

Sophocles' Stagecraft: Some Insights from the Fragmentary Plays

Almost thirty years have passed since Verdenius greeted Radt's edition of Sophocles' fragments as "an accomplishment deserving of our admiration and gratitude which will provide an important service to Sophoclean scholarship" (1982: 164, my translation). So far, however, the availability of this additional evidence has not made the impact one might have expected: many, if not most, studies of Sophocles are still concerned exclusively with the seven complete plays. Due to the great number of very small, unconnected pieces, the fragments are likely to overwhelm a reader who encounters them all at once. Therefore I restrict my investigation to the group that is easiest to come to terms with: the thirty fragmentary plays whose subject is either certain or very probable (Radt 1983: 223; I will include a list on the handout). This material complements our understanding of Sophocles in several ways; in this paper I focus on insights pertaining to matters of stagecraft.

The most famous contributions to theater history from Sophocles' lost plays are the reports that the playwright appeared on stage in his *Nausicaa* and *Thamyras*. More surprisingly, the orator Aeschines is said to have acted the role of Oenomaus in a revival of Sophocles' play by that title, though only in a rural venue and --according to our prejudiced source, Demosthenes-- very badly indeed. Later sources elaborate on the story by explaining that Aeschines fell off his chariot during a performance, badly hurting himself. For an actor playing Oenomaus, a mythical king so confident in his horsemanship that he challenged all suitors of his daughter to compete with him in a chariot race, such an incident would surely have been ignominious. In terms of stagecraft, the implication that Oenomaus drove a chariot on stage deserves note. By

contrast, the race between Oenomaus and Pelops cannot have been shown on stage but must have been narrated in a messenger report similar to the fictitious report of Orestes' death in a chariot race in *Electra*. In fact, the events of both plays are explicitly linked in the choral ode at *El.* 505-515.

A similarly rewarding point of contact exists between the extant *Philoctetes* and the fragmentary *Athamas*: a seemingly insoluble situation is solved by the appearance of Heracles. In both cases the method for Heracles' entrance is a matter for debate.

An excellent candidate for an entrance on the *mechane* by a different hero is Perseus' first appearance in *Andromeda*. This play may even allow with a unique glimpse of Sophocles' mastery of tableau: a group of vases showing Andromeda exposed to be devoured by the sea monster very likely reflects one of its scenes.

Traces of another visually striking scene survive in F **441a and **442 of *Niobe*: Apollo and Artemis are standing on the roof of the stage building, shooting arrows down inside at the daughters of Niobe, while a human observer is reacting to the spectacle with horror and pity (as in the opening of *Ajax*). By analogy, it seems likely that the playwright used some "special effect" when bringing on Achilles' ghost in the *Polyxena*.

A staging challenge of a different kind results from Sophocles' choice to dramatize mythical events that take place during a god's infancy in several of his satyr plays. F 314, 277-82 of *The Searchers* provides a clue how he tackled the difficulty of having an actor credibly embody a newborn baby.

For some characters Sophocles employed special masks. The description of Io's metamorphosis in *Inachus* is compatible with the appearance of an actor wearing the special cow mask listed by Pollux for this role. (It suits Aeschylus' *Prometheus*, too.)

Pollux also mentions masks for female characters with short hair, which were employed to signal their low social status. F 659 of Sophocles' *Tyro* implies that this speaker's mask had short hair. In addition, Pollux specifies that the mask used for Sophocles' *Tyro* was black and blue, a powerful visual signal of the physical abuse the heroine has been suffering and a play on her name (F *648).

Bibliography

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