

Fire-Walking in Sophocles' *Antigone* 618–19

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One of the major problems of Sophocles' plays is the exploration of the nature of Atê and its relationship to human activity. Solon, in a classic elegiac fragment (1.11 ff. Diehl) laid down the general rule that Atê was the punishment of the unjust, visiting them either in their lifetime or in their progeny: "Man's deeds of injustice cannot go long unpunished" (*ibid.* 16). And yet, in the same fragment Solon is forced to admit that "Even those with good intention, without forethought, have fallen into profound and bitter Atê" (68)—a suggestion which seems to make the operation of Atê completely irrational and capricious. Now Sophocles, without completely rejecting the traditional structure of Atê, Moira, and the Erinyes, has attempted to work them into a more subtle vision of the interaction of man and the gods in the universe. Part of his attempt to purify and rationalize the ancient concepts emerges from the second choral ode of the *Antigone*. Here Sophocles begins with a meditation on the inherited evil, the Atê, that seems to brood over the house of Oedipus. The curse that will not leave off for generations is compared to the sharp sea blast that blows over the headlands of Thrace. As the chill wind blows over the turbulent, wintry sea, the headlands moan echoing, as it were, the tragedy of the world. And from the bottom (in the poet's vision) comes a dark silt that somehow seems connected with the darkened, troubled soul of man (582–92). The poet ponders on how the mystery of Antigone's transgression is to be understood. For the final light that seemed to shine over the house of Laius is now cut down by a bloody dust (602, retaining *konis*), a dust that comes out of Hades to cover the bodies of the dead. Indeed, all the hopes of Oedipus' progeny seem cut down by the powers of death and putrefaction. But in the final section of the ode (605–30), Sophocles through his chorus of elders proceeds to a broader, more philosophical survey of the mystery of human misery. Though all things come under

the watchful eye of Zeus, yet there is a law which seems to govern the actions of men and the operation of Atê. Pride, boldness, vastness (612 ff., retaining the plausible emendation of Heath)—all are attended by the imminent possibility of destruction and ruin.

Thus far, this is in substance the doctrine as transmitted by Solon.¹ But Sophocles' analysis goes much deeper. For not only in the area of wealth and vastness, but in all the aspects of life, men must move forward with caution and diligence. We must be constantly, he suggests, on the lookout, for the evil that we do, the folly that we commit, will seem to us like a good (631 ff.). This is the penalty for the bit of wisdom (cf. *Antigone* 365 ff.) which men possess as they march now towards good and now towards evil, to the concomitant glory or despair of their native city. Hence it is that true human wisdom, in Sophocles' view, requires a constant watchfulness and flexibility, an awareness of oneself and of the world. This is the way of the gods with men.

Such, in brief summary, is the message of the second stasimon of the *Antigone*. But unfortunately the text of this difficult choral ode does not enjoy a flawless transmission. For the purposes of this paper, however, I should attempt to deal with only one of the many *cruces* of the ode, the famous "fire-walking" passage in 618–19. It occurs towards the close of the piece, and the text is as follows:²

εἰδοῦτι δ' οὐδὲν ἔρπει,
πρὶν πυρὶ θερμῷ πόδα τις προσαύση.

618 οὐκ εἰδοῦτι δ' ἔρπει Ellendt οὐκ εἰδόσιν ἔρπει Hermann 619 προσ^{αυ}ση
L (-αρει sscr alia man) προψάσει R προψάση (cum ψ in rasura) A
προσαίρει vel προσαίρη aliqui recc

¹ For a discussion of the Solonic fragment, see C. M. Bowra, *Early Greek Elegists* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1935; repr. Cambridge [England] 1960) 90–98, where Bowra treats the Solonic message within the context of early Greek poetry, Homer, Hesiod, and Semonides of Amorgos. Solon takes care to frame his precepts as part of εὐνομία, for the economic and moral good of the state. Still the cure Solon seeks is ultimately on the personal and individual level. The fragment should of course be considered along with Solon, Fr. 3 on the tension between Order and Disorder within Athens.

For a discussion of the Sophoclean passage, with emphasis on the imagery, the best treatment is R. Goheen, *The Imagery of Sophocles' Antigone* (Princeton 1951) 56 ff. See also, among others, C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford 1944; repr. 1960) 87–90; G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama* (Ithaca 1958) 207–8 with the literature cited.

² For the text, see Richard C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments. Part III: The Antigone*³ (Cambridge 1900; repr. 1962); A. C. Pearson, *Sophoclis fabulae* (Oxford

So much for the text. It is also useful to note that the Laurentian scholia explain the passage thus:³ *προσαύση· προσφέρει. πρὶν τοῖς δεινοῖς ἐπικύρησθαι καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐμπέσθαι τὸν κίνδυνον*, and this ambiguous scholion has given rise to the impression, reflected in the apparatus of both Pearson and Dain, that the scholiast is a witness for the reading of *προσαίρει*; but this is not so rashly to be assumed. The compound form *προσαύω* is found only here in all Greek literature; the uncompounded form, *αὔω*, only in Homer and Aratus.⁴ But this reading is most probably not to be questioned, and the correct meaning, “to burn or scorch (something) against,” is adopted by Ellendt,⁵ Jebb,⁶ *LSJ*, and most of the modern commentators. Indeed, any verb in its place meaning “to lift or raise against” would seem, as most commentators agree, most inappropriate in the context. And it would appear that the later manuscript readings involving a form of *-αίρω* or *-ψαύω* are really false variants, as even Ellendt long ago recognized,⁷ rising from natural attempts to interpret the

1928; repr. 1957); and A. Dain and P. Mazon, *Sophocle* (3 vols., Paris 1955–60), 1.95–96. The Dain-Mazon edition represents a marked improvement upon the older Budé edition of Paul Masqueray, *Sophocle* (Paris 1922), and the apparatus attempts to follow the new lines suggested by A. Turyn, *The Manuscript Tradition of Sophocles* (Urbana [Illinois] 1952), in which the text of Sophocles must be constituted not only by relying on the scholia and the Laurentian or L-tradition, but also by using the Roman or non-L tradition represented, for example, by R (Codex Vaticanus Graecus 2291, s. xv), which I here cite. Apart from the enormous value of Turyn’s study, I cannot agree that the theory of the two branches has been sufficiently substantiated, and should incline more towards the cautious view expressed by P. Maas in his review of Turyn’s monograph, *Gnomon* 25 (1953) 441–42. This controversy (which remains unsettled) does not enter into the present discussion, and the reading of R is quoted here merely by way of illustration; in general I do not believe that, apart from the inclusion of lines missing from L (and its gemellus A), any of the readings of R and its fellows within the Roman tradition are to be taken as true variants. The vexed question of Sophoclean manuscripts has been taken up again by Miss P. E. Easterling in her discussion of the Parisinus (A) in *Classical Quarterly* 10 (1960) 51–64. See also A. Dain’s analysis of the manuscripts in *Sophocle* 1. xxiii–xlvi.

³ See *Scholia in Sophoclis tragoedias vetera*, ed. P. N. Papageorgios (Leipzig 1888) *ad loc.*

⁴ See *LSJ*, s. v. *αὔω* (A), with the single entry for *προσαύω*, s. v. The compound *ἐναύω* is of far more frequent occurrence.

⁵ F. Ellendt, *Lexicon Sophocleum*² (ed. by H. Genthe [Berlin 1872; photomech. Nachdruck: Hildesheim, 1958]) s. v. *αὔω* and *προσαύω*.

⁶ See Jebb, *Antigone*, page 119, with the additional note on page 255. The abridged school edition, *The Antigone of Sophocles* (abridged from the large edition of R. C. Jebb by E. S. Shuckburgh [Cambridge 1902; repr. 1953]) page 143, follows the same line though in a much more succinct way.

⁷ Cf. *op. cit.* (above, note 5) page 663.

hapax legomenon προφασίση. Hence I think we may fairly well assume that the text in this part of the line at least is assured with a high degree of probability. It is the first part of the sentence that has caused the major controversy.

Assuming then that the text of the subordinate clause is sound—"until one should scorch his foot on the hot fire"—what is to be made of the expression εἰδóτι δ'οὐδέν ἔρπει? Here the text appears certain. Although, admittedly, there is no metrical responsion between our phrase and the corresponding colon in the strophe, practically all editors and commentators (except Hermann, whom F. Ellendt follows in his *Lexicon*) prefer to correct the corresponding colon in the strophe,⁸ leaving the transmitted text here as it stands. We are thus presented with the ambiguity of the phrase, with the following possible meanings:

1. "(Deception, Atê) comes to a man completely unawares"—with οὐδέν as the object of the verb εἰδóτι; and
2. οὐδέν as subject of ἔρπει, meaning either
 - a. "He understands the true meaning of nothing that happens to him," or
 - b. "Nothing happens to the man who is aware (of the danger)."

Now Jebb, following some of the earlier commentators, expressed his preference for the first interpretation. He finds the second interpretation "somewhat forced"; but in explaining it, he paraphrases it only in the sense of 2a above, completely disregarding the possibility of 2b. But surely Jebb's is not a fair paraphrase of the construction.

But to proceed with our analysis, we see that in Jebb's view, the man who is unaware, who scorches his foot, is one of the "many" who, in the previous line, have been seduced by "the deception of frivolous loves" (617). But what is difficult, in this view, is to explain the sudden transition to a single person, after the discussion of the many. Thus, he would translate,⁹

⁸ Where the reading (609) οὐτ' ἀκάματοι θεῶν of all the manuscripts gives a metrical sequence unusual for this ode, and one impossible to square with 618. Hence the practice has been, for the most part, to leave 618 unemended and change 609 to οὐτε θεῶν ἄκμητοι or the like (so Hermann). Pearson, however, leaves 609 unchanged.

⁹ Jebb, *op. cit.* (above, note 2) page 119, note on 618 f.

Yet widely tossed Hope has been
 A comfort to many men,
 And to many the deception of frivolous loves.
 And to him unawares it comes, until he scorch
 His foot on the hot fire.

There is plainly an incongruity here, which cannot (in my view) be solved unless we take the individual who is “aware” as completely separate from the “many” deceived who have gone before. The meaning of the subjectless verb *ἐρπει*, in Jebb’s view, is also difficult, especially since in the previous lines we have the possibility of taking over the subject as “hope,” “comfort,” and, finally “deception” (616–17). But apart from the analysis of the immediate context, we should not fail to notice that the verb *ἐρπει* in this ode is *always with an expressed subject*, in both cases *οὐδέν* (as in 585, and even on the most likely reading, in 613). This I feel is the clinching argument for taking *οὐδέν* as the subject of *ἐρπει* in our present context. Indeed, in both of the other passages of the ode, there is a dative of reference (584 *οἷς*, 614 *βιότῳ*) of the mortals affected by the calamity of Atê. Finally, if we examine these parallel passages further, we still see that in both cases it is a question of the “approach” of Atê coming upon a man or upon an entire household. Thus in our passage it is natural to take *οὐδέν* once again as the subject of *ἐρπει* (as it is in 614); indeed, expanding the phrase, we may construe *οὐδέν* *sc.* *ἀτᾶς* (as in 584–85). The singular *εἰδότε* now becomes clear: as opposed to the “many” of the previous lines who are tossed up and down on their hopes,¹⁰ the one man to be singled out is “the one who knows,” the man who is aware of the problem of life and the deception of surface reality. Thus far, then, our phrase is to be interpreted: “To one who *is* aware (of the danger, etc.), no Atê comes. . . .”¹¹

But the full sense of the entire line must depend not only upon the grammar but upon the imagery involved. In Jebb’s view (and that of the majority of the commentators), the burning of one’s foot on the fire represents the final catastrophe, which creeps up on one (as it were) unawares. It is, as he takes it, a “not

¹⁰ On the image, see also Pindar, *Ol.* 12.5–7.

¹¹ Such a conclusion is ultimately reached by F. H. M. Blaydes, *Sophocles* (2 vols. [London 1859]), 1.535, but he does not offer any analysis of the passage.

... until" construction ($\text{o}\ddot{\upsilon} \dots \pi\rho\acute{\iota}\nu$),¹² which he thus translates: "The disappointment comes on one who knoweth nought till he burn his foot against the hot fire."¹³ And similarly Dain-Mazon: "... Et l'homme en qui elle pénètre ne comprend rien avant l'instant où il sent soudain sous son pied la brûlure du feu ardent."¹⁴ What is clear is that the image is taken from a man walking over hot coals either by chance or else in the act of performing the ordeal of fire-walking, to which mention had already been made by the guard (*Antigone* 265). There are but few references to such ordeals in antiquity.¹⁵ A curious passage in

¹² For the construction, normal enough in Greek, see H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1956, rev. by G. M. Messing), § 2444b, and especially the grammatical appendix compiled by Ewald Bruhn in F. W. Schneidewin and A. Nauck, *Sophokles* vol. 8 (Berlin 1899): *Anhang*, 80, 8 ff. (§ 145), although our specific passage is not quoted.

¹³ Jebb, *op. cit.* (above, note 2) page 119; what Jebb thought was a clinching analogy for his view occurs in Antiphon, *Or.* 1.29, "Those who are plotted against know nothing until they are already in the disaster" ($\pi\rho\acute{\iota}\nu \acute{\epsilon}\nu \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{\omega} \acute{\omega}\sigma\iota \tau\acute{\omega} \kappa\alpha\kappa\acute{\omega} \gamma'$). But the objection is not to the grammatical construction but rather to the image: Jebb takes the scorching of the foot in the *Antigone* passage as equivalent to "the evil itself," Atē. Rather in our passage, the burning of the foot is to be conceived as a warning to the man, all aware of the danger, walking cautiously above. The difficulty in our passage, however, is created by $\epsilon\rho\mu\epsilon\iota$, which does not occur in the Antiphon text, and hence the argument somewhat falls. The same use of the Antiphon parallel is cited in the smaller *Antigone of Sophocles* abridged by E. S. Shuckburgh from Jebb's larger edition (Cambridge 1902; repr. 1953), page 143.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.* (above, note 2) page 95. In explaining the image Dain suggests that the man walks "imprudently" on the coals; but there can be no question of imprudence if the fire-walking is either an ordeal to prove the justice of one's case (as in the dispute among the guards, *Antigone* 265), or a generic image for the necessary risk inherent in man's passage through life. Walk he must, but he can walk cautiously or not.

¹⁵ For an early summary article, see Paul Vinogradoff, "Ordeal (Greek)," in Hastings' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (repr. New York 1955) 521; and W. Dürig, "Gottesurteil," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*² 4 (1960) 1130-32, with the bibliography there cited.

On the explanation of the phenomenon of fire-walking, V. Coutant has assembled a number of interesting ancient and modern texts in his article, "Theophrastus and the Firewalk," *Isis* 45 (1954) 95-97. Coutant lists Theophrastus *De igne* 57-58 along with Varro as being skeptical of any true religious phenomenon in the performance of the fire-walk; whereas Strabo 5.2.9 and 12.2.7 as well as Pliny, *NH* 7.2.19 merely report without comment. But I might add that the passages from Pliny and Varro may perhaps throw added light on the Horatian passage in the ode to Asinius Pollio (*Odes* 2.1.7-8). Pliny, Varro (quoted by Servius), and Vergil, *Aen.* 11. 785 ff., all refer to the reported custom of the Hirpi or Hirpini, who lived near Mt. Soracte, of performing a religious fire-walk in honor of Apollo, the patron of Soracte. In Vergil, Arruns mentions this cult act in his prayer to Apollo, the god of Soracte (*Aen.* 11.785-92), and Pliny, *loc. cit.*, seems to refer to the persistence of the practice among the Hirpini. Servius in his *Commentary* (*ad loc.*) also mentions the Hirpini, but quotes a

Ovid's *Fasti* 4.553–54 is interpreted by Frazer as pointing to a fire-initiation ritual at the Eleusinian mysteries.¹⁶ And Horace uses the image of fire-walking in his ode to C. Asinius Pollio (*Odes* 2.1.7–8) as a symbol of Asinius' caution in writing history:

incedis per ignis
suppositos cineri doloso.

Whether or not Horace is thinking of the primitive ordeal, his image suggests that Asinius is walking over fire, but he is sure that he will tread carefully in utilizing his material so as not to incur the anger of people who are still alive. In Horace the phrase *incedis per ignis* is used almost like a proverbial expression; and indeed, some commentators have endeavored to see a connection with an obscure proverb quoted by the *Suda*,¹⁷ ἐν πυρὶ βέβηκας; but the exact meaning of the Greek is difficult, and would seem to be the equivalent to the English expression, "It's now or never," on the occasion of performing some difficult task.

Another interesting parallel occurs in the fourth-century patristic writer, Gregory of Nyssa. In Gregory's *Life of Moses or a Treatise on Perfection*,¹⁸ he speaks of sensual pleasure as a kind of baleful fire to which we must not come too close:

Solomon [he says] in his book of Wisdom teaches this when he tells us not to touch hot coals with the naked foot, nor to take up fire into one's bosom.

Actually the passage which Gregory seems to refer to is not from

passage from Varro to the effect that such fire-walkers use a *medicamentum* on the soles of their feet: see G. Thilo and H. Hagen, *Servii grammatici . . . Commentarii* (3 vols., Leipzig 1923), 2.564.50–51.

¹⁶ It is the reference to Demeter's mysterious scorching of the babe Triptolemus by throwing him upon the fire: see the remarks of J. G. Frazer, *Fastorum libri sex* (London 1929), 3.293–95. Here Ceres attempts to render the sick child immortal through the purification of the fire—*humanum purget ut ignis onus* (*Fasti* 4.554)—but is prevented by the panic of the child's mother. A passage often referred to in Lucretius 4.925 (*cinere ut multa laet obrutus ignis*) has nothing to do with fire-walking.

¹⁷ See E. L. A. Leutsch and F. G. Schneidewin, *Corpus paroemiographorum Graecorum* (3 vols., Göttingen 1839–87; photomech. Nachdruck, Hildesheim 1958–61) 1.239.52. No similar proverb is quoted in the supplementary list given by R. Strömberg, *Greek Proverbs* (Göteborg 1954).

¹⁸ *De vita Moysis*, in J.-P. Migne, *Patres graeci* 45.424 C, and in my new critical edition of the text (*Gregorii Nysseni opera*, edd. W. Jaeger and H. Langerbeck [Leiden 1964]), 3.1, page 137.26.

the book of Wisdom but from Proverbs 6.27–28.¹⁹ Here the biblical writer is discussing the moral doctrine of cause and effect in a series of questions; in connection with the danger of adultery, he asks:

Can a man take up fire into his bosom [*or* lap] and not burn his clothes? Can he walk upon hot coals and not burn his feet?

There would seem to be no question here of an ordeal, but merely an analogy to explain the imminence of moral danger. The actual text of Gregory of Nyssa, however, ἐπιβαίνειν τοῦ ἄνθρωπος γυμνῶ τῷ ποδί, does not correspond precisely to the Hebrew or Greek (Septuagint) text of Proverbs and may actually be a reminiscence of the passage in Sophocles; in this case Gregory's ἐπιβαίνειν may reflect the discarded reading προβαύσει of R. Suffice it to recall, however, that whereas in Horace the walking on coals was an act of caution and prudence, in both Gregory of Nyssa and the book of Proverbs it is an act of rashness, since the fire on which one walks is the dangerous pleasure which may lead one to catastrophe.

Let us return now to our text. Whether or not the image in Sophocles refers to the primitive ordeal of fire-walking, it would seem more likely that it conveys the idea of a cautious walking through life, such as we find it turning up again in the Horatian passage on Asinius Pollio. The walking is thus considered a necessary act, but it can be accomplished without calamity if one treads carefully. This is quite the opposite of the patristic passage, which, however inspired by Sophocles, derives its interpretation from the biblical warning in the book of Proverbs. In Sophocles, on the other hand, the scorching of the naked foot

¹⁹ R. Kittel, P. Kahle, and others, *Biblia Hebraica*⁹ (Stuttgart 1954); the text is quite clear, with no serious variants. The entire passage is a series of questions and answers noting the immediacy of cause and effect, in this case, the effects of adultery. If a man places burning coals on his lap (or in the bosom of his garment) he will inevitably scorch his clothing; so too, if he walks unshod on hot coals he will be burnt. Portions of the book go back to the sixth or seventh century B.C., but others are as late as the third. For a brief commentary, see W. Gunter Plaut, *Book of Proverbs* (New York 1961) 93–94; and see H. Lesêtre, "Charbons ardents," *Dictionnaire de la Bible* (Paris 1899) 2.582–84. But there can hardly be a question of a real ordeal in the text of Proverbs; indeed, there are no other references to such fire-walking in all of the Scriptures. For the problem of the ordeal in ancient Mesopotamian and Semitic texts, see E. Kutsch, "Gottesurteil," *Die Religion in der Geschichte und Gegenwart*³ (Tübingen 1958) 3.1807–9. I have had the advantage of discussing the Hebrew text with the Rev. George Glanzman, professor of Scripture in Fordham University.

on the hot coals is not the advent of final catastrophe (on this interpretation), but merely the warning “to the man who knows” that Atê is not far to seek. Admittedly, this theory goes completely counter to the interpretation of Jebb and others, but it is surely the more natural explanation of the image as used in the choral ode, and it corresponds, I think, precisely to Sophocles’ doctrine of prudence (that is, *εὐβουλία*; cf. 1050, 1098) and flexibility (as in 710–18) that is so much stressed throughout the play. It is this in which Antigone has triumphed and Creon, for all his power, has failed. Interpreted in this sense, the image in our stasimon would suggest that the man of wisdom and prudence goes through life as though he were fire-walking: danger lurks beneath every step, and even then, however innocent, he may not be able to avoid a scorching, but at least he may forestall the calamity of total Atê if he is constantly on his guard and bears in mind that evil enters in through the ignorant choices of the mind and heart—indeed, through the “folly of speech and the passion of the soul” (604). Hence, our final corrected version will read (616–25):

Yet widely tossed Hope has been
 A comfort to many men,
 And to many the deception of frivolous loves.
 But to one who knows, no Atê comes
 Until he scorch his foot upon the hot fire.
 For wisely has the saying been uttered
 That evil appears as good to him
 Whom the gods would lead to Atê.²⁰
 And then his time is short
 Before the final catastrophe.

²⁰ *Antigone* 620–24; this sentence should now be added to Strömberg’s extensive collection of proverbs cited above. The unnamed wise man who had uttered this memorable analysis of the work of Atê has never been discovered; Sophocles, I submit, has written this way out of modesty, and hence however old the idea, the precise way it is here stated can be attributed only to the poet himself.