

Reporters in Sophocles: The Rhetoric of Bad News

In both the *Trachiniae* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, a nameless reporter enters unexpectedly with significant news for characters on stage, and both reporters are explicit about their motivation for bringing the news: they hope to materially benefit from being the first to announce what they believe to be good news. In the *Trachiniae* the Old Man comes on stage to tell Deianeira that Heracles will be returning home safely; in *Oedipus Tyrannus* the Corinthian enters to tell Oedipus that his father is dead and that Oedipus is now king of Corinth. The idea that sharing information can, or even should, benefit the person doing so recurs repeatedly in Sophocles, particularly in *Oedipus Tyrannus* in which both Teiresias and the Shepherd state that they do not want to share information that brings no benefit. Similarly, Orestes in *Electra* notoriously justifies lying about his own death in order to execute his plan by invoking the benefit those lies can bring. In these cases, the benefit they mention probably means something less concrete than it does to the Old Man and the Corinthian, but it is not unlikely that the idea that sharing information is potentially beneficial or harmful can lead to a character deriving the motivation for sharing news from an explicit goal of material gain.

The *Trachiniae* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, however, raise an important question: how does a reporter share bad news while still reaping benefits? In these plays, both reporters discover, while on stage, that they possess further information which is pertinent to the other characters on stage, but which is also potentially troubling (Oedipus's abandonment as an infant in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Iole's parentage in *Trachiniae*). Both try to turn this situation to their advantage, but only the Old Man in the *Trachiniae* is successful in securing the desired reward for his services. In this paper, I explain the Old Man's success by arguing that he makes savvier use of rhetorical tactics than the Corinthian in order to cultivate a sense of mutual connection with

Deianeira. In these two situations, the reporter's success is dependent not just on what he says but on how he says it.

In *Oedipus Tyrannus* the Corinthian's rhetorical strategy remains single-mindedly focused on trying to turn everything into good news for Oedipus. As Frederick Ahl has argued, the Corinthian's primary goal seems to be securing Oedipus's return to Corinth because that is what he believes will benefit him the most (Ahl, 1991, 170-3). As a consequence, he downplays the death of Oedipus's (foster) father in favor of the news that Oedipus can take the throne of Corinth. Later, he frames his announcement that Polybus and Merope are not Oedipus's parents as a reason Oedipus should not be afraid to return to Corinth. Although he is less aware of the full destructive potential of his information about Oedipus's parentage than is the Old Man in the *Trachiniae* about Iole's parentage, the Corinthian still seeks to minimize any negative aspect of his news.

In contrast, in the *Trachiniae* the Old Man initially intends to tell Deianeira only of Heracles's safe return. However, when he witnesses Lichas's deception of Deianeira regarding Iole, he makes the choice to challenge Lichas face-to-face and reveal his deception to Deianeira, presumably in hopes of increasing his reward from her. Because the Old Man is aware of the potential dangers in the news he shares and that Deianeira may not receive the news well, he is able to develop his rhetorical strategies to compensate for that. Rather than downplay the unpleasantness of his news as the Corinthian does in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, he downplays instead his desire for a reward and deploys a rhetorical strategy that shares commonalities with the illusion of a "simple man relating the unvarnished truth" which Josiah Ober sees as an underlying theme in the use of rhetoric in Athenian courts (Ober, 1989, 175-6). This method casts the speaker as fearful or inexperienced, and implicitly disparages the language of the

opponent as less direct and presumably less trustworthy. This strategy creates a posture for the Old Man that stands in direct contrast to Lichas, whose dishonesty he is revealing, and establishes a sense of common cause between the Old Man and Deianeira. Unlike the Corinthian, the Old Man's skillful use of rhetoric does secure him a promise of reward from Deianeira. Despite the play's tragic turn, certain characters survive and even thrive: for the Old Man his rhetorical skills enable him to benefit benignly from another's grief.

Bibliography

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Ober, Josiah (1989) *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.