Redoubling and Emblematic Syntax in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*

Verbal repetition is characteristic of Sophocles' style. While some have faulted his tendency to repeat vocabulary carelessly or without immediately discernible purpose (overview in Easterling), various examples of Sophoclean repetition display familiar poetic or rhetorical devices, such as anaphora, polyptoton, and *figura etymologica,* all of which may serve to embellish the play and emphasize important themes. (For repetition in tragedy generally and in certain plays, see Pickering. Easterling invokes the broad figure of *traductio,* arguing that repetition often stresses key themes in a particular passage if not an entire play.) However, the rationale behind many instances of "unfigured" repetition remains unclear (terminology from Wills). Nevertheless, a number of verbal repetitions display a less widely acknowledged device, namely, emblematic or mimetic syntax, which may be described as collocation of words that by virtue of their relative position enact, reflect, or complement their meaning. While such verbal playfulness has been readily recognized in later writers—such as the ostentatious figure-poems of Simias of Rhodes and the clever works of the Latin poet Ovid (see Lateiner)—emblematic syntax may serve to enhance repetition also in Sophocles' tragedies.

Examples of emblematic syntax selected from *Oedipus Rex* demonstrate the poet's sustained attention to repetition. Sophocles artfully exploits the mimetic potential of certain words and phrases, such as *autos* (e.g., 284), *diploos* (288–89, 1249–50, 1256–57, 1320), and *isos* (425); and of certain prefixes and prepositions, including not only *anti* (306), but also *hyper* (380–81) and *para* (503–504). Analysis of such terms reveals two types of mimetic syntax: the first is evident in terms with meanings that accentuate the basic fact of repetition, such as "self, the same," "twofold, double," "equal," and "in turn"; while terms of the second type iconically

exemplify the relative position of a repeated element, such as "beyond" and "beside." Additional principles can be induced from the evidence. Wordplay of various kinds, including emblematic syntax, may serve to mark a special moment, such as introduction of an important character; and it commonly enjoys prominent placement at beginning or end of a speech or verse. Furthermore, repetition tends to engender more repetition.

The tragedy's first mention of Tiresias presents obvious wordplay as well as subtle irony. The chorus juxtaposes Tiresias' name with Apollo's after giving both the same title, which in a third line is bestowed also on Oedipus.

ἄνακτ᾽ ἄνακτι ταῦθ᾽ ὁρῶντ᾽ ἐπίσταμαι

μάλιστα Φοίβῳ Τειρεσίαν, ...   285

... **ὦναξ**, ...

Line-initial polyptoton is enhanced by immediate reference to sameness ("Lord like lord") and by eventual reiteration ("my lord"). As poet and audience know, blind Tiresias and Apollo "see" alike, while Oedipus does not.

Oedipus replies to the chorus' rhetorical flourish with a pointed *figura etymologica*: "I dispatched ... *double* dispatches," meaning he sent either two escorts to escort Tiresias, or one to the prophet and another to Delphi.

ἔπεμψα γὰρ Κρέοντος εἰπόντος **διπλοῦς**   288

πομπούς· ...

Verb and cognate object are emphatically placed at the beginning of successive lines, while doubling is referred to at line's end, pushing the clause-concluding noun to the next line in violent enjambment while prefiguring twofold repetition. This brief exchange, three verses delivered by each speaker (284–86, 287–89), highlights a kind of "tautology" and "diplosis."

The act of "sending," *pempō,* propels much of the plot as well as unmistakable wordplay (especially 288–89, 306–309; cf. 71, 149, 278, 556, 696, 705, 789, 860–61, 951, 1475, 1518). Once Tiresias arrives, Oedipus informs him of messages exchanged with Apollo, varying his recent *figura etymologica* by combining a participle of *pempō* with an iconic compound of the verb, then later reiterating another compound, turning twofold repetition into triple crescendo, as done earlier with *anax.*

πέμψασιν ἡμῖν **ἀντέπεμψεν**, ἔκλυσιν 306
μόνην ἂν ἐλθεῖν τοῦδε τοῦ νοσήματος,
εἰ τοὺς *κτανόντας* Λάϊον μαθόντες εὖ
κτείναιμεν ἢ γῆς φυγάδας **ἐκπεμψαίμεθα**.

When we dispatched a message, he in turn dispatched one: release
from this illness would come only
if we would rightly identify Laius' killers
and kill them or as exiles from the land dispatch them.

Forms of *pempō* open and close Oedipus' account of the oracle. In the opening verse, verbal repetition is emblematically prefigured by the prefix *ant(i)-, "*in turn." The oracular reply is a

kind of "antiphony." However, *anti* is ambiguous, suggesting with potential irony not only response but also antagonism.

Works Cited

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