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On the First Stasimon of Sophocles' *OT*¹

Zoia Barzakh

Abstract: In my article, I analyze the first stasimon of Sophocles' *OT* (vv. 463–521) and its function in the dramatic context. I demonstrate that the Chorus of this stasimon is similar to both the spectator—in its collectivity and role of responsible citizens and judges, and to the hero—in its ignorance and preference for human skill over divinely inspired wisdom. In this way, through its mediation, the Chorus brings the hero's experience closer to that of the spectator and shows that his fatal ignorance is not a feature of his unique fate but an essential part of the human condition.

Keywords: Sophocles, Oedipus, Chorus, irony

The first stasimon of Sophocles' *OT* has attracted less attention than the famous second stasimon. For instance, C. Gardiner in her monograph *The Sophoclean Chorus* devotes to this song less than a page and her only conclusion on it is that it 'is wholly consistent with the character they (i.e., the elders of the Chorus – Z. B.) have thus far displayed'.² R.C. Jebb in his fundamental commentary to the play devotes only a few lines to the overall interpretation of the stasimon and then, in the line-by-line commentary, discusses mainly syntactical and textual matters.³ The same can be said on the more recent commentary of R.D. Dawe.⁴ A. Lesky, in his lengthy discussion of the tragedy, fails to mention this song at all, although he cites and discusses, for instance, the second stasimon.⁵ H.D.F. Kitto mentions the ode only in passing,⁶ important though its close analysis could have been for his reasoning about the characters' and the Chorus' attitude towards prophecies. However, as I hope to show in what follows, a close analysis demonstrates its key importance for the development of the play's most crucial topic, namely the limitation of human knowledge, as well as for the attitude of the spectators towards the hero and his situation intended by Sophocles.

Before we analyze the dramatic function of this special song, a few remarks should be made about the function of the tragic chorus in general. A.W. Shlegel's "ideal spectator" has been deservedly criticized for a century and a half; nevertheless, it is generally accepted that there are special relationships between the chorus and the spectator. It is obvious that the chorus, using the formulation of S. Murnaghan, is similar to the audience as a "tragic bystander"—a figure witnessing the events and affected by them (although to a much lesser extent than the characters) and surviving to tell the story.⁷ However, its role

¹ I am profoundly grateful to the anonymous reviewers of *SCI* for their constructive and helpful comments, which have significantly improved the quality and clarity of the paper.

² Gardiner (1987), 100–1.

³ Jebb (1885), 56.

⁴ Dawe (1982), 139.

⁵ Lesky (1965), 111–17.

⁶ Kitto (1939), 137.

⁷ Murnaghan (2009), 321–33 (quotations at 322).

is not restricted by passive witnessing: the chorus, as a collective body, serves as ‘the stage metaphor of the community involved in the dramatic performance’. Moreover, O. Longo, to whom I owe this formulation, supposed that, while before the end of the fifth century, the archaic tragic performances took place in the agora and there was no spatial split between the actors and the audience, later, when the theater buildings were erected, collective participation was replaced by a delegation of the chorus, and the public participated in the tragedy in a mediated form—through the chorus.⁸ A more cautious formulation of the same view can be found in the famous book by J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, who write that the role of the chorus is to express the feelings of the spectators and to be, in a sense, opposed to ‘a hero from another age, always more or less alien to the ordinary condition of the citizens’.⁹ Similarly, R. Kitzinger in her article on Sophoclean choruses, notes that the chorus, is ‘a collective body [...] who, both by their social and political identity and their collectivity, may seem much closer to the world of the audience and their democratic state than the protagonists’, who are ‘heroic or royal figures socially, politically and circumstantially removed from the members of the audience’.¹⁰

Those scholars who, on the contrary, insist on the “otherness” of the chorus with respect to the spectators, usually stress the belonging of the chorus’ members to the groups alien or even marginal for adult male citizens from whom the audience consisted—women, slaves, foreigners, or old men.¹¹

However, the old men of the Chorus of *OT* are much closer in their collective experience to the body of the citizens of the democratic polis than most of the other tragic choruses. All three Theban plays of Sophocles have old men choruses—and all three, according to the observation of C. Gardiner, ‘are not isolated self-sufficient units. The mass of their fellow citizens—including women, children, and warriors—are generally evident in the background [...] Consequently, these choruses bring in their plays a broad political significance that could not easily be presented by a single character’.¹² This is all the more true when we consider the Chorus of *OT*: it appears in answer to Oedipus’ order to summon Κάδμου λαόν (v. 144), the members of the Chorus are addressed by the king, as if they are, or represent, “all Thebans” (v. 223), they are called ἄνδρες πολῖται (v. 512).¹³ Their old age or infirmity is never stressed: they are, as well as most of the spectators, adult male citizens, competent representatives of their community, their collectivity being an additional factor assimilating their experience to that of the spectators.

However, the members of the Chorus are obviously of more elevated social status than the average spectator. In v. 922, Iocaste addresses them as χώρας ἄνακτες, and in v. 1223 they are called by the Exangelos γῆς μέγιστα τῆσδ’ αἰετιμώμενοι, ‘ever most held in honor in this land’. Hence, the Chorus seems to be composed of the most honorable members or even leaders of the Theban community. However, the attitude of this Chorus

⁸ Longo (1990), 12–19.

⁹ Vernant, Vidal-Naquet (1988), 24 (cf. 33–4).

¹⁰ Kitzinger (2012), 385–6. Similarly, Budelmann (2000), 195–7.

¹¹ Gould (1998), 219–20.

¹² Gardiner (1987), 81–2.

¹³ Gardiner (1987), 97–9; Gould (1998), 36 n. 15.

to the larger community is likely to be similar to that in other surviving Sophoclean tragedies. As has been shown by F. Budelmann, the chorus in Sophocles always forms a distinctive small group, which has a complex connection to a large off-stage group. ‘While never being the large group’s straightforward representatives’, Budelmann writes, ‘the Chorus are always in some ways part of it’.¹⁴ For instance, the Chorus of the *Oedipus at Colonus* are representatives of the large Athenian community, while themselves being old men rather than citizen-warriors and countrymen rather than inhabitants of the city. The larger community of the *polis*—with Chorus being part of it, though a distinctive part—is, in both tragedies, the natural locus of identification for the spectators, who are also representatives of the *polis*, though each one distinctive in his own way. Therefore, we can assume with Budelmann that presenting the Chorus as a part of the larger community, in *OT* as well as in *OC*, ‘may help to make Chorus’ perspective an attractive one for the spectators to adopt’.¹⁵

From the very first lines of the first stasimon, the elders of the Chorus behave as responsible representatives of the city in trouble. The song is placed just after the conflict between Oedipus and Teiresias, Oedipus expressing his suspicions about Teiresias and Creon, and Teiresias throwing grim hints about Oedipus’ parentage—but all these matters are completely ignored in the first strophic pair. Just as in the previous episode, during the quarrel itself, they insist that ‘the welfare of the city, and therefore the problems of the oracles, must take precedence over personal matters’—so here they turn to the only thing important for the well-being of the city, namely the oracle, the identity and the situation of the unknown murderer, leaving aside all the private troubles of the principals.¹⁶

When they, at last, turn to the startling revelations of the prophet in the second strophic pair, the civic function they assume becomes rather familiar to the spectators due to their own experience: as has been shown by B. Knox,¹⁷ they examine Teiresias’ accusations against Oedipus in a manner of the Athenian criminal court. First, they see no arguments either for or against the accusation: Knox’s translation of v. 485 ‘I neither affirm nor deny’ stresses the somewhat formal sounding of Greek δοκοῦντα and ἀποφάσκουντα. Then, in vv. 489–93, they analyze the possible motives of the accused: was there any enmity between him and the victim or the victim’s family? ‘This is, of course, the stuff of which murder trials are made’, Knox notes. Finally, after reviewing all the evidence so far presented, they reject Oedipus’ accusation. The problem posed in the previous scene is solved by the Chorus ‘by very careful and human common sense: they seek motive and proof, and find none’.¹⁸

All these features aim to bring the Chorus closer to the spectators. This similarity is all the more striking in the play where the great difference between the audience and the Chorus as regards knowledge of the upcoming events is so prominent: unlike the Chorus, the audience knows both the horrible past and the expected ruinous outcome of Oedipus’ search. The tragic irony, which is so persistent throughout the play, is based on this difference in knowledge. However, the features that assimilate the Chorus to the spectator

¹⁴ Budelmann (2000), 201–2.

¹⁵ Budelmann (2000), 204.

¹⁶ Gardiner (1987), 100–1.

¹⁷ Knox (1998), 85–6.

¹⁸ Gardiner (1987), 100.

must be considered in this context: being of the superior position in comparison with the Chorus, the spectator, nevertheless, is forced to conclude that, if put in a similar position with regard to knowledge, his own reasoning would be no less mistaken.

As we have said, the Chorus is similar to the hero in its ignorance and in being, for the all-knowing spectator, the object of tragic irony. In this station, however, it is not only ignorance that assimilates the Chorus with the hero. Above we have said that common sense is one of the features that assimilates the Chorus with the spectator. However, the Chorus' common sense has a deeper philosophical level. When they refuse to believe Teiresias, they base their decision on the doubt about the prophetic art in general (vv. 498–504): only Zeus and Apollo have the full knowledge of human affairs, the humans must content themselves by competing in wisdom (vv. 503–4: σοφία δ' ἄν σοφίαν παραμείψειεν ἄνθρωπος.)

Finglass in his commentary sees a contradiction in these statements of the Chorus:

They first profess their trust in the gods rather than mortal prophets, who may know no more than the chorus. But then they admit that one man's wisdom can surpass another's, implicitly acknowledging that Teiresias might indeed have superior understanding. That admission, if pressed, would undermine their opening claim that there is no means of deciding whether or not human prophet possesses special insight.¹⁹

However, the contradiction disappears if we understand correctly the meaning of σοφία in the context. The only understanding that preserves the logic of the passage would be 'human, secular wisdom', as opposed to the divine knowledge. This meaning is well attested in the Greek literature. The earliest attested meaning of σοφία (σοφία) in Homeric and Hesiodic epic is 'technical skill', 'craft carried out with one's hands'.²⁰ In archaic and classical poetry, σοφία can denote more abstract skills, including poetic craft, but is never used for god-inspired wisdom.²¹ Heraclitus even uses this word as a synonym of πολυμαθία—vain erudition of those who cannot understand the essence of things.²² In Euripides' *Bacchae*, as shown by L. Barzini, 'σοφία and its derivatives exclusively designate human intellectual skills, cleverness, ingeniousness', as opposed to Dionysiac mystical knowledge.²³

In Sophocles, too, σοφία usually means 'human skills' as opposed to divine knowledge. Sometimes, these skills are even perverse, as in the case of Menelaos' rhetorical skills in *Ajax* (vv. 1091–92) and especially the cunning sophistic of Odysseus in *Philoctetes*, who is repeatedly called σοφός and uses this word about his plan (vv. 119, 431–32, 1244–6). In the milder cases, σοφός is simply skillful: the word is used of the Man from the first stasimon of *Antigone* (vv. 364–5: σοφόν τι τὸ μηχανόεν τέχνας ὑπὲρ ἐλπίδ' ἔχων) or of a skillful doctor (*Aj.* 581). The word σοφός is indeed used also about Teiresias in both *Antigone* and *OT* (*Ant.* 1059, *OT* 484, 563, 568—in the last case

¹⁹ Finglass (2018), 319.

²⁰ *Il.* 15, 410–12, Hes. *WD* 649. West (1978), 319 ad v. 649; Schein (2016), 257; Barzini, 5.

²¹ Snell (1924), 6–7; Schein (2016), 258; Wolfsdorf (2019), 11–15.

²² Hld. 50 D-K. See Barzini, 6.

²³ Barzini, 1–2.

sarcastically). However, it can be argued that in all these cases prophesy is understood as an art or even a set of techniques, with no reference to any kind of superhuman wisdom.

This is most evident in Ant. 1059, where the enraged Creon tells Teiresias: σοφὸς σὺ μάντις, ἀλλὰ τὰδικεῖν φιλῶν. At this stage, Creon surely cannot believe that Teiresias possesses any kind of supernatural wisdom: what he says is that his opponent is a skillful prophet who nonetheless loves injustice.

In the context of our stasimon, the understanding of σοφία as a ‘humanly accessible skill’ presents a possible solution for the paradox noticed by Finglass. With it, the logic of the second strophe will be as follows: Only Zeus and Apollo have full knowledge of human affairs; there is no certain way to prove that a prophet has more knowledge than you and I; so, let humans compete in humanly accessible and understandable skills without pretending to possess supernatural wisdom.

We must note here that, by the words παραμείψειεν ἀνὴρ, Sophocles stresses the competitive side of this human σοφία. Indeed, in Archaic and Classical Greece this humanly achieved σοφία used to be characteristically competitive. ‘Rivalry in claims to be wise’, G. Lloyd stresses, ‘starts almost as soon as we have any evidence to go on in Greece’.²⁴ Similarly, in the analysis of the tradition of Seven Sages and their competition, R. Martin concludes that, in general, ‘one sage always thought to undo the others, whether or not the others were present’.²⁵ A. Nightingale stresses that the title σοφός was a kind of ‘symbolic capital’, which ‘had to be won against stiff competition’.²⁶ Of course, the competitiveness of σοφία stresses its self-gained and humanly achieved nature: it is much more natural to compete in what you have achieved by your own efforts than in what you have been given as a gift from above.

Note, that opposing human σοφία, as something more certain and reliable, to the presumed (but not fully reliable) supernatural wisdom of a prophet, the Chorus’ members follow their king, who, in the previous episode, stressed that he solved the Sphinx’s riddle by his intellect alone, without learning anything from the birds (v. 398: γνώμη κυρήσας οὐδ’ ἄπ’ οἰωνῶν μαθῶν). In the following antistrophe, the Chorus finds proof of Oedipus’ wisdom and usefulness to the city (and, as a consequence, rightness and superiority over Teiresias) in exactly the same achievement that he himself prides himself on before Teiresias—the victory over the Sphinx (vv. 507–11).

However, the Chorus not only shares Oedipus’ delusion about the superiority of human σοφία over prophetic knowledge: in their ignorance they, as well as Oedipus, become the object of dramatic irony. When they describe the crime of the unknown murderer as ἄρρητ’ ἀρρήτων (v. 465), these words are too strong for the regicide—but fit well the patricide and incest, of which they do not think yet (on this meaning of ἄρρητα and cognates, cf. *OT* 1289, *OC* 1001). In their description of the murderer fleeing from the oracle, which persecutes him in all his ways (vv. 467–72) they are, as noted by J.R. March, ‘at the same time both right and wrong’. On the one hand, the dramatic image of flight and fear they present is ‘in strong contrast with the audience’s perception of reality: of Oedipus, the unwitting killer, quietly at home in his palace’. And in the moment, far

²⁴ Lloyd (1987), 103.

²⁵ Martin (1998), 120.

²⁶ Nightingale (2000), 157–8. On the competitive nature of Archaic and Classical σοφία, see also Silva (2017), 38–41.

from fleeing from the oracle, ‘he is in fact trying to do all he can to obey Apollo’s oracle in 96–8’. However, at the same time, they are right in the sense they cannot at the moment see or guess. Much later, in v. 794–7, Oedipus will confess that, upon hearing the oracle about parricide and incest, he ‘went into exile, /.../, to a place where I would never see the reproaches of the terrible oracles given to me come true’ (transl. Finglass). So, in a sense, he fled from the oracle prosecuting him—‘unbeknown to them, the chorus are indeed describing the real killer’s actual reaction to hearing an oracle, although his intention was to avoid committing the crimes that the oracle was predicting, not to escape the consequences of his action’.²⁷

The Chorus twice hints unwittingly at the name of the killer. Periphrastic expressions in v. 468 (φρυγᾶ πόδα νωμᾶν) and v. 479 (μέλεος μελέφ ποδι χηρεύων) contain the word ποῦς—the second root in the name of the hero.²⁸ They hint unconsciously not only at his name but at his parentage: when in v. 496 they put the name Οἰδιπόδα next to Λαβδακίδαις (in the context ἐπὶ τὰν ἐπίδαμον φάτιν εἴμ’ Οἰδιπόδα Λαβδακίδαις / ἐπικούρος ἀδήλων θανάτων) the spectator naturally recollects that Oedipus *is* a Labdacid, though the Chorus, at the moment, is unaware of this fact.²⁹

These unmeant hints are typical cases of tragic irony. Note that before the first stasimon, it was Oedipus whose speeches were full of this kind of irony. His edict (vv. 216–75) contains multiple tragic ironies (see esp. vv. 228–32, 257–65), and there is also a lot of tragic irony in his angry responses to Teiresias in the following scene (see, e.g., v. 397). The dramatic aim of this device is to stress the speaker’s ignorance, and his lack of control even over the meaning of his own speech stemming from this ignorance. So, it can be said that the Chorus in this stasimon is sharing in the tragic ignorance of the hero.

There is yet another way by which Sophocles assimilates the delusion of the Chorus to the tragic ignorance of Oedipus. The Chorus expresses its opinion of the situation in markedly visual terms—so much so that R. Kane states that ‘they measure Teiresias’ *manteia* by the index of their physical perception’.³⁰ The Chorus speaks of the ‘invisible death’ (v. 495 ἀδήλων θανάτων) of Laius, by contrast with the ‘manifest’ (v. 506 φανερά) nature of Oedipus’ heroic deed, in which he was seen (v. 510 ὄφθη) to be skilled and dear to the city, so the Chorus will never condemn him ‘before seeing a true word’ (v. 505 πρὶν ἴδοιμ’ ὀρθὸν ἔπος).³¹ The theme of light and darkness was crucial for the preceding scene—the encounter of Oedipus with Teiresias—and by now the spectator possesses enough information to understand that the references to the earthly, mundane vision in this play must be considered in the context of ‘the paradox of *Oedipus*: the blind see, yet those gifted with the sight are, as it were, metaphorically blind’.³² From the beginning, the

²⁷ Finglass (2018), 328. Cf. March (2020), 217–18; Rutherford (2012), 153–4.

²⁸ Finglass (2018), 323–4 ad v. 467–8; Knox (1998), 112, 182–3.

²⁹ Note that other stasima of the tragedy also contain tragic irony. In the second stasimon, when the chorus wishes for the fulfillment of the oracles, but ‘at this point in the play, the audience has all the information needed to know that the chorus’ wishes will be fulfilled, but in a way that they would never imagine or want’ (Gardiner 1987, 105–6). On the tragic irony in the third stasimon, see Sansone (1975), 110–17.

³⁰ Kane (1975), 193–4; Finglass (2018), 326 ad vv. 477–8.

³¹ On the accumulation of such terminology in this tragedy and its meaning, see Helmbold (1951), 293–300.

³² Helmbold (1951), 298.

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