Undoing in Sophoclean Drama: *Lusis* and the Analysis of Irony[*]

SIMON GOLDHILL

King's College Cambridge

SUMMARY: This article explores some aspects of how Sophoclean irony works. I begin by looking at one set of words across Sophocles' extant tragedies, a vocabulary which has not been discussed adequately by critics, namely, the language of *lusis*, "release," "undoing." This group of terms (*lusis, luein, lutêrion, ekluein* and so forth) constructs a systematic view of the failure of human hopes for control over narrative, a failure that goes to the heart of Sophocles' view of human action. The hope or proclamation of a solution in Sophocles turns out again and again to be ironically undercut. The second section of the article explores the standard model of dramatic irony, at one level implicit in this analysis of *lusis*. In the standard model of dramatic irony, the audience recognizes what the characters on stage cannot: the spectators understand and see the meanings concealed from the actors. Here, I investigate four limit cases where an audience cannot be certain how ironic the tragic language is: the very recognition of irony becomes unstable (and with it the secure position of the audience). This analysis focuses on apparently functional and everyday remarks, where the passing—whether humans or words—may shift from the accidental or circumstantial into the realm of significance. Bringing together the two sections, the irony of *lusis* and the analysis of irony, raises finally a question about tragic ambivalence—one of the most heatedly debated issues in contemporary criticism of tragedy—and the relation between tragic ambivalence and tragic politics.

1. SOPHOCLES' DRAMA OF UNDOING

IN THE THIRD EPISODE OF THE *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS*, JOCASTA LEAVES THE HIGHLY disturbed Oedipus inside the palace and comes out to pray to Apollo, the god whose absent presence is everywhere in the play. She asks the divinity spe-

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cifically to provide (921) λύσιν εὐαγῆ, "holy release," "an undefiled solution" (Jebb's "some riddance from uncleanness" has far too biblical a ring, though it does capture the proleptic force of the adjective[1]). Her prayer receives what appears to be an instant answer with the immediate arrival of the messenger. His news seems to give Jocasta exactly what she has hoped for: the death of Polybus means that Oedipus cannot kill his father as he currently fears. Of course, the messenger will provide further information that will lead to the full unravelling of the plot.[2] The answer to the prayer will turn out to be ironically fulfilled in a way Jocasta could not predict. *Lusis* is the term Aristotle uses for the dénouement of a plot (and dénouement means "untying"—*lusis*), and it is the messenger's news which leads to the violent end of the tragedy.

We are well prepared for this irony. When the messenger enters, his standard request to learn where he is and where the recipient of his message is to be found is turned by the most extraordinary versification to echo with the name of Oedipus and to produce "violent puns"[3] on the king's name and the language of "know where" (924–26):

> ἆρ' ἂν παρ' ὑμῶν, ὦ ξένοι, μάθοιμ' ὅπου
> τὰ τοῦ τυράννου δώματ' ἐστὶν Οἰδίπου;
> μάλιστα δ' αὐτὸν εἴπατ' εἰ κάτισθ' ὅπου;

> May I learn from you, strangers, where
> The house of the king, Oedipus, is?
> Can you tell me in particular where he is?[4]

The jingling rhyme at the end of each line—*mathoim' hopou, Oidipou, katisth'hopou*—sounds out an etymology for Oedipus—"know where"— which the whole play shows to be a painful recognition of the king's ignorance, and which the scene to come will prove to be a turning point in revealing. The chorus in reply point out Jocasta as (928) γυνὴ δὲ μήτηρ ἥδε τῶν κείνου τέκνων, "This is his wife and mother of his children." In the tiniest gap between

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[1] Each future citation of Jebb is to Jebb's seven volume commentary and to his note on the line in question, unless otherwise indicated. Bollack 1991: 602–3 discusses the sense of εὐαγῆ and its proleptic force at length.

[2] As discussed by Knox 1957: 172–84; Kitto 1961: 132–44; Winnington-Ingram 1980: 180ff—who writes "every prayer in the play is ironical" (191)—and more generally Bushnell 1988.

[3] The phrase is from Knox 1957: 184 who notes how commentators resist recognizing puns in Sophocles as intentional and significant. That trend, among literary critics at least, has certainly changed in the last thirty years.

[4] All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

hêde and *tôn* we can hear the hint of "this is his wife and mother."[5] When the messenger announces his news may please and upset, Jocasta asks (938), "What is it? What sort of double power does it have like this?" It is precisely the double power of the message that will reveal her double status as wife and mother, and that Oedipus does not know what he thought he knew, most of all, where he is.[6]

Lusis is a marked term, then, a promise of release that turns out to be ironically and tragically fulfilled. The scene continues to play with the term, however. When Oedipus tells the messenger of his fear that he would kill his father, the messenger happily asks (1002–3), "Then why, since I have come here with kindly intent, have I not released you from this fear?" The verb here is ἐξελυσάμην, and the irony again is palpable. This not a moment of salutary release, but it does release the one piece of information that will lead to the horrible revelation of who Oedipus is. What is more, the messenger reveals that he has "released" Oedipus once before (1034): "I released you when your ankles were pinioned together," λύω σ'. The chorus had exhorted the king when he argued with Teiresias that the best course was to find out how best to "solve"—λύειν—the oracles (440), after Oedipus accuses Teiresias of failing to say anything ἐκλυτήριον, "by way of release," "by way of a solution," to the citizens during the crisis of the Sphinx (392). Oedipus himself had predicted that the only "release," ἔκλυσιν, for their current sickness would be to find Laius's killers (306–7)—just as the Priest had recalled that Oedipus himself had "released," ἐξέλυσας, the city of Thebes from the predations of the Sphinx (a process of release that had led Oedipus unknowingly into his current disastrous position). "Release" in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is used repeatedly for a crucial juncture of the plot, and in each case what appears to be a solution to a problem, a positive salvation, turns out to be entwining the victims deeper and deeper into the meshes of the tragic plot.

This use of *lusis* goes to the heart of Sophocles' tragic perspective, where humans, in their pursuit of knowledge, their attempts to change things, their hope to escape from the narratives in which they find themselves enmeshed, are relentlessly and with grim irony drawn back into disaster at every turn. *Lusis* and its cognate vocabulary becomes a sign in Sophoclean theatre for the failures of human control, and ultimately for the only release that is inevitable and sure, that of death.

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[5] As noted already by the scholiasts, who call it "an ambivalence that gives pleasure to the listener," τὸ ἀμφίβολον ὅ τέρπει τὸν ἀκροατήν.

[6] For the role of language and names in the *Oedipus Tyrannus,* see Segal 1981: 207–48; Goldhill 1984b, and, more circumspectly, Goldhill 1986: 199–221.

Heracles in the *Trachiniae*, with the clarity that traditionally comes to the dying hero in Greek literature, spells out the misprision that lies at the root of this idea of *lusis*. The old oracles and newer prophecies concur, he says (1169–72):

ἥ μοι χρόνῳ τῷ ζῶντι καὶ παρόντι νῦν
ἔφασκε μόχθων τῶν ἐφεστώτων ἐμοὶ
λύσιν τελεῖσθαι· κἀδόκουν πράξειν καλῶς.
τὸ δ᾽ ἦν ἄρ᾽ οὐδὲν ἄλλο πλὴν θανεῖν ἐμέ.

The prophecy said that at the present and now living time
Release from the toils laid upon me would be
Fulfilled. I thought that meant a happy future.
I now realize it meant nothing else than my death.

Heracles thought *lusis* must mean a prosperous future; he now knows it means death. But Sophocles layers even such a bleak recognition of the failure of hope with a more ambiguous look to the future also. The word *teleisthai* "will be fulfilled," "brought to pass" is the word repeatedly associated with the fulfilment of prophecy in this play (cf. 79, 167, 170, 174, 824–25), but it also implies "consummation," "death" and also a ritual initiation into a new state. It is the word used, for example, for initiation into the mysteries. "Release from toil" ἀπαλλαγὴ πόνων is the phrase used for the state of transformation through the mysteries, which may find an echo here in μόχθων. . .λύσιν.[7] Heracles is about to demand that he is set on a pyre by his son. Although Sophocles' play does not show it, one dominant traditional story is that Heracles from the pyre ascended to heaven, where he marries Hebe, and lives on Olympus with the gods, the only human to be deified because of his heroic exploits (Easterling 1982: 17–19). The strange language of "living time," together with the phrase πράξειν καλῶς, which I have translated "happy future" (literally: "I thought things would go well for me"), and the note of realization (*ara* and the imperfect) that this means "nothing else but death"—which sounds against the traditional future of the immortal Heracles—may all hint at the hero's transformation to come—a *lusis* of a different kind. As Heracles spells out the ironic misprision of his earlier understanding of *lusis*, he may be performing another misunderstanding of how his narrative in unfurling (Heiden 1989: 144–48).

[7] As in Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 1, as discussed by Thomson 1935 and Tierney 1937 (but not by Fraenkel 1950).

As in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, this climactic use of *lusis* has been prepared for earlier in the play. The messenger arrives in the first scene and proudly announces (180–81):

δέσποινα Δηάνειρα, πρῶτος ἀγγέλων
ὄκνου σε λύσω.

Queen Deianeira, I will be the first of the messengers
To release you from fear.

Deinaeira's fear is a keynote of the opening of the play (Heiden 1989: 22–30). As in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the messenger appears to bring good news, and hopes to get a reward for being the first to bring it. This *lusis* too will turn out to be grotesquely misplaced, and, indeed, as soon as the second messenger arrives, Lichas, it is precisely this first messenger who will lead to the tragic fears of Deianeira being redoubled (with all their terrible consequences) by outing Lichas as a liar and thus informing the queen of the significance of the arrival of Iole, her rival for the affections of Heracles. It is another release that is no release.

Deianeira's response is to attempt to win back Heracles' desire for her with the drugs of the centaur's blood, which turns out to be a poison rather than a love philtre. She announces her plan to the chorus as something λυτήριον, "bringing release," "leading to a solution," "freeing" (554). (The noun in this line with λυτήριον may be λύπημα, as the manuscripts have, and has been defended by Stinton and most recently Lloyd-Jones and Wilson; or λώφημα, as Jebb proposes, or νόημα, as Campbell suggests and Easterling prefers: in each case the emphasis is on the first word of the line—her desire for *lusis*.[8]) The ambiguity of *pharmaka* as cure and poison is very well known in tragedy, and is redoubled here by its interweaving with the narrative of misplaced hope for *lusis*. So in language that looks back to Deianeira's hopes and forward to Heracles' despair, the chorus celebrate with desperately misplaced enthusiasm (653–54):

νῦν δ᾿ Ἄρης οἰστρηθεὶς,
ἐξέλυσεν ἐπιπόνων ἀμερᾶν.

Now Ares stung to madness
Has set free from the days of toil.

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[8] Lloyd-Jones and Wilson 1990: 162; Stinton 1976: 138; Easterling 1982: 142–43 *ad* 553–54; Campbell 1881.

"Ares stung to madness" is a "lyrical condensation"[9] of the military narrative of the sack of Oechalia, which we have just been told (359–65), but *oistretheis* implies not merely "roused to fury" [Jebb], but also "stung by the madness of sexual desire," a motive force which not only drives Heracles, but, it is suggested, also dangerously impels Deianeira. So, as Easterling notes, the object of the verb "has set free," "released," could be taken to be Heracles, whose *ponoi*, "labours," are now at an end, but it also indicates release for Deianeira and the chorus from their anxiety about Heracles (Easterling: 1982: 154 *ad* 164). It need hardly be emphasized that their delight here in such release will prove temporary and desperately misguided.

In the light of this language, Deianeira's first description of how she came to marry Heracles may turn out to ring with greater significance than she can appreciate. In her opening speech, she describes how Heracles won her by fighting off her horrific suitor Achelous. ἐκλύεταί με, she says, "he set me free" (21). She herself immediately underlines the uncertainty of this narrative of salvation (26–27): τέλος δ' ἔθηκε Ζεὺς ἀγώνιος καλῶς, / εἰ δὴ καλῶς, "But, Zeus, who decides conflicts, brought an end in a good way, if in fact it was in a good way." The freedom that marriage to Heracles brings is also a constant round of fear, she explains. Yet even this doubt of hers will turn out to be inadequate. The word *telos*, as so often, marks the further irony.[10] We are progressing towards her killing of Heracles and her own tragic death—a *telos* she cannot here anticipate. (Both *telos* and *kalôs* anticipate Heracles' own recognition of the twists of his fortune [1169–72] with which I began). Once again, the language of salvation in *ekluetai* (21) actually signals one step in a more complex, destructive narrative.

In *Electra*, we see a similar patterning of the language of *lusis* leading to a marvelous climactic moment. It begins with the chorus trying to control Electra's wild and constant outpouring of grief by pointing out that such wailing can provide no ἀναλυσίς κακῶν, "dissolution of evils" (142). The language of *lusis* immediately looks towards a consummation, an end of trouble. Electra herself picks up this language first with Chryosthemis, as her sister prepares to take Clytemnestra's offerings to the grave of Agamemnon. Electra asks with great bitterness (after describing Agamemnon's mutilation) (446–48): "Do you think these offerings can bring release [λυτήρια] for her? It is not possible." *Luterion*, "bringing release," "freeing" [from guilt], here sarcastically marks Clytemnestra's necessarily failing attempts to extricate

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[9] Campbell 1891 cited by Easterling 1982: 154 *ad* 653.

[10] See Zeitlin 1965; Lebeck 1971: 68–73; Goldhill 1984—for the multiform language of *telos* in the *Oresteia*, which often seems to lurk behind Sophocles' tragic Greek.

herself from the situation she has created for herself. Electra recognizes the impossibility of her mother getting *lusis*. We recall this when Clytemnestra prays her unpleasant, muffled prayer for the death of her own child (634–59). She calls her prayers λυτηρίους, "bringing release," "freeing" (635). As with Jocasta's prayer for *lusis* in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Clytemnestra's *luterious euchas* here receive an instant, ironic answer from Apollo in the form of the arrival of a messenger, whose news will bring downfall to the one who prays, though at first it seems to be the perfect answer to the prayer. In this case, the false tale of the death of Orestes, as told by the Paidagogus, also involves a story of unloosing, as the charioteers "loose" [ἔλυσαν (755)] Orestes' bloody body from the reins of his chariot. As Electra has demanded, Clytemenstra's hopes for *lusis* prove all too false.

In her agon with Clytemnestra, however, Electra justifies her father's sacrifice of Iphigeneia (574–75): οὐ γὰρ ἦν λύσις / ἄλλη στρατῷ πρὸς οἶκον οὐδ' εἰς Ἴλιον, "For there was no other solution for the army either for home or for Troy." Electra's rhetoric in this scene is so aggressive and forceful that even the chorus who support her, comment that they are not sure of the justice of her case (610–11). (Even Jebb notes that in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* Agamemnon speaks as if it were possible, if shameful, to go home. No such scruples for Electra [1984 *ad* 573]). Here while it may be true that Agamemnon could find no *lusis*—his is the *locus classicus* of the tragic double bind—it scarcely simply exonerates him. Electra shows no hint of upset over the sacrifice of her sister. Chrysothemis, for her part, points out to Electra that there is no point in dying horribly, even if they get a noble name (1005–6): λύει γὰρ ἡμᾶς οὐδὲν οὐδ' ἐπωφελεῖ / βάξιν καλὴν λαβόντε δυσκλεῶς θανεῖν, "For it gives us no release or benefit to win a noble report and die infamously."[11] Both passages put pressure on the term *lusis*: what could bring "release"? What would be the right form of "release"? So Electra cries to the now recognized Orestes (who wishes she would restrain herself) (1246): "Aiaiai, you recall the nature of my evil, which cannot be veiled, cannot be released [καταλύσιμον],

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[11] Finglass 2007 *ad loc* against Jebb suggests the two verbs here must be parallel ("gives neither advantage nor benefit") and takes λύει in the sense of λυσιτελεῖ. It is better to see a more fluid semantic drift between the two verbs, λύει and ἐπωφελεῖ. Since λυσιτελεῖ takes the dative, the phrase λύει ἡμᾶς is hard to hear as λυσιτελεῖ. Hence Elmsley emended ἡμᾶς to ἡμῖν. The emendation is not necessary. The sentence first suggests "release," but ἐπωφελεῖ retrospectively encourages the sense of benefit to be heard: the whole question is whether release is really a benefit. In *O.T.* 316–17 τέλη λύῃ is used—uniquely, according to Jebb—for λυσιτελῇ, but for an extended reading of the continuing ambiguity of such usage see Guay 1995 especially 40–47.

cannot be forgotten." The question is mounting: what would release mean for Electra?

All this by way of preparation for the last stunning use of the vocabulary in the play. The children have led Aegisthus to uncovering the slaughtered body of their mother, his lover, and Orestes has taunted him. Aegisthus asks to be allowed to say a few last words, but Electra, who has been told to shut up by every character in the drama, now demands silence from her enemy: "Do not let him speak more!" she snarls (1483–84). He must be put to death as soon as possible, and given a humiliating burial. This, she says, is her only release (1489–90):

> ὡς ἐμοὶ τόδ᾽ ἂν κακῶν
> μόνον γένοιτο τῶν πάλαι λυτήριον.

>   Know that this alone for me would prove
> To bring release for the woes of the past.

These are the last words of Electra. Her very last word is to anticipate "release." We have read enough already in Sophocles and in this play to scent the grim irony in this word.[12]

The ending of the *Electra* play is a celebrated problem.[13] The absence of the Furies, the absence of any moral judgment or even discussion of the matricide, the absence of any indication of what happens after Orestes leads Aegisthus back into the darkened house, have led to a debate since the nineteenth century which shows surprisingly little sign of dampening down. Few today would follow Jebb and the nineteenth-century Germans, and declare that Sophocles is simply looking back to the days of Homer in celebrating Orestes, who follows the god's command unproblematically to become the "happy matricide" (as Schlegel unhappily termed him, as if he were a character in a Lehar operetta like the "Merry Widow"). It is hard to repress the qualms of the *Oresteia*, especially when Sophocles' play echoes Aeschylus's great trilogy so often and so pointedly.[14] It is equally hard to imagine how an unproblematic

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[12] March 2001 writes on this line: "There is no trace of uncertainty in her words." This confuses the tone of Electra (whatever it is taken to be) with the audience's understanding of her words. Finglass 2007 surprisingly makes no comment on the irony of any example of *lusis* in the play.

[13] See, each with further bibliography, Winnington-Ingram 1980: 217–47; Segal 1981: 249–91; Batchelder 1995: 111–140; Ringer 1998; March 2001—who goes against the modern trend wholly in her support for the unproblematic acceptability of the matricide.

[14] For the interplay between the final scene of the *Electra* and the *Oresteia*, see Goldhill 2003: 172–76.

matricide could be conceived within any moral system: it is significant that Orestes who is held up as an example for Telemachus in the *Odyssey* is never said to have killed his mother in Homer. And after the *Oresteia*, there are no examples of Orestes being promoted as a straightforwardly positive role model. For Winnington-Ingram (following Rohde, and thus creating another German genealogy), the Furies are to be seen as forces within the personalities of Orestes and Electra, allowing, encouraging, driving on the children's murderous intent. The play here displays the dangerous consequences of a passionate commitment to violent revenge: the Furies within. Even if one resists the psychological bent of Winnington-Ingram's reading of the Furies, the ending of the play must at least be seen to provoke a question of judgment from the audience, a worry about what happens next, about what to think of the matricide and its consequences for the murderers. Sophocles anticipates such concerns with the finely self-reflexive last word of the play, τελεωθέν, "finished," "consummated," "fulfilled," against which the open-endedness of the play's final questions resounds.

The play has undoubtedly focused on the figure of Electra; it has raised the question of what release might mean; it has shown us the misplaced hopes of humans in release, and the despair of finding it. It has shown us Clytemenstra offering prayers of release that rebound against her. And it has shown us how like her mother Electra has become (and recognizes herself to have become [619ff]). In this last scene we have seen her acting out a role with false words and a false face to lead a man to his death—just like her mother. How then does the play end for Electra? It is not an issue of trying to divine how the silent Electra feels in the play's final moments: Segal darkly imagines "her spiritual and inward isolation"; March, more fluffily, sees her as "vibrantly alive and present on stage" (Segal 1981: 266–67; March 2001: 229). The point is rather that the hope for release has become ironized by the play's treatment of the vocabulary of *lusis*. So what is the release that Electra can expect? It seems to me typical of Sophocles' searing and provocative dramaturgy to leave us with that question—and to provoke it by her last word.

The problem of Electra's end finds physical form whenever the play is performed. There are at least three possible things for Electra to do at the end of the play. One is to leave the stage with Orestes, to enter the house and thus take part in the murder directly (something Strauss and von Hofmannsthal refuse her in the most brutal and disturbing way by having her dance herself to death on stage as the murder takes place inside the house[15]). This exit fully makes her complicit with all the questions of what happens to the matricide(s)

[15] For a full discussion of Strauss's *Elektra* see Goldhill 2002:108–77.

after the death of Aegisthus. Second, she can leave the stage with the chorus, being returned as it were to the world of the women, the collective of female support. This exit would offer a different image of her future. Aeschylus, of course, returns her to the house *before* the revenge, to separate her from Orestes—and to wait inside, inactive, according to the Greek normative model of a how a good girl should behave. Euripides takes a different route and marries her off—separating her from the farmer and setting her up with Pylades. Both Euripides and Aeschylus allow straightforward narratives of a projected future for Electra (however upsetting the Euripidean solution has seemed to modern audiences). Or, third, she could stay on stage. This is the route most modern productions take. This leaves her in the strange space she has inhabited throughout the play, just outside the house, a space crossed by others on their way to the palace or the tomb of Agamemnon, a liminal space—where she inevitably is, in terms of standard Greek models of female behavior, out of place. Leaving Electra on stage emphasizes most strongly the ironic uncertainty of what release she can hope for and where she can hope to find it. Staging the final moments of Electra in this play focuses precisely on what sort of release the director thinks Electra should have.[16]

The strongly marked pattern of misplaced hope for release and ironic fulfilment of such hopes in these three plays helps us read the full weight of two other examples of the vocabulary of *lusis*. In *Antigone*, Creon is finally persuaded by Teiresias's prophecies, the chorus's careful warnings and his own misgivings to try to save Antigone. As he rushes from the stage towards the cave, he declares (1112–14):

αὐτός τ' ἔδησα καὶ παρὼν ἐκλύσομαι.
δέδοικα γὰρ μὴ τοὺς καθεστῶτας νόμους
ἄριστον ᾗ σῴζοντα τὸν βίον τελεῖν.

I myself bound her, and I myself will be there to release her.
I suspect that it is best to go through life
Preserving the established laws.

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[16] We can only guess how the first performance or any other ancient production staged this last scene: all three closures discussed here are possible for the ancient theatre too. For the record, Mantziou 1995: 194 suggests Electra stays on stage; Finglass 2007 *ad* 1510 (against Calder 2005) prefers her to enter the palace with Orestes and Pylades. The characters leave with the chorus in e.g. *Philoctetes* (and possibly Creon in *Antigone*: ἄγοιτ' "lead me away" (1339) could be addressed to the chorus, rather than "attendants" as Griffith assumes). Most ancient plays end with an emphatic *exeunt*, but this does not mean that the option of Electra staying on stage is impossible.

This is a climactic moment, not least because it is so rare for a Sophoclean hero to change his mind. It is, of course, thoroughly Sophoclean that he has learned too late, and his hope to alter what he has set in motion will prove vain. Antigone has been walled up in a cave: the language of binding and setting free therefore extends to a more metaphorical sense. He wants to "undo" what he has done—and will be quite incapable of so doing. Indeed, "being there" (παρών), he will be stabbed at by his son, Haemon, who then kills himself over the already dead body of Antigone (1231ff). The language of the final couplet here with which he indicates his change of mind, hints at the disasters to come. He suspects or fears (δέδοικα) that it is best to go through life preserving the established laws: the phrase τὸν βίον τελεῖν can also be translated to "end one's life." He wants to undo what he has done, but his last words as he runs out anticipate the death he will not be able to prevent (Griffith 1999: 313 *ad* 1113–14).

There has been scant if striking anticipation of the language of *lusis* in the *Antigone*. The chorus in one grimly prophetic stanza (594–97) lament the long history of the Labdacid family and its constant round of god-sent miseries. οὐδ' ἔχει λύσιν, they conclude ringingly, the family "has no release." Ismene, a survivor like Chrysothemis in *Electra*, expresses her diffidence at the beginning of the play with a proverbial sounding phrase perhaps drawn from the sphere of music (39–40): "Poor sister, what more could I contribute by trying to loosen [λύουσ'] or to tighten [ἅπτουσα]?" The expression is a familiar one and sees circumstances as a lyre string (or possibly a knot) which can be tightened or loosened (Griffith: 1999: 129–30 *ad* 39–40). It is a way of saying "whatever I do," and indicates Ismene's unwillingness to act in any direction (which leads to her survival as well as her failure to influence the course of action at all).[17] In the exodus, Creon picks up the language of *lusis* briefly again to lament the death of Eurydice his wife. Twice (1268, 1314) he uses the word ἀπολύεσθαι to mean "die" ("be dismissed from life"): not only could he not undo what he had done, but it has led to further acts of "loosening" that add to his woes.

"Undoing" one's former wrongs is what Neoptolemus hopes to do at a key turning point of the *Philoctetes*. Neoptolemus has the bow of Philoctetes. Odysseus has arrived and taken the boy off stage towards the ship, leaving the chorus with the enraged and hopeless Philoctetes. Then, suddenly, Neop-

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[17] Ismene's hesitation is nuanced, but not contradicted, either by her willingness to take responsibility for Antigone's action after the event (536), which Antigone rejects; or by Creon's initial willingness to punish both girls (789), an option that he rejects shortly afterwards.

tolemus, pursued by Odysseus, hurries back on to the stage. Odysseus (and the audience) is desperate to know what he is intending to do. Neoptolemus declares (1224):

λύσων ὅσ᾽ ἐξήμαρτον ἐν τῷ πρὶν χρόνῳ.

I intend to undo all the mistakes I made before.

This is a bold statement of intent. When he announces he has come with fresh words, Philoctetes is unimpressed: he has heard such deceit before (1268–70). When Neoptolemus promises that this time he is telling the truth, Philoctetes retorts that the boy had seemed convincing before (1271–72). It is harder than Neoptolemus imagined to undo what he has done: once trust has been lost by verbal deceit, how can words put it back together again? So he gives back the bow: a deed, an *ergon*, rather than a word.[18] But Philoctetes immediately wants to use the bow to kill Odysseus, Neoptolemus's leader, and the boy has to restrain the hero from murder. But even now, with this token of trust in hand, Philoctetes cannot be shifted from his hatred and his determination to return home. Neoptolemus cannot undo all his former mistakes, and keep the plot on track. As Neoptolemus is forced to recognize in the face of Philoctetes' angry rejection (1373), λέγεις μὲν εἰκότ᾽, ἀλλ᾽ ὅμως, "What you say is reasonable; but nonetheless. . ." It takes the arrival of Heracles to redirect Philoctetes towards Troy. The climactic use of λύσων, first word of the line, announces Neoptolemus's intention to "undo" his mistakes, but the unfurling of the plot shows just how difficult it is to achieve that aim. λύσων marks not just Neoptolemus's hope for release but also his continuing failure to determine and control the moral crises in which he is caught.

Earlier I said that the only *lusis* that is inevitable and sure is the *lusis* of death, and we have come across more than one occasion where the vocabulary of *lusis* is brought into contact with the vocabulary of *telos*, which means both "end," "fulfilment," and "death." There are a surprising number of uses of the language of release or undoing in the context of death in Sophocles: we have already seen Heracles' death as his "undoing"/"release" (*Trach.* 1171); the "undoing" of the body of Orestes from the chariot (*Electra* 755); the dismissal from life of Eurydice (*Ant.* 1268, 1314). The background may be the familiar Homeric expression λύειν γούνατα, or γυῖα "loosen the knees" or "the limbs" in the sense of killing (rather than desire); but (in the spirit of Jebb) it might be worth recalling the immense pathos of the simple words of Shakespeare's

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[18] For the contrast between words and deeds in this play, see Segal 1981: 328–61, followed by many later critics; on the actions, see Taplin 1971, also followed by many later critics.

broken man, King Lear: "Come, unbutton me here." So Deianeira in the *Trachiniae* says farewell to her marriage bed and (923–24) τοσαῦτα φωνήσασα συντόνῳ χερὶ / λύει τὸν αὐτῆς πέπλον, "She said such things, and with intent hand undoes her own dress. . ." Undoing the dress precedes stabbing herself in her side. Similarly, Oedipus, as he approaches his transcendent death in the *Oedipus Coloneus*, sits εἶτ᾽ ἔλυσε δυσπινεῖς στολάς, "then he undid his dirty robes" (1597). In *Antigone*, Eurydice before her death by suicide, also sits and (1302) λύει κελαινὰ βλέφαρα, "undoes her eyes into darkness"—a striking expression, where the distant echo of λύει γούνατα anticipates her death. (With a different nuance of λύειν, Creon in *Oedipus Tyrannus* announces that the oracle has indicated that they must either exile the murderers of Laius or "requite slaughter with slaughter," φόνῳ φόνον πάλιν λύοντας (100–1): the addition of *palin* here "back" as well as the repetition of *phonos* helps the sense of requital: not just "undo" a wrong, but "atone for," "pay back"). *Luein* in Greek, as with "undoing" in English, can always imply either a "solution," or an "untying" or a "downfall"—or all three. Sophoclean language works with this potential ambiguity to explore the fragile control humans have over their narratives.

The language of *luein* and death that I have been discussing is synthesized strikingly in a wonderful phrase at the end of the *Oedipus Coloneus*. The chorus, encouraging the children to stop their lamenting at the death of Oedipus, sings (1720–21): ὀλβίως γ᾽ ἔλυσεν τὸ τέλος, ὦ φίλαι, βίου, "In true blessedness, friends, he dissolved the end of life." My translation struggles to get the full sense here. *Luein* together with *telos* might be thought to imply "profit" (as at *Oedipus Tyrannus* 316), but here rather seems to mean "put an end to," "dissolve." In which case, one might expect the object to be simply βίον, as at Euripides *IT* 692 λῦσαι βίον. So Jebb translates "he hath found a blessed end, friends," which gives an easy sense, but forces *luein* to have an impossible meaning. *Telos biou*, what's more, is a normal phrase for "death" (and *telos* can connote "the end of life," "death" on its own). The strangely overladen phrase seems to be suggesting not simply that Oedipus has died, but that Oedipus has gone beyond the limits—as indeed he has with his god-driven transformation. He has transcended both life and death in his becoming a hero: he has "blessedly dissolved the end of life." The dense language of the chorus captures the mystery of Oedipus's end, his passing.[19]

My final example of a marked use of *luein* in Sophocles also comes from the *Oedipus Coloneus*, and it occurs in one of the most haunting and difficult

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[19] This sense of mystery has, of course, been prepared for throughout the messenger scene cf e.g. 1585, 1601–5. On Oedipus's end, see Easterling 2007.

expressions in this most difficult of plays (See Wilson 1997: 165; Markantona-tos 2007: 224–30). The messenger tells us of Oedipus's final moments. Before his mysterious end comes, Oedipus bids farewell to his daughters, Antigone and Ismene. He recalls the sufferings they have experienced looking after him and comments (1615–19):

> ἀλλ᾽ ἓν γὰρ μόνον
> τὰ πάντα λύει ταῦτ᾽ ἔπος μοχθήματα.
> τὸ γὰρ φιλεῖν οὐκ ἔστιν ἐξ ὅτου πλέον
> ἢ τοῦδε τἀνδρὸς ἔσχεθ᾽, οὗ τητώμεναι
> τὸν λοιπὸν ἤδη τοῦ βίου διάξετον.

> But indeed only one word
> Undoes all these hardships.
> Love—you could not have more from any man
> Than from me, whom you will be without
> Now, as you pass the rest of your life.

Oedipus suggests that all the girls' difficulties are dissolved by the single, magic word *philein*: he is looking back over their life together and forward to the problems to come. Nineteenth-century Christian readers (and their modern humanist heirs) are keen to translate *philein* as "love" (as I have, unwillingly, above). *Philein* here, however, should not be assimilated simply to a transcendent modern western theological notion. At very least, *philein* implies mutual bonds of obligation and duty within a family and an extended range of kinsmen and friends, rather than a predominantly affective tie. But it should not be forgotten that in the previous scene Oedipus has re-iterated the curse on his son, Polyneices, which will take the murderous feud between *philoi* into the next generation. Ismene, who has arrived "not without difficulty" (328), has told Oedipus of the machinations of his *philoi*—and she will suffer from them, before being saved by Theseus. What is more, for an incestuous family such as Oedipus's, to extol the values of "family ties" is always an ambivalent virtue. There is indeed no man who could be more *philos* to Antigone and Ismene than Oedipus, their father/brother.[20] *Oedipus Coloneus* was produced at the end of Sophocles' life, well after the *Antigone*: the future of Antigone, τὸν λοιπὸν τοῦ βίου, where in Sophocles' play at least the one word, *philein*

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[20] Note Ismene's opening address (*Oedipus Colonus* 324–25): ὦ δισσὰ πατρὸς καὶ κασιγνήτης ἐμοὶ ἥδιστα φωνήματα. . . "O most sweet double names of father and sibling." *Dissa*, "double," "ambiguous," is tellingly left out of Jebb's translation ("Father and sister, names most sweet to me. . .") Ismene reminds us—to Jebb's distaste, apparently—of the doubled and confused genealogy of the family, as she brings the news of yet another intrafamilial disagreement.

plays such a destructive motivating role, has already been written. The *Oedipus Coloneus* draws also on the power of its great tragic predecessor, to layer Antigone's imagined future with her own bleak intensity. When Antigone exits (1168–72) towards Thebes to try to stop the intrafamilial slaughter—sent on her way to her own death graciously by Theseus (1173–77)—the sense of further impending disaster is emphatic. This is a deeply moving scene, and the daughters and Oedipus embrace in a tearful farewell. But should we not hear yet again a worrying note in the promise of "release?"

The language of *lusis* and its cognates is a repeated concern in Sophocles. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Trachiniae*, and *Electra* there is an extended semantic network where release is hoped for and promised and sought after, but which turns out to be impossible to find, misplaced as a hope, or ironically and destructively fulfilled. In *Antigone* and *Philoctetes* single, marked uses of the term are also replete with the ironies of reversal and misguided expectations. Release becomes associated with death through the language of "undoing." Even in the *Oedipus Coloneus*, where Oedipus's heroization gives a potentially less despairing conclusion to a tragic narrative, the language of *lusis* weaves an ambivalent thread through the text. In Sophoclean theatre, humans struggle to escape from the tragic circumstances in which they find themselves, and struggle to exert control over their own narratives. The language of *lusis* in Sophocles reveals the self-deceptions within such struggles, and the constantly failing attempt to find the solution to the *aporia* of human action. The drama of undoing.

THE ANALYSIS OF SOPHOCLEAN IRONY

Now, there is no more familiar topic in Sophoclean criticism than dramatic irony. Integral to the critical treatment of this foundational trope is the rhetoric—the performance—of superior knowledge. We—the audience in the theatre or its surrogate, the critic—watch a man whom we know to be the killer of Laius try to find out who the killer of Laius is; we watch the man whom we know to be married to his mother, gradually discover the miserable secrets of his identity. The audience is placed in a position of superiority to the characters on stage and responds to the action through this knowledge: irony lets an audience see itself as *le sujet qui sait*.[21] So, paradigmatically, the critic who outlines irony for the reader reveals what is unknown (to the characters

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[21] This dictionary understanding of dramatic irony runs through into modernist criticism as much as in more traditional readings: "What is in plain sight of the audience is hidden from the participants," Segal 1995: 162; "It is only for the spectator that the language of the text can be transparent at every level in all its polyvalence and with all its ambiguities," Vernant and Vidal–Naquet 1981: 18.

on stage, to the reader who did not previously perceive such an irony, or even to the author, who may not have recognized the fissures in his own text). My discussion of Sophoclean *lusis* has followed precisely such a strategy. It has opened up the density of Sophoclean language by critical *analusis*, to reveal the implications in characters' language that they do not appear to realize, to show to an audience how words come to mean more than has been recognized. But I also want now to build back into this discussion something of the dark undertow, the sense of necessary failing, which Sophocles' repeated recognition of the misplaced certainties of the human rhetoric of *lusis* should encourage in the critic.[22]

There are two interwoven strands in this undoing. On the one hand, I will be looking at how Sophocles ironizes irony: that is, he encourages an uncertain and destabilized comprehension of the terms integral to the standard model of dramatic irony, such as "we," "know," "learn," "again." On the other, I will be expanding on the dangerous ordinariness of the language of Sophoclean irony. *Luo* and *lusis* are common, unexceptional words, frequent in the poetic and prose record from Homer through the classical era and beyond.[23] In what follows, my four (carefully chosen) examples will be of apparently casual or functional comments, clichés, standard phrases—all forms of expression that seem to resist too close an attention: everyday words.[24] Sophocles, however, has an uncanny ability to suggest the horror lurking in mundane language, its predictive or even causal force. But I use the word "suggest" advisedly. The question that emerges from these readings is not simply "is there irony here?" so much as "how far should we see irony here?," "how sure can we be of the boundary between the casual and the causal?" In this way, Sophocles turns back against the reader (critic, audience) the fiction of superiority and controlled knowledge. These examples of flickering irony leave the reader in a far more uncomfortable position than the strong model of dramatic irony supposes. Each of my four test-cases will be concerned, then, with the *limits* of our reading of Sophoclean irony.

My first example will prove to be the most extreme limit case and concerns the word ὅπου in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The *Oedipus Tyrannus* is the *locus classicus* for the most developed sense of what is meant by dramatic irony in

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[22] Although Romantic irony has its own configurations, de Man 1996 has been particularly influential in contemporary discussions of irony. In response to a generally very helpful set of remarks from the anonymous reviewer for *TAPA*, I wish to emphasize gently the performativity of my argument here, in undoing the analysis of irony.

[23] And *luo* is the most common modern paradigm with which to learn Greek verbs, of course: one could say that the orderliness of undoing is basic to our learning Greek.

[24] See Easterling 1999 for the complexity of "plain words" in Sophocles.

Sophocles, and this play has been extensively analyzed in terms of the audience's superior gaze, aimed at the knowledge claims of the central character as he seeks after knowledge. The central term *oida*, "I know," introduces a theme of vision on the one hand—it means etymologically "I have seen"—which is fully played out with the blind prophet Teiresias who knows, and the final blinding of Oedipus, when he learns the truth of his identity; on the other hand, *oida* echoes in the many puns on Oedipus's own name, showing how "knowing [where]" is at the heart of his narrative. The play constantly suggests that it is the moment that you have a superior feeling of knowledge about yourself that you are most vulnerable to self-deception and to self-destructive decisions. "Seeing" is associated with false knowledge (as we look on at Oedipus's tragedy); the play shows Oedipus, the seeker after knowledge and control, failing in the most basic knowledge of himself, and offers a paradigm for all readers in their pursuit of knowledge; Oedipus shows us a man who thought he knew where he was at the cross-roads, and challenges everyone to recognize an uncertainty about the road of life, about where we are going (Segal: 1981: 207–48; Goldhill: 1986: 199–221).

Within this familiar general reading of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, I want to return briefly to the entrance of the messenger, who arrives apparently in response to Jocasta's prayer (924–26, above pp. 22–23). His questions take the simplest form of expected introduction—where is the palace, where is the ruler for whom I have a message?—and fill them with unexpected meaning, partly by the versification, which allows two lines to end with the word ὅπου, "where," partly by the jingling rhymes of ὅπου with Οἰδίπου, partly by the play on words of knowing μάθοιμ'/κάτισθ' and the word "Oedipus," which emphasizes the role of knowing encoded in the etymology of the king's name. The arrival of the messenger is already and immediately ironized by the timing that makes it the answer to Jocasta's prayer, but Sophocles makes his language, also apparently simple questions, into a richly ironic, thematically dense, and shockingly programmatic utterance. These lines powerfully encourage us to hear a profound, dislocating irony in the word ὅπου and to hear it even in the name of the king. For Oedipus, "to know where" is the fundamental riddle of his life.

But does this mean we should hear ὅπου with ironic overtones when it occurs later in the play? Does "where" become a sign of irony? When the *exangelos* narrates Oedipus's screaming rampage through the house, he describes the king seeking (1256–57):

μητρῷαν δ’ ὅπου
κίχοι διπλῆν ἄρουραν οὗ τε καὶ τέκνων.

where he might find
The double, motherly furrow of both himself and his children.

This description is certainly richly layered. “Double” (*diplên*) reminds us of Jocasta’s worry about what words have “double” power, now with the added sexual frisson of her double role as wife/mother, already hinted at in the messenger’s earlier questions (see above pp. 22–23). The “furrow” (*arouran*) recalls the language of the wedding ceremony, here at its greatest transgression. Even *te kai* “both and” echoes with the surrounding repetitions of *teknon* and *tekoi* “children,” “give birth” (1250). What, then, of *hopou*? Is Oedipus just looking for Jocasta, or does his word echo with the puns of the messenger? Now he knows and struggles to articulate the position of the “wife no wife,” does the word “where” recall all the anxieties of place in the play? How marked a term can “where” become? So, Oedipus begs Creon to expel him (1436–37):

ῥῖψόν με γῆς ἐκ τῆσδ’ ὅσον τάχισθ’, ὅπου
θνητῶν φανοῦμαι μηδενὸς προσήγορος.

Throw me out of this land as quickly as possible, where
I may enter into conversation with no human.

As in the messenger’s opening speech (924/926) and in the *exangelos*’s narrative (1256), *hopou* appears in the last foot of the iambic line, a rather odd position, especially with so strong an enjambement, though less odd for Sophocles than the other tragedians.[25] Oedipus wants to find a place for himself, a place beyond language, beyond address (προσήγορος). Here too, then, we might

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[25] At *Antigone* 318 and *Ajax* 103 it is the final word of a line, in sharp stichomythia. See also *Trachiniae* 40 and *Philoctetes* 443. Sophocles is much more free than Aeschylus or Euripides in ending a iambic line with a conjunction, especially ὅτι. There are at least 50 examples in the seven extant texts. The enjambments at *Philoctetes* 263 or 312 (or *Oedipus Colonus* 14, 17, and 495) are especially striking. By contrast, in the six extant plays of Aeschylus, there are only two examples: *Agamemon* 1371, where the dramatic effect of the distorted expression in the mouth of the confused chorus is clear, and *Choephoroe* 98 (ὅτι). In the seventeen plays of Euripides, there are only 11 examples of such conjunctions in the final foot of a non-lyric line, and never used with the boldness of Sophocles. ὅπως *Medea* 322, *Heraclidae* 420; *Troades* 1008; *Phoenissae*. 1318; *Iphigenia at Aulis* 56; ὅταν *Heraclidae* 77, *Trooades* 880; 1236; ὅτι *Medea* 560; *Phoenissae* 1617. The single example of ὅπου comes in the phrase οὐ γὰρ ἔσθ’ ὅπου (*Heraclidae* 186), which makes for a less jarring usage than the examples in Sophocles. Other strong enjambments are also much rarer in Euripides. The fact that the *Prometheus Vinctus* alone has eleven examples (61, 259, 322, 328, 377, 384, 463, 725, 793, 839, and 951), including six cases of ἵνα, I take to

ask what echoes are to be heard in *hopou*. It seems to me that it is reasonable on the one hand to say that the *Oedipus* (of all plays) encourages an intensely paranoid attention to language, and, further, to recognize that "whereness" is a major theme of the play; but it is also reasonable, on the other hand, to say that *hopou*, "where," can slide back into being an unmarked term: *hopou mê* and the future is, after all, an extremely familiar idiom in Sophocles, as elsewhere, for the wish to be removed from human contact. That is, even if we agree that *locus* is a thematic focus of the *Oedipus*, we might disagree whether therefore every use of spatial vocabulary becomes charged with such thematic weight. Or, better, we might disagree *how* charged each use of spatial vocabulary seems. How ordinary is Oedipus's use of *hopou*? The judgement of a reader is a judgement not of grammar but of how ironic you think the plea to be elsewhere must be, and how precisely evoked by the simplest of words, "where." Or: how ordinary can language be in the *Oedipus*?

The *Oedipus Tyrannus*, then, not only dramatizes an uncertainty of knowing but also requires its audience to perform such uncertainty by making the most mundane of words a site of instability. We don't quite know where we are in this *locus classicu*s. . .

As with knowing, so with learning. My second example concerns διδάσκειν in the *Trachiniae*. I have already mentioned the entrance of the messenger (above p. 25). His simple opening utterance, "Queen Deianeira, I will be the first to release you from fear" (180–81), turns out to say far more than might be expected, partly because of the thematically significant false promise of "release from fear," where both *luein* and fear become thematically significant terms in this tragedy, and partly because his self-description as "first of messengers" anticipates the arrival of more. There are indeed several more messengers in this tragedy (Kraus 1991). Lichas arrives from Heracles; Hyllus brings back to his mother the news of Heracles' death; the nurse brings on the story of Deianeira's death. The lies of Lichas (together with their exposure) lead us to beware the force and motivation of messages. Hyllus's tale, addressed to Deianeira, drives her to commit suicide. Deianeira's suicide is narrated by the victim's companion and carer, deeply moved. The power and significance of words plays a major role in this play and necessarily frames this discussion.

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be further evidence that the play was finished after the death of Aeschylus. See Griffith 1977: 96, for discussion and bibliography. Sophocles' versification, as with his scene construction, is often far more novel and experimental than his contemporaries, though this rarely enters the discussion of "radical tragedy."

When Hyllus enters, his first line seems as anodyne and functional as possible. His mother tells him that the nurse, a slave, has uttered a good piece of advice, like a freeborn woman, and he replies (64):

ποῖον; δίδαξον, μῆτερ, εἰ διδακτά μοι.

"What is it? Teach me, mother, if it may be taught to me.

The phrase δίδαξον εἰ διδακτά is a very familiar formula ("tell me if it may be told"), and it is precisely echoed later in the play by the chorus: δίδαξον εἰ διδακτόν, "teach if it may be taught" (671). The imperative δίδαξον also occurs in the play elsewhere (233, 394) when Deianiera asks for information about Heracles from Lichas, and when Lichas asks Deianiera for instructions as to what he should say to Heracles from her. But the word *didaskein*, in its intensive form *ekdidaskein*, "to teach fully," or more commonly in the passive form, "to know fully," "really to know," will also become a specific marker of the difficult narrative of the young Hyllus. Hyllus's words drive his mother to suicide; but the boy then learns the truth of the centaur's involvement in the plot and lies bitterly weeping on his mother's corpse: ὄψ' ἐκδιδαχθείς (934), "he had learnt fully all too late." This phrase seems to capture not only Hyllus's fate but also that of Heracles and Deianeira: "'Finding out is a key theme in this play'" (Easterling 1982: 93 *ad* 143), as the very first lines of the play (ironically) announce. Indeed, this is the problem of many Sophoclean characters: the destructiveness of partial knowledge and the lateness of full understanding.

Hyllus's education continues when he encounters his father, who makes him swear to obey him, and then instructs him first to set fire to him on the pyre on Oeta (though Hyllus begs off setting the torch himself [1210–16]), and then to marry his concubine, Iole. Hyllus is deeply shocked. His father demands obedience and reminds him that it is just to do what a father asks (1244). Hyllus retorts with passion (1245):

ἀλλ᾽ ἐκδιδαχθῶ δῆτα δυσσεβεῖν, πάτερ;

Am I then to be really taught to commit impiety, father?

What Hyllus is to learn from his experience in this play remains a searching question.

His first request, then, "Teach me…if it may be taught" may come to seem to be less simply functional than it may have first appeared; rather, it may announce the most pressing problem of Hyllus's narrative. Even so, at what point does an audience begin to hear a heightened significance in the standard vocabulary? When the chorus uses the same phrase can it really escape the

perils of Hyllus's narrative? Hyllus's desperate question to his father about impiety (1245: *ekdidachthô dêta*) may powerfully echo the nurse's summation of his folly (934: *ops' ekdidachtheis*), but does this retrospectively color the *chorus*'s politeness (671)? With the example of ὅπου in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* the question was whether or how much the messenger's ironic language infected the later uses of the term; with διδάσκειν in the *Trachiniae* the question is whether or how much the earliest uses of the term become marked as anticipatory by their later ironic use. It seems to me that Sophocles' play opens the possibility of hearing a grim irony as Hyllus enters; but the degree to which such apparently unmarked usage can flair into significance retrospectively is extremely hard to determine. Hence the audience's uncertainty—provoked, as it were, by a half-heard irony in the mundane exchange of son and mother, echoed by the chorus' formulaic language. Perhaps.

From the half heard to the unsaid. My third example concerns the lack of the first-person plural in Antigone's language. *Antigone* dramatizes the tensions between differing perceptions of the collective and between different claims of duty. This invests the language of "the common," τὸ κοινόν, with a particular force. *Koinos* is important in *Antigone* from the "fertile duplicity"[26] of its first line, where Antigone addresses Ismene as κοινὸν αὐτάδελφον Ἰσμήνης κάρα, "Of common kin, my very sister, dear Ismene." *Koinos* means "common" or "shared," and can imply either "shared blood" (that is, "kin"), or a more political sense of communality: "commonwealth," "the common good." In the *Antigone* it is used to stress the common, shared fate of Polyneices and Eteocles (56–57, 147), which stems from their common blood (201–2), the awful family politics of incest and fratricide. But it also cues the political question of what are the ties and obligations that bind a community together—what is common? The central question which joins and separates Creon and Antigone is whether the shared blood of the family outweighs the hostile intent of a brother towards the political community.[27]

It has also been noted by several critics that there is, particularly at the beginning of the play, "a dense cluster of duals . . . describing natural but frustrated *pairings*—murderous brothers, disunited sisters, sister and dead brother, dying bride and groom."[28] What is common becomes a question of what two share, should share or cannot share. This is conjoined with a re-

[26] The phrase is from Steiner 1984: 208.

[27] For the modern political and critical implications of this, see Goldhill 2006. On the general issue of communality and Sophocles' language see the excellent Budelmann 2000.

[28] Griffith 1999: 121 *ad* 2–3. See Segal 1981: 185–86.

petitive use of the numbers two and one. So, for example, Ismene describes how δυοῖν ἀδελφοῖν ἐστερήθημεν δύο, μιᾷ θανόντοιν ἡμέρᾳ διπλῇ χερί "we two together were deprived of two siblings together, both dying together on one day with a double hand" (13–14). The dual nouns and verbs, together with the number "two" and the adjective "double," overlay different images of doubleness to contrast with the "single day" of their conjoining. She picks up the same terms shortly later where her "two brothers together on one day destroying one another, wretched together, in a common doom with hands against one another" (55). Again, the dual nouns, verbs and adjectives, together with the numbers and words of commonality and mutuality construct a language of multiple doubling. Even Creon talks of the brothers dying "by a double fate on a single day" (170–71).

This sense of pairing and separation, doubleness and singleness is worked out in a surprising linguistic way with Antigone and Ismene, which has not been noticed by the critics. Antigone may address her sister in fulsome terms of sharing in the opening line; but by the end of the first scene, they are rowing furiously. When Ismene tries to claim she shared in her sister's transgression, Antigone dismisses the claim of sharing explicitly (539: "I did not share this," οὔτ᾽ ἐγὼ ᾽κοινωσάμην; 546: "you cannot share my death," μή μοι θάνῃς σὺ κοινά.) This progressive separation of the sisters is anticipated in a fascinating habit of Antigone's language. She never uses a first-person plural verb to refer to herself and another person (and indeed only uses the form once altogether, to refer to herself, in her last iambic sentence), and she never uses the word, ἡμεῖς," we/us" in any case. When she first refers to the sufferings of Ismene and herself, she says τῶν σῶν τε κἀμῶν. . .κακῶν, "yours and my evils," (6) with a first-person singular verb. Creon's announcement has been σοὶ / κἀμοί, λέγω γὰρ κἀμέ, "for you and for me—I mean *me*" (31–32). Polyneices is τὸν γοῦν ἐμὸν καὶ τὸν σόν, "actually mine and yours" (45). This three–fold repetition of "mine and yours" instead of "ours" is part of her rhetoric of persuasion, but also constantly anticipates the separation of the sisters away from a "we" into a contrasting "you" and "I." Twice, in not especially emphatic places, Antigone uses the dual of ἐγώ in oblique cases (νῷν), once in her first address to Ismene (3), and once referring to the brothers of "the two of us" (21), the barest hint in the opening lines of Antigone trying to bring the sisters together. But her general unwillingness to align herself linguistically with her sister—or anyone else—as a pair or as a group plays a role in the increasing isolation of Antigone through the play, and in the expression of her extreme commitment to self. When she describes herself as a metic with no home among the alive or the dead (850–52), she is expressing the ἐγώ, who can form a "we" neither with her family on earth nor with her family in Hades.

Antigone famously claims to have been born to συμφιλεῖν rather than to συνέχθειν (523), "to join together in mutual bonds of duty and obligation" rather than to "join together in hatred." Yet joining together with others, ironically enough, is exactly what she finds hardest to do. The lack of the word "we" in her vocabulary may seem to mark this. But how confident can a reader be in such an argument from silence? When does an *absence* of a word become recognized as an ironic lack? As with my first two examples, the temporality of reading is an integral factor in the fragile and uncertain recognition of irony.

Much of what I have been discussing with these three examples concerns re-reading: turning back from the end of a play to realize the full significance of what had appeared simple. How, then, does Sophocles treat the act of turning back? My final example of the precarious boundaries of irony is a single word from the *Philoctetes*, which indicates the act of "turning back." Odysseus accompanies Neoptolemus as he rushes back on stage "to undo all the mistakes I made before" (1224; see above p. 32). Odysseus asks (1222–23):

οὐκ ἂν φράσειας ἥντιν' αὖ παλίντροπος
κέλευθον ἕρπεις ὧδε σὺν σπουδῇ ταχύς;

Will you not indicate on what journey you are again
Returning in this way with such keenness and haste?

This is a superb example of the density of functional language in Sophocles' dramaturgy. First, the form of the question with its rather polite use of *an* and the optative indicates Odysseus's control: worried, polite, keen to persuade, he does not yet threaten or bully Neoptolemus. Second, the lines indicate for the audience (and the actors) that Neoptolemus is not doubtfully re-treading his route towards Philoctetes, but is doing so with intent (σπουδῇ) and speed (ταχύς). This is in contrast with his hesitations about what to do in the previous long scene. Third, the question itself indicates that Odysseus does not know what Neoptolemus is doing, which both cues the discussion to come, and marks the breakdown in their relationship, its shifting dynamics as now Odysseus is made to follow the boy. αὖ, "again," often occurs with πάλιν, but here also specifically marks the repetition and difference of the path taken: here they are again travelling between ship and cave, but this time, Odysseus fears, it is different in intent.

But the word on which I wish to focus is *palintropos*, which I translated with ἕρπεις as "returning," but which means "turning again," "turning back." Unlike the previous three tests-cases of the irony of the ordinary, this is a rare word, and its use here is distinctive. First of all, it shows a similar ambiguity to *polutropos*, the first adjective applied to Odysseus in the *Odyssey* and a

term closely associated with the hero (as well as the trickster god, Hermes, the only other figure in the Homeric poems to be called *polutropos*).[29] As was noted at least from Plato onwards, *polutropos* in the first line of the *Odyssey*, implies both "of many turns" in the sense of "many journeys," and "of many turns" in the sense of "very wily." That is, *-tropos* can connote both an idea of physical journey and an idea of mental attitude. κέλευθον, "path," ἔρπεις, "you go," and ταχύς, "quickly," all suggest the element of journeying. σπουδή, "keenness," which is also picked up by much of the dialogue to come, indicates here a change of mind, a change of attitude. The ambiguity is, of course, significant (as in *Odyssey* 1.1): the change of heart is demonstrated by the change of path.

By the fifth-century, τρόπος has also come to mean a "style" or "manner" of rhetoric. In this play, with its emphasis on different types of speech performances from lies to shrieks, from oracles to false messages, what Odysseus is also announcing is a change of verbal performance on the part of Neoptolemus—no longer deceptive and plotting but now sincere and exposing. This anticipation will be fulfilled (1267ff) as Neoptolemus tries (and fails) to persuade Philoctetes that he now is speaking the truth. *Palintropos* expresses Neoptolemus's backing away from *dolos*, "trickery"—and how hard it will be to put back together trust through words alone. *Palintropos* conceals a question as well as a narrative to come: can one "turn back" the clock once trust has been destroyed?

My reference to the Homeric use of *polutropos* was not merely for the semantics of *-tropos*. When the character of Odysseus uses a word that sounds so similar to such a particular and significant epithet of the character of Odysseus in Homer, it sets up a potential intertextual reading.[30] Of course, each time Odysseus (or any other Homeric character) appears on the fifth-century stage, their figuration is worked through their Homeric inheritance. Odysseus in the *Philoctetes* has to be understood through his Homeric paradigm. The echo of the Homeric *polutropos* is here telling, however. We are watching the first

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[29] On *polutropos*, see Pucci 1982; Ellmann 1982; Goldhill 1991: 3–5 (with further bibliography).

[30] Many critics have argued for an influence of Heraclitus on the language of Sophocles in this play (where a bow is life). I have wondered whether one might just hear an echo of *palintonos*, that key Heraclitean term, here in *palintropos* as Neoptolemus carries the bow back. One may also hear an echo of Parmenides fragment 6, itself possibly an echo of Heraclitus: πάντων δὲ παλίντροπός ἐστι κάλευθος, "Of all things, the path is backwards turning"—from a passage on the confusion of humans. Parmenides' recognition of human confusion as a "backwards turning path" would suit Neoptolemus's return here.

collapse of Odysseus's powers of persuasion over Neoptolemus; in this play, which revolves around the return of a hero from an island far from any human inhabitation, this is a turning point, as Neoptolemus returns to Philoctetes to re-negotiate his return, though Philoctetes will insist on a *nostos* to his own island and refuse to go to Troy. The programmatic use of *polutropos* in Homer announces the return of Odysseus from his wanderings thanks to his powers of guile. The use of *palintropos* here, the re-writing of *polutropos*, signals the failure of Odysseus's guile and a new crisis in the narrative of return.

Palintropos is also picked up in the dialogue that follows. Odysseus asks Neoptolemus (1231) "What action are you going to take? Know that a certain fear is creeping over me." Neoptolemus replies (1232):

παρ᾽ οὗπερ ἔλαβον τάδε τὰ τόξ᾽, αὖθις πάλιν. . .

From whom I took this bow, back again…

Odysseus immediately interrupts with "O Zeus, what are you going to say?" in order to stop the finality of Neoptolemus's pronouncement that would confirm Odysseus's fears. This leaves *authis palin* hanging in the air. It points out that underneath the phrase *au palintropos* is not just a return journey but a giving back, a paying back, a reversal of a (corrupted) exchange. So Odysseus asks (1247–48) "How exactly can it be just to give up again (πάλιν μεθεῖναι) the things you actually got by my plan?": the word *palin*, recalling *palintropos* and *authis palin*, again stresses the physical act of "returning" the bow which underlies the "returning" of Neoptolemus to the cave.

Finally, the return of Neoptolemus and Odysseus also encourages the audience to return to the previous scene, where they watched Neoptolemus stand in silence in the face of Philoctetes' rant, confess an onset of pity for the outraged hero, but then leave with Odysseus and the bow. What may have appeared as a hardening of the young man's intent, now appears as a struggle of conscience; where we might have wondered how sincere Neoptolemus's expressions of sympathy for Philoctetes were, now his rejection of Odysseus retrospectively validates the honesty of his expressed feelings. The return, Neoptolemus's change of heart, leads the audience to re-evaluate his earlier responses. *Palintropos*, and the repetitions of *palin, au, authis*, also cue the audience's re-consideration of Neoptolemus's *tropos*: a sign to re-read.

Odysseus's words, as he enters with Neoptolemus, can be shown, then, to resonate with a semantic density, to match their functional complexity: there is an ironic excess of signification in Odysseus's language, echoing beyond his apparent immediate expression. But to what degree does the depth of reading offered here stand in tension with the functional role of the line? This difficulty can be made vivid by looking at how David Grene renders the

line in his best-selling translation of the play: "You have turned back, there is hurry in your step. Will you not tell me why?" (Greene and Lattimore 1954: 242). It is, of course, hard to hear the semantic range of *palintropos* in the resolutely ordinary "you have turned back," and consequently hard to see the line as anything other than functional, indeed totally mundane. So we might ask: how much of the ironic excess of signification is to be appreciated in the rushed entrance? How expansive a moment of irony is this? Here, too, the temporality of reading is integral to the uncertain recognition of the irony: how much irony is recognized here depends on how much of the buried life of the word is accessed in the moment—the process—of reading, how much attention is paid to the passing word, as the men cross the stage.

Each of these four test-cases has focused on particularly everyday language—"know," "where," "teach," "we," "back"—and on apparently functional expressions, whose role in the drama appears to be primarily to progress the action. In each example, we have tried to trace the ironic horror that Sophocles lets emerge from the ordinary. In contrast with the great heroes and grand actions that dominate tragic theatre, apparently trivial, unnoticed, and mundane words turn out to conceal a buried life of dangerous, excessive meaning, over which the characters have little control. The word in passing, as Oedipus found at the feast, is never just passing. It is always all too late that we learn fully the significance of the language we use and hear.

But these four examples were also chosen because each reflects on the dominant model of tragic irony as establishing the audience in a position of secure and superior knowledge. "Knowing" and "teaching" become terms of tragic misprision rather than comfortable recognition; the sense of place of an audience, a sense of collectivity are set at stake. The very act of re-reading, integral to irony, becomes invested with excessive and provocative significance. What is more—and this is most important for my argument—each of these test-cases raised a deeply problematic question about the very recognition of irony. I wrote above "*we have tried to trace* the ironic horror. . ." because in the process of exploring Sophoclean irony at work, in each case our attempt to trace irony came up against the uncertainty of how far to press Sophocles' language, to what degree to perceive irony in the language of the unfolding tragedy. In contrast to the dominant model of tragic irony, in these examples the audience cannot see itself simply as *le sujet qui sait*, but finds itself implicated in the doubts, uncertainties, and fissures of tragic language. "We dwell within," as Rilke writes (1948, 2: 308). Like a Sophoclean character, each reader is faced with the question of how far to go.[31]

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[31] The scholia on *Oedipus Tyrannus* 264 seems to allude to the awkward boundaries of irony: αἱ τοιαῦται ἔννοιαι οὐχ ἔχονται μὲν τοῦ σεμνοῦ, κινητικαὶ δέ εἰσι τοῦ θεάτρου. αἷς

The hardest question, however, remains how we should bring together the systematic picture of the failure of human attempts to control narrative with this more edgy, flickering uncertainty. How should we reconcile the knowing recognition of irony and the uncertain recognition of possible irony; the audience as *le sujet qui sait* and the audience conscious of the *glissement* of its knowing? Does the slipperiness or instability traced through the limit cases of potential irony frame and undercut the systematic understanding of *lusis*? Or should the examples of limit cases be treated as exceptions, which do not significantly affect the thematics of undoing?

 In contemporary critical discussion of tragedy, there is a fierce though not always intelligently articulated debate about the openness of meaning, about how much ambivalence there is in tragedy. Irony (inevitably) introduces instability into discourse—since what is said is always a mask for other meanings—and critical reading involves negotiating this instability. Such a negotiation can have very different emphases—stressing, for example, coherence, or, by contrast, stressing the stress-fractures in such coherence. But a critical reading that sees only instability, indeterminacy, doubt, is unlikely to take adequate account of the political, normative power of the plays, just as a critical reading that sees only the expression of ideology or the declaration of a message is unlikely to take adequate account of the slipperiness of tragic discourse and the response to it. What I have tried to show in this paper is first that Sophocles is much concerned with humans' lack of control over narrative and language, and with the structures of self-deception which inform the misplaced attempts to achieve such certainty. But, second, that the instability introduced by the ironies in Sophocles' texts is itself a condition of possibility of critical disagreement—critical disagreement for which resolution will only ever be temporary: οὐδ' ἔχει λύσιν.

Both the lack of control figured in the language of *lusis* and the challenge to the audience's secure sense of understanding need to be seen within a political dimension, however. The audience is a central and integral element in Athenian democracy—privileged as the voting, sovereign body of citizens.[32]

καὶ πλεονάζει Εὐριπίδης, ὁ δὲ Σοφοκλῆς πρὸς βράχυ μόνον ἅπτεται πρὸς τὸ κινῆσαι τὸ θέατρον. There are several comments in the scholia that note irony (with various forms of expression)—*ad Oedipus Tyrannus* 34, 132, 137, 141, 372, 928, and 1183—but this seems to go further in its recognition of discomfort—the potential lack of solemnity in irony, which is none the less moving—and in its recognition that Euripides, in contrast to Sophocles, goes too far with it.

[32] On the audience of democracy, see e.g Ober 1989; Lanni 1997 (with the added background on Lanni 2006); Sinclair 1988; Hansen 1991; Boegehold and Scafuro, eds. 1994; Finley 1983; Ober and Hedrick, eds. 1996; Cartledge, Millett, and Todd, eds. 1990;

Democracy depends on its citizens listening, evaluating and judging arguments put in front of them; discussing and predicting the flow of events in their decision-making. Tragedy is the institution where the reliability of these processes is held up to most consistent scrutiny. The audiences on stage make error after error of understanding, decision-making is repeatedly flawed, and, the final twist, the audience in the theatre is not only awed, emotionally overcome by what is staged before them, but also finds itself implicated by the drama in its own narrative of uncertainty. How tragedy is political has become one of the most heated debates of the contemporary academy. The most profound questioning of democracy, I would suggest, is not to be found by searching through the tragic texts for any direct engagement with specific political policies or concrete issues of foreign or domestic strategy. Tragedy's politics is to be found rather in the searing exploration of the basic elements of democratic principle: responsibility, duty, masculinity, decision-making, self-control, and so on. In the case of the Sophoclean ironies I have been discussing, the shaky ability of characters to predict and understand their own narratives, and the shaky ability of the audience fully to understand the ironies of the language articulated in front of them, holds up a mirror to the audience in the theatre—a mirror which gives an uncomfortable view of the audience's political role as judging, evaluating citizens. Tragedy asks questions of the self. And Sophocles' ironic tragedy asks a painful question of the confident self of fifth-century democracy. Where so much of the fifth-century enlightenment, especially in the decision-hungry democracy, is concerned with producing answers, Sophocles reminds his audience again and again that in the human world secure solutions are harder to find: οὐδ' ἔχει λύσιν.

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