself in the last years of the war, “which, though it may be defeated and may even be physically destroyed, will still flourish in immortal strength, conferring power on those who love it.” See The Heroic Tempe, 141.
of the play. Before attempting to answer the questions represented by Oedipus, it will be useful to turn to Creon and Theseus. These characters represent two typologies of rhetoric that we have examined in other plays, the pernicious and excessively self-regarding rhetoric of leaders such as Creon and Odysseus (in *Philoctetes*) and the good sense characteristic of the Chorus in *Antigone*, Tecmessa, and Odysseus (in *Ajax*). What stands out in the portrait of Creon and Theseus is that these characters are both politically powerful and therefore potentially persuasive. Once we have brought these poles into focus, we will return again to the question of Oedipus.

**Creon**

Creon provides a paradigmatic example of instrumental political rhetoric. As predicted by Ismene, Creon arrives in Colonus to reclaim Oedipus’ body for Thebes’ benefit. His plan is to bury Oedipus outside the city so that he will neither pollute Thebes nor bring advantage to another city. While Ismene does not spell out the implications of this for her father, it is clear that Creon has no interest in keeping Oedipus alive or in restoring him to Thebes.

We know therefore before Creon opens his mouth that his interest in Oedipus is instrumental. He views Oedipus’ body only as an object to be secured for Theban advantage. Yet Creon’s opening rhetoric does not betray any of this; he obscures the violence inherent in his intention by appealing to the Theban people and a concern for justice.\(^\text{244}\) All the

\(^{244}\) This is a clever way of attributing legitimacy to policies that are often individually authored or which involve an unacceptable amount of violence. It is consistent with Creon’s insincere references to hearing counsel and his attempt to represent his decree as the will of the people in *Antigone* (see Chapter Two). It is also consistent with Odysseus’ attempt to use utilitarian language to justify his decision to abandon and deceive Philoctetes (see Chapter Four), and Agamemnon and Menelaus’ thinly veiled claims to democratic process in *Ajax* (see Chapter Three).
people of Thebes, he claims, summon Oedipus for just reasons (kalei dikaiōs) – Creon most of all – for they grieve his sorrows as an exile and an indigent (741-2). He even takes modest responsibility for the bitter reproach he had levelled against Oedipus in exiling him, though without going so far as to admit his wrong, and begs him to return to his homeland. Creon presents himself as an ambassador who has come to Athens because of the Thebans general concern for Oedipus’ wellbeing, thus matching Theseus in word, though not in deed. Yet at the same time he also admonishes Oedipus. He points out that, in exile, Oedipus thinks only of himself, rather than of the fate he now imposes on his daughters. Antigone has allowed herself to come to ruin, attending on an old man and wandering as a beggar, rather than joining with an equal in wedlock (747-52). Perhaps Creon’s most impressive flourish is his claim that Oedipus the Theban exile should revere (seboit’ an) Thebes more than Athens out of a sense of justice (dikē; 759-60).245 This paternalistic appeal to Oedipus’ patriotism underscores Creon’s inhumanity and the extent to which he is devoid of fellow feeling. Why, we might ask, should Oedipus have a strong attachment to Thebes—the city in which he committed heinous crimes, from which he was banished by Creon as a beggar, where his sons abandoned him in their own quest for power, and which now instrumentally desires his dead body for instrumental reasons? Yet as readers we must also wonder if this appeal might not have been persuasive to lonely and outcast Oedipus had Creon’s intentions not already been revealed by Ismene. Indeed, in revealing Creon’s intentions to us before this speech, Sophocles leaves both Oedipus and the spectator no opportunity to feel swayed by Creon’s rhetoric (unlike the more

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245 Blundell notes that Creon could have taken his paternalistic approach further by presenting the return to Thebes as being in Oedipus’ best interests, even though he may be blind to this advantage. See Mary Whitlock Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics*, 234.
excusable portrait of a political leader who must act in the interest of the civic peace that we find in *Antigone*). His showy displays of concern for Oedipus and his daughters, as well as his claims to loyalty and justice, highlight the extent to which empathy, loyalty, and justice are empty concepts for Creon, at least as he is represented in this play.

Oedipus is of course resistant to Creon’s “cunning scheme” (761) and his attempt to tear him away from safety by “saying hard things in soft words” (774). Oedipus reveals to Creon that he knows his agenda, and clearly explains the latter’s plan to their Athenian audience (782-93). Indeed his own rhetoric is aggressive and intended, characteristically, to bait Creon into revealing his true intention:

> Why is it so delightful to be kind to men against their will? It is as though someone gave you nothing and refused his aid when you were imploring him to give, and when you had your fill of what you wished for gave to you, at a time his kindness brought no kindness. Would not your pleasure then be useless? But that is the nature of what you offer me, sounding good, but in essence bad. And I shall explain it to these men also, so that I can prove you are a villain! (775-83)

He makes a point here of drawing attention to Creon’s aptitude with words so as to warn the Chorus not to be seduced (774; 781-2; 802-3; 806-7; 809). It does not, therefore, take long for Creon to expose himself.

Recognizing that persuasion will not work on Oedipus, Creon opts for force, taking Ismene and Antigone as hostages. When the Chorus tries to stop him, pointing out that they are enforcing the laws of Athens (879), he reveals his tyrannical approach to rule and his disregard for law in the absence of authority, insisting, “Do not give orders where you have no power!” (839) Creon has robbed Oedipus of his beloved daughters—that is, of his last human attachments. And he will not back down.
The scene’s injustice is intensified by Creon’s early attempt to harness the language of justice to serve his own manifestly unjust ends. When the Chorus attempts to intervene, Creon escalates the dispute by threatening to take Oedipus by force as well. When the Chorus charges Creon with insolence and reminds him that he is exerting his will in the self-governing territory of another, independent polis, he retorts, “With the aid of justice even the small man vanquishes the great man!” (879-80). When the members of the Chorus call on Zeus as their witness, Creon laughs at the notion that they presume to know Zeus’s will. When asked if his insolence is not hubris, Creon agrees but asserts that it is hubris that they will have to endure (883-3). This violence is contagious and leads Oedipus to curse Creon (865-7). Yet this, too, provides further material for Creon’s attack.

Later, when Theseus enters to mediate the conflict, Creon will claim that Oedipus’ “bitter curses” on him and his family caused him to retaliate in anger (thumos) (954). He does not believe, he argues, that Athens would accept such a polluted criminal, and supports this claim with a suspect reference to the wisdom of the Areopagus, “which does not permit such wanderers to live together with this city.” (947-9). Faced with this audience, however, Creon’s skilled rhetoric is useless. Oedipus has already managed to gain the sympathy both of Theseus and the Chorus, and he does so once again by repeating his version of events (960-1002). Perhaps most importantly, Oedipus highlights his knowledge of and respect for the Athenian reputation for piety particularly as regards the act of supplication. In “maltreating” “an aged man, a suppliant” and “my daughters,”

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246 This blatant denial of Zeus’ affiliation with suppliants is, of course, an insult to the god and an indication of Creon’s naked impiety.

247 Jebb argues that it is likely that even in the early days of the Athenian democracy the Areopagus would have had the power to expel a polluted individual under its powers of general moral censorship, cf. Jebb, Sophocles, 153.
Creon shows himself hostile to Athens (1008-9). There is little that Creon can do, and Sophocles is clear in underscoring his losses. Theseus is impervious to his rhetoric and to his threats. He will hold Creon as a prisoner until the girls are found and returned (932-6), at which point Creon must return home, defeated.

Unlike other characters in Sophocles (such as Creon in Antigone, or Oedipus in Philoctetes) there is no disputing Creon’s badness; he is not, of course, as clever as Odysseus, yet we also have privileged insight into his intentions and this helps us to see just how closely related his rhetorical strategies and his violent actions turn out to be. In an unusually clear way, Creon reveals to the audience the precise ways in which skilled rhetoric can serve as a thin veil obscuring violent intentions. How, then, do we detect the Creons in our midst? Sophocles helps us to answer this question by revealing Creon’s intentions early on; we therefore have the luxury of regarding his rhetoric with a critical eye and detecting the underlying aggression. Yet we might imagine a situation in which Oedipus was homesick and desperate enough to be won over by Creon’s patriotic temptations—and this would have been as sad and misguided as Oedipus’ life up to this point. Insofar as we are unambiguously prompted to judge Creon as destructive (even if he believes he is acting to make Thebes more secure), we are left with a caricature that occupies the far end of the ethical spectrum. Sitting at this far end, Creon stands out as a characteristic type representative of the most corrupting and evil impulses of other Sophoclean characters. He combines the narrow selfishness and power-seeking characteristic of Creon in the Antigone, the instrumental and ruthless approach to deception represented by Odysseus in Philoctetes and the simplistic conflation of force and justice we saw with the Achaeans in Ajax. This synthetic portrait that gathers together all of the qualities
that together represent a destructive political *ethos* may be as far as Sophocles is willing to go in offering any kind of coherent ethical vision – yet, insofar as Creon clearly reveals all that is bad, we have at least one unambiguous model of evil, against which we can reliably judge other actors.

**Theseus**

Theseus enters the scene with an expression of pity (*oiktos*) for Oedipus (556). Before hearing Oedipus’ promise of benefaction to the city, he tells Oedipus that he is ready to grant the poor man almost any request. Theseus knows from experience the troubles that Oedipus has faced, for he “was brought up in exile” and has “struggled against such dangers to my life as no other man has met with” (563-4). Theseus’s personal experience of suffering has not made him bitter or angry. His subsequent success has not bred over-confidence or *hubris*. He knows that he is “a man” and therefore has “no greater share in tomorrow than you have” (567-8). This capacity to extend one’s sympathy to others out of an experience of suffering, combined with recognition of one’s equality with others before fate, is the foundation of good sense and recalls the insights of other Sophoclean characters, such as Tecmessa and Odysseus.248 It is also a quality that does not come naturally to all. When Polyniceis arrices, Antigone pleads, unsuccessfully, with her father to extend this principle to his son (1201-3).

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248 As I suggest in this chapter and establish throughout the dissertation, good sense is experiential and is rooted in the capacity to recognize one’s equality with others, especially one’s enemies, and to extend a neutral generosity and forgiveness as a result. In this crucial respect it is fundamentally Sophoclean and therefore distinct from other conceptions of prudence. It is worth noting that in this first speech Theseus does not mention piety or sacred laws pertaining to suppliants; instead, his openness stems from his personal experience and judgment.
In contrast to Oedipus and Creon, Theseus is prepared to listen. He asks Oedipus to explain his story so he “can learn it all” (575). When he first hears that there is a plot to return Oedipus to Thebes, he encourages him to go, for it would not be right to live in exile if he was welcome in his homeland (590). Yet when Oedipus requests his patience in listening to the whole story, he is quick to apologize, on the grounds that “I ought not to rebuke you without having judged the matter” (594). When Oedipus informs him that his body has been prophesied as providing protection for Athens and destruction for Thebes in an unforeseen war (605; 616-623), Theseus is generous, perhaps to a fault. He accepts that he will make enemies of Theban leaders who want Oedipus’ return, and in the worst case he accepts war with Thebes as a consequence of his generosity.

Theseus’s justification for accepting Oedipus’ supplication does not betray concern for the potentially dangerous implications of his generosity. His first reason for accepting Oedipus is based on the importance of the guest-host relationship, since “forever a hearth between us speaks of guest-friendship and a spare alliance” (632-3).\(^{249}\) His second reason is piety: Oedipus has come as a supplicant (hiketēs) of the Eumenides and of Zeus, and he cannot be refused. Third and finally, he recognizes that Oedipus is offering a great tribute (dasmos) to Athens and Theseus in return for this kindness. For all of these things Theseus claims he has reverence (sebas).

These three justifications are inter-related. It is a reflection of Athenian piety that guests are welcome and it would be difficult, and indeed impious and in violation of un-

\(^{249}\) Trans. Grene and Lattimore. Lloyd-Jones translates this as “First, the hearth of an ally is always open to him, by natural right, with us”. Yet, it helps to draw out the unwritten yet binding import of the host-guest relationship (xenia) for Greeks. This emphasis establishes continuity with the epic tradition in which violations of unwritten codes pertaining to xenia are presented as the source of conflict. In contrast, Blundell (Helping Friends and Harming Enemies, 231n18) and Reinhardt (Sophocles, 271n14) argue that these lines merely indicate an earlier treaty between Athens and Thebes.
written law, to turn down a suppliant who promises such great reward for one’s city in return. Yet it is also worth reflecting on the order that Theseus uses. Theseus places customary obligation first (prōton), before piety and before advantage (632). This suggests that in the event of a conflict between the dictates of customary law, piety, and advantage, Theseus would privilege obligation, even at the expense of offending the gods or risking political advantage.²⁵⁰ Sophocles does not lead us to believe, however, that Theseus passively endorses collective wisdom. This ordering gains significance when we reflect again on the Chorus’s initial reaction to Oedipus. Though their initial reaction was to respect the guest-host relationship, their fear of Oedipus’ fate caused them to reject him, just as Oedipus’ alignment of his fate with the will of the gods caused them finally to accept him. Theseus, in contrast, at no point demonstrates any fear of Oedipus or of the gods. Though he expresses his reverence throughout the play,²⁵¹ his sense of security and calm stems, not from piety or from a passive acceptance of a traditionally cultivated common sense, but rather from his confidence in his mental fortitude. For, “when the mind is in control of itself, threats vanish” (658-60).

For example, when Oedipus attempts to bind Theseus to his commitment to offer protection, by means of a pledge to the gods, Theseus assures him that his word and judgments alone are sufficient (648-51). When prodded with the rejoinder that this might not prove adequate in the face of threats from Theban enemies, Theseus calmly advises Oedipus to have confidence, for “his heart feels no anxiety” (656). Theseus reveals himself to

²⁵⁰ Theseus’ calm assessment is all the more striking if we keep in mind that Oedipus’ potential benefaction also means that Athens will assume the risk of war with Thebes. While Athens may be assured victory, Athenian men will nevertheless surely be required to put their lives in danger.

²⁵¹ Theseus is interrupted from sacrificing twice in the play (887-90; 1156-9) and speaks reverently about and toward the gods, yet he does not share the Chorus’s fear toward the Eumenides nor does he defer to piety to support his judgments.
be reverent toward the gods, but his confidence in his ability to protect the stranger lies not in blind faith but in his temperance and mental fortitude. Indeed, Theseus’ speech and action model this hierarchy. Theseus is a self-declared man of action and, therefore, a man of courage, yet this courage flows out of his clarity of vision in making commitments, as well as expressing his confidence that, if commitments are deliberately chosen with a mind that is in control, the potential risks that attend these commitments are manageable (1143-4).

Hence, when he returns to the scene to discover that in his absence Creon has abducted Antigone and Ismene, Theseus acts decisively, sending a messenger to his subjects (897-901) instructing them to retrieve the girls. When Creon scrambles to justify his actions, Theseus goes straight to the point. There is no excuse, in Theseus’ view, for Creon’s disregard of the norms of justice between states: “I would never,” he says,

have entered your country, even in the justest of all causes, without the consent of the ruler of the land, whoever he was, and have dragged people off; I would have known how a stranger must conduct himself in relations with the citizens. But you are disgracing your own city, which does not deserve it (924-31).

And when Creon and Oedipus descend into mutual rhetorical attacks, Theseus terminates the discussion, insisting on quick action rather than insult (1016-17).

Theseus demonstrates his courage in insisting on escorting Creon personally to the place where the girls are hidden (1019-35). And when he later returns the girls safely to their father’s arms, he shows his compassion for others in deferring to the priority of family; he accepts Oedipus’ need to speak to his daughters first before expressing gratitude to the king who saved them. He does not seek praise or recognition for his actions, except to underline to Oedipus that he has kept his word (1145-7). In all of these respects, he is, as
Blundell has observed, a paradigmatic example of the moral virtues. He is courageous in risking himself to return the girls; moderate in his judgments and his listening; prudent in ascribing judgments first to a sound mind; generous in demanding little recognition for his contribution; and liberal and courageous in extending amnesty to a stranger, even at possible risk to Athens. Finally, he is willing to put his obligations and his sense of justice before his concerns for piety or advantage.

Yet, as I have tried to show, there is a way in which he goes beyond this familiar template. He has, for example, learned from his experience as an exile to be generous. His concern for Oedipus and his desire to treat him justly—for this concern and desire are undoubtedly what unite all of the virtues listed above—are not innate attributes, nor are these skills that Theseus has learned in Athens. Rather, Theseus attributes his capacity to feel solidarity with Oedipus to his experience of suffering in exile and to his humbling recognition that he remains as vulnerable to fate as any man. This recognition is similar to the good sense we identified in Odysseus and Tecmessa in Ajax. It is an expression of solidarity in based on humankind’s common vulnerability before fate and this solidarity gives rise to a feeling of compassion rather than anger. And, according to Theseus, it is the humility gained from this experience that is responsible for his virtuous action.

252 Blundell, Helping Friends and Harming Enemies, 248.
253 Recall that the Chorus was more motivated by fear than reason or virtue; to the contrary, Sophocles shows that it is Theseus who exhorts his fellow Athenians to live up to these virtues of characters through the example he sets. Sophocles holds him up as an example of Athens’ ideal self. Indeed, the play abounds in praises of Athens. There is the choral ode in which Attica is praised for her majestic landscape which includes fine horses, the gifts of Poseidon and the olive branch, gift of Athena (668-719), as well as Oedipus’ praise of Athens as the city that has “most reverence for the gods and alone can protect the afflicted stranger” (258-62). Yet, while the Chorus praises Athens’ inherited beauty, it is Theseus that sets her apart as a virtuous and fair city (1124-27)–indeed Theseus demonstrates his virtue through thinking and acting alone.
Hence, just as Sophocles presents Creon as the model tyrant, Theseus is an ideal type that represents the other, virtuous end of the Sophocles’ ethical spectrum. Theseus provides a model of good leadership paired with good sense. Indeed, Theseus is a king, not a democrat—he does not consult his fellow Athenians on which course of action to take, and when he acts he acts decisively. Yet Sophocles leads his reader to see this leadership as positive and even necessary. For the Chorus of Elders in this play, unlike the Chorus in *Antigone*, is motivated by fear and superstition and does not display sound judgment. However, the play does not end with an unequivocal endorsement of Theseus and his Athens. Rather, Theseus, the man of good sense and judgment, must follow Oedipus to his death in order to learn from him “things that are taboo and that speech must not disturb” (1523-4) Theseus must always guard these things and pass them on to his successors, for “[i]n this way the city in which you live shall never be ravaged by the men sprung from the sowing” (1533-4). This is a puzzling conclusion, for what are we to make of this suggestion that Theseus the noble king still has lessons to learn from Oedipus—lessons, no less, that are taboo and unspeakable? To make some sense of this ending and its significance within the structure of the play, it is necessary to return once again to the question of Oedipus.

The “Oedipal Centre”: Piety and Fury

Taken as a whole, the play provides us with clear perspectives on virtue and vice. Even so, it remains difficult to bring Oedipus’ character into focus. Oedipus disrupts Athens’s ideal self-image as represented by Theseus. The mysteries that Oedipus reveals to Theseus

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254 On Theseus’ undemocratic character and the weakness of the Chorus see Wilson, *The Hero and the City*; see also Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, 213.
in their final walk to the site of Oedipus’ own inviolable shrine are secret, taboo, and speech-defying (1518-55); they are not, therefore, truths that resonate with the Athens represented by Theseus’ persuasive good sense. Indeed Oedipus in many ways defies reasonable speech—his vituperative temper, his excessive transgressions, his redemption, and his mysterious burial are all melded with Athens’ soil. Oedipus will be redeemed and preserved in Athens—despite his many flaws, he will be her saviour.\(^{255}\) Related questions of his mysterious piety, his excessive anger, and the spiritual authority with which he departs blur the sense of ethical clarity conveyed by the other characters.

As many commentators have noted, Oedipus’ redemption by the gods on the heels of his violent rejection of his son suggests an endorsement of this behaviour by the gods. At the very least, it indicates the gods’ neutrality on the questions of the superiority, on the one hand, of good sense to \textit{thumos}, and, on the other, of the democratic ideals of fairness and forgiveness to retributive justice. Yet where the gods are silent or ambiguous or even ethically regressive,\(^ {256}\) Sophocles’ dramatic presentation in this play clearly privileges Athens over Thebes and Theseus over Creon. What are we to make of this distance the play opens up between the inscrutable judgments of the gods who alternately punish and redeem the innocent—who, indeed, seem to endorse Oedipus’ \textit{thumos}, irrespective of his personal traits—and the clear ethical judgments that Sophocles provokes in his spectator?

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\(^{255}\) Most commentators on the play identify Oedipus’ anger as a central interpretative problem. For commentators who see the Oedipus’ spiritedness as celebrated as an indication of his heroic status, see Knox, \textit{The Heroic Temper}, 161–2; Bowra, \textit{Sophoclean Tragedy}, 340; Segal, \textit{Tragedy and Civilization}, 387.\(^ {256}\) For this would be one way of reading the Eumenides’ alignment with Oedipus: against the progressive transformation Aeschylus suggests in the \textit{Oresteia}. For another Sophoclean depiction of the gods as committed to principles of retributive justice that their human subjects have rejected, see the Prologue to \textit{Ajax} (Chapter Three).
Does the play suggest a disjuncture between the demands of piety and the ideals of justice that it holds up before us?

Knox suggests that *Oedipus at Colonus* symbolizes the rise and fall of fifth-century Athens, whose decline was due to a destructive thirst for war. It would not be surprising to find the poet giving voice to such a lament in the final years of the Peloponnesian War. This reading also helps to account for the integration of Oedipus’ *thumos*, together with the spirit of the Furies, within an ideal Athens, as if Athenian imperial aggression were being criticized and at the same time attributed to the persistence of its internal “Theban” other.\(^{257}\) While this reading is compelling, we should be careful not to attribute too much weight to contemporary history or to the specifically Athenian context, for the Athens of *Oedipus at Colonus* is not just that city’s ideal self: it is also a persuasive portrait of good governance under the leadership of an authority grounded in good sense. In this respect, it is again important that Theseus stands apart from the superstitious and anxious Chorus of Elders, who more clearly reflect Athenian prejudices.\(^{258}\)

Rather, Oedipus’ puzzling function within the play is best understood in the dramatic context of his relationship with the Eumenides. These goddesses represent different things to different characters throughout the play. For the Chorus, the gods are a source of sober power, a power with a dreadful underworld aspect; after all, the nightingales who

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\(^{257}\) This is an extrapolation from Knox’s reading. Knox sees Oedipus’ *thumos* as indicative of his heroic status, and so does not see the Oedipal representation of Athens as an opportunity for self-criticism, as I suggest. In Knox’s words “The old Oedipus of this play is like the exhausted battered Athens of the last years of the war, which, though it may be defeated and may even be physically destroyed, will still flourish in immortal strength, conferring power on those who love it.” Knox, *The Heroic Temper*, 144.

\(^{258}\) Indeed, whereas in *Antigone*, the Chorus represented a good sense that was embedded in the common sense of the community, in *Oedipus at Colonus* we see a critique of common sense and we are thus reminded that good sense cannot simply be populism or the will of the people, for the people can incline as easily towards superstition and faulty judgment as they can represent a collective and embodied experiential wisdom. Sophocles’ Theseus is therefore distinguished from Thucydides’ Pericles in this important respect (Cf. Thuc. 2.65-66).
sing at their shrine also carry an association with death and lamentation (18). For Oedipus, however, they provide shelter and the site for his future burial. Finally, for Theseus they warrant reverence, like all gods, but they do not inspire either irrational fear or hope since for him such emotions do not attend an orderly mind (658-60).

The shifting associations of the Eumenides throughout the play invite a comparison to Aeschylus’s Oresteia, for nowhere else do we have as clear an account of the twin sides of these chthonic deities that seem to be merged in Oedipus. In the Oresteia, the Eumenides are first presented as vengeful Furies who torment Orestes in retribution for his matricide. In the last play of the trilogy, the Eumenides, Athena finally manages to persuade these gods to relent from their torment by involving them in a trial. In the end, Orestes is acquitted, and, though the Furies are not satisfied with the verdict, they are finally persuaded to relinquish their anger when Athena, in exchange, promises them a new role as guardians of Athens (856-1057). This final act of persuasion results in their transformation from Furies into Eumenides—that is, into goddesses who, in turn, mark the transition from tragic Argos to democratic Athens and from retributive justice into justice rooted in judicial process, speech, and persuasion.

Although the Oresteia does not provide the interpretative key to Oedipus at Colonus, it is nevertheless important to take into consideration the twin aspects, brought out most clearly by Aeschylus, of these deities as both vengeful Furies and beneficent Eumenides.

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259 Knox, The Heroic Temper, 155.
260 This comparison, which would very likely have been obvious to an Athenian audience, has been made by many scholars; see, for example, Kelly, Sophocles, 71–2; Beer, Sophocles and the Tragedy of Athenian Democracy, 166–8; Buxton, Persuasion in Greek Tragedy, 145. For an excellent, extended comparative treatment of piety in these plays see Winnington-Ingram, “A Religious Function of Greek Tragedy”.
261 It is important that Athena’s persuasive victory over the Furies rests in her divine capacity to grant such power to others. The play does not, therefore, unambiguously champion persuasion.
ides. This duality has particular significance for the duality we find in Oedipus, as a vengeful Theban “other” who enters Athens as a “suppliant saviour” (ton hikēten sōtērion)\(^\text{263}\). Oedipus represents a union of the irrationalism and vengeance associated with Creon’s Thebes, and the “piety, forgiveness, and the absence of lying speech” (1125-7) associated with Theseus’ Athens. These twin sides of Oedipus, vengeance and beneficence, are persistent features of political life.\(^\text{264}\) We see thumos operative in the application of punishment and redemption within the ordinary framework of the law, and beneficence in moments of political reconciliation, forgiveness, and strong leadership as well as in the good sense of ordinary people; yet, as Oedipus also helps us to see, the desire for vengeance and the capacity for beneficence are both also tied to experiences and needs that can transcend individual or collective agency. In this sense, Oedipus also helps to draw our attention to the limits of the political fully to satisfy human longings for justice.

By drawing our attention to this Oedipal centre between the clear ethical poles represented by Theseus and Creon, we are led to see that, irrespective of the ideal conditions toward which a city might strive, we can learn to identify, punish and banish from our public spaces the abusive speech of Creon, and we can also aspire to embody the good sense and psychological health and prudence displayed by Theseus, but we cannot ever fully contain, speak to, or understand, the murky middle occupied by Oedipus. This is a

\(^{263}\) I thus agree with Kelly and Jebb that sōtērion here refers “to what Oedipus gives and also what he receives.” Kelly, *Sophocles*, 75.

\(^{264}\) They are also, incidentally, twin features of religion and piety. In that respect, they point back to the inability of the political to contain or satisfy the desire for retribution or to account for the experience of beneficence or, to put it anachronistically, grace.
middle occupied by luck, *thumos*, and humility before the unknowable and unspeakable—indeed it represents the very content of our political lives.

Conclusion

*Oedipus at Colonus* thus serves to synthesize our study of rhetoric and good sense, for it is both more coherent and puzzling than the other plays we have examined. Through our study of Creon and Theseus, we have arrived at a more optimistic portrait of stable ethical standards to which we can appeal, and nevertheless we have also confirmed that there are certain transgressions, certain injustices, that cannot be forgiven and that undermine our capacity to hear good sense. Like Philoctetes, Oedipus cannot be persuaded either by his loving and devoted daughter or by the just king Theseus. Politics must acknowledge these extreme cases and do its best to punish the perpetrators and to provide space for these injustices to be remembered and at the same time transformed into something new—such as a source of justice for the future. On the other hand, there are instances of fortune that are entirely beyond our control and that speak to the vulnerability of our human condition. While we may lean on ethical banisters for guidance (indeed, for Sophocles at least, these more than the gods protect us from the frightening “middle” that we must face alone), we nevertheless come to see that political leadership and good sense can lead only so far.\(^{265}\)

\(^{265}\) I depart from Ahrensford, who emphasizes Oedipus’ “pious rejection of reason”. The point for Ahrensford is that Oedipus rejects truths about the human condition, such as our self-centeredness and the fact of our mortality, and this rejection in turn fuels his fury which is the basis of his piety. This leads Ahrensford to conclude that “(t)he case of Oedipus suggest that religious anti-rationalism is rooted in such essential features of our human nature as our awareness of our mortality, our hope for immortality, and, above all, our angry refusal to accept our mortality. In this way, the play suggests that religious anti-rationalism is an enduring feature of political life” (*Greek Tragedy and Political Philosophy*, 69–73). In my reading, Oedipus does not represent a rejection of reason or truth about the human condition; rather, he reflects the gravity and messiness of this condition reflected in its most miserable extreme; the play shows us
As much as prudent political actors can encourage good sense and promote thoughtful political discourse, they cannot, after all, protect us from suffering—especially suffering of an Oedipal proportion—nor can they satisfactorily redeem our transgressions. In this sense, it is fitting that Oedipus’ anger is retained in his apotheosis. The two kinds of piety, represented by both faces of the chthonic deities, make an uncomfortable marriage in Theseus’ Athens. Together, they point to the limited ability of politics to satisfy our desire for retribution and redemption, and therefore to the limits of a political good sense, toward which we should nevertheless aspire. This gap between the ideal of good sense represented in a strong political leader like Theseus and what I call the Oedipal centre is the substance of Sophoclean tragedy. Acknowledgment of this gap and deference before it constitute Sophoclean good sense.

the inability of reason or good sense to soothe or control this condition, though we may and should strive toward the fusion of leadership and good sense as an ideal.
Conclusion

Approaching a literary medium such as tragedy forces the theorist to step outside the confines of rational inquiry, as traditionally understood, and beyond the desire for solutions to perennial problems. And yet what, if any, general observations about rhetoric and prudence might we draw from these contextual studies of Sophoclean drama? Why should we care about Sophocles’ presentation of rhetoric and good sense? What is learned from paying attention to the treatment of rhetoric and prudence in these plays that we do not find in other philosophic thinkers or authors?

Careful attention to the action of the drama helps to deepen our appreciation of the plays themselves, but it also allows yields sharper and more nuanced reflection on challenges, characters and contexts that are persistent and universal. In Antigone, we saw good sense buried in the common sense of the Chorus of Elders and overtaken by Antigone and Creon’s respective versions of self-interested and solipsistic rhetoric. The Chorus’s good sense was overwhelmed by political hierarchies and interests, so that the community as a whole could not gain access to, or benefit from, its own deeply embedded human truths. Antigone did not, therefore, leave us with any concrete resources for understanding how we might be more discerning audiences, nor did it help us to identify how we might better hear good sense without resorting to simplistic populism or blind faith in the will of the collective.

Ajax helped us to identify additional limits to the persuasiveness of good sense. Ajax’s commitment to a heroic way of life—a commitment perhaps amplified by his place atop its steep social hierarchy—precluded his ability either to accept betrayal or shame, or
even to see himself as an equal to others. This latter point is crucial, as the minimal requirement of good sense is the capacity to imagine oneself empathetically in the position of another. Yet, as we also saw, the story of Ajax is only half the play. The other half presents the remarkable prudence and persuasiveness of Odysseus who helps to facilitate the transition to a new, more subtle and contextually appropriate approach to justice. Whereas the title figure in Ajax revealed the type of attitude that good sense cannot reach, the same play’s Odysseus showed us just how powerful good sense can be in facilitating ethical change when voiced by someone in a position of power.

In Philoctetes we witnessed variations on the theme of isolation and detachment, as manifested by various characters incapable of good sense for a number of physical, spiritual, and ethical reasons. We focused on the ruthless precision of Odysseus’ speech in order to amplify the ways in which it worked on young Neoptolemus. We noticed that even though Neoptolemus resisted Odysseus in the end, the effect of having ever been persuaded by him at all seems to lead to some degree of ethical and psychological corruption. Philoctetes was sympathetic and capable of some degree of empathy, but also ultimately too corrupted by experience to forgive the others or reconcile with them in the absence of divine intervention. This added to the “tragic” thesis we had been building toward, for the most unsettling lesson of Philoctetes is its honesty in suggesting that some wounds cannot, by human means, be mended.

Oedipus at Colonus was in some ways more straightforward than any of these plays. Its treatment of good sense and rhetoric was clouded neither by tragic complications nor by cautious attention to the systemic and persistent factors that make our prospects of recovering an ethical and salutary presentation of good sense faint. Yet, it also reintro-
duced into our study aspects of the tragic universe, represented in Oedipus’ vengeful *thumos* and his otherworldly salvation. In this way, *Oedipus at Colonus* offered our most comprehensive treatment of Sophocles’ ethical spectrum on the one hand, while on the other it pointed to the limits of politics ever adequately to address our deepest injuries or longings.

In one sense we might find these examples remote. They do, after all, operate on a mythic rather than a historic plane and are therefore necessarily exaggerated figures living in exaggerated contexts. And yet, as we look through the magnification of the tragic stage, the characters and situations we encounter feel remarkably familiar. Sophocles’ characters and plots speak to us not just as particular figures and stories but also as nuanced paradigms that resonate across time and space. This was Aristotle’s point when he said that tragedy speaks more to universals than to history (*Poetics* 1451b1-b10). Paying close attention to the specific contexts developed in these plays therefore helps to cultivate a richer appreciation of the various psychological motivations, character dispositions, actions and reactions that, in general, come to inform different uses and abuses of speech and demonstrations of good sense. Through our specific study of characters, such as Creon and Odysseus, we are left with nuanced and accessible examples of the types of characters who might convincingly promote tyranny or a perniciously instrumental political ethic. We are also permitted to see the way these destructive courses of action can be persuasive to characters such as Neoptolemus, and the limited persuasive power of prudent but marginalized actors such as Tecmessa.

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266 Regardless of what one thinks of Freud’s reading of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, it is significant that he interpreted Sophocles’ story as (universally) reflective of the structure of the unconscious.  
267 Cf. fn33.
Moreover, we find that Sophoclean good sense is not born in “academic” contexts, nor can it be reduced to a set of clear criteria or a distinct terminology. Rather, we see it displayed in the way characters such as the Chorus, Tecmessa, Odysseus, and Theseus, react and speak to others and in the accounts they offer of their judgments. Taken together, these characters display a consistent orientation toward others, a capacity for forgiveness, adaptability in circumstances of catastrophe and a capacity for sound “other-oriented” judgment, even when these judgments depart from the common opinion of one’s community. This Sophoclean presentation of prudence as “good sense” thus puts pressure on longstanding assumptions about prudence—for example, that it must result from strictly “rational” inquiry or that philosophic inquiry has privileged access to terrible truths the scope of which ordinary people cannot digest.

Indeed, Sophocles helps us to reconsider an anxiety, expressed by philosophers ancient and modern, that the popular acceptance of a tragic perspective could lead to nihilism or fanaticism. These dramas alert us to a tragic perspective in which ethical norms or moral banisters are always on the brink of collapse. In Sophocles we find a lucid presentation of an inhospitable world—a world which is made more so by the precariousness of our condition. Yet it is under these precarious conditions, in fact, it is direct result of them, that we also find Sophocles’ confident portrayal of the human capacity for good sense.

While Sophocles does not point to anything like a philosophic life, he does show that some individuals or groups have the capacity to bear the indignities of politics and fortune with humanity, good judgment and nobility. It is important that this capacity is not

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268 See the epigraph to Chapter Five, a passage from section LVI “Old and New Tables” in Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra.
a result of the intellect or the blessings of good fortune; rather it is a capacity that is “common” to all. In place of the fall of tragic heroes who act and speak with intransigence, we find a tragic tension between the rhetorical power of solipsistic actors and an often-buried inter-subjective sensibility necessary for sustainable political life. In alerting us to this tension, Sophocles does not suggest that it can be overcome. Instead, a tragic perspective, indeed Sophoclean good sense, requires that we permit ourselves neither the apathy to feel satisfied with political life as we know it, nor the hubris to imagine that there might be any one or lasting solution.

What is distinctive, then, about Sophocles’ unique approach to themes of rhetoric and prudence is a confidence in a universal capacity for solidarity and good judgment combined with an acceptance that there are no permanent ethical banisters on which we might confidently lean. Indeed, in Sophocles we find all of these moments at once: the acceptance that the world is contingent, that the world is often shaped by the words of corrupt leaders, that the railings and bridges that comprise our ethical horizons are always precariously balanced and at risk of falling into the water, and, that good sense is born in the face of these factors and is remarkably resilient, humane and universally accessible.

Finally, it is of central importance for any political theory that is concerned with democracy, and that strives to promote inclusion, that these “truths” are held together in an art form that was crafted for public consumption in a democratic forum. In this way, Sophoclean tragedy is itself an education in good sense. Sophocles helps to cultivate good sense in his spectator (and reader) by encouraging reflection on actions and characters that are destructive to political communities, and by offering an account of the best we might strive toward under the limited conditions we face as political actors.
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