

Defining Deception: Applying Information Manipulation Theory to Sophocles

Deception, particularly deceptive speech, plays a critical role in Greek tragedy, from Clytemnestra's hidden plot against Agamemnon in the *Agamemnon* to the Paedagogus's speech in Sophocles' *Electra*. Much of Greek tragedy relies in some way on deception as a dramatic device. However, it can be a struggle at times to define what constitutes deception and deceptive speech in ancient drama. While it is easy enough to point to obvious lies as clear examples of deception, it becomes more difficult to sort out other, less obvious, instances of deception, especially those that do not involve direct lies.

Recent work on deceptive speech has shown that it operates on multiple axes, beyond simple truth versus falsehood. It is entirely possible to say something completely true and still deceive somebody. We can see this sort of speech in play in Greek tragedy. For example, in the *Trachiniae*, Lichas answers Deianeira's questions about Iole's true identity in an evasive, but truthful, manner. Nothing he says is a lie, but it is clear that he intends to hide from Deianeira Iole's true identity and significance.

By turning to Information Manipulation Theory, we can provide ourselves with a toolbox for analyzing deception and understanding how these elements intersect in a dramatic context. Information Manipulation Theory, first developed by Steve McCornack, seeks to explain deception in human communication by building on H.P. Grice's Cooperative Principle. Briefly, the Cooperative Principle states that people make a "conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange" (Grice 1975, 45), and this principle can be broken down into four maxims (known as Gricean maxims): Quality, Quantity, Relevance, and Manner. McCornack develops this further by articulating that deception occurs when a speaker violates one of these maxims but does so

covertly. The listener, however, remains unaware of the violation and are misled because they believe the speaker to be communicating in a cooperative fashion.

This paper will focus on applying Information Manipulation Theory (IMT) to two specific scenes in the work of Sophocles: the exchange between Deianeira, Lichas, and the Old Man in the *Trachiniae*; and Oedipus's narrative about how he came to Thebes in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how IMT can bring to light how less explicit types of deception operate in these dramatic texts and thus elucidate the subtle, destabilizing effects of such deceptions.

Bibliography

Grice, H.P. (1975) "Logic and Conversation". *Syntax and Semantics*, vol 3, 41-58.

McCornack, Steven. (1992a) "Information Manipulation Theory". *Communication Monographs* 59, 1-16.

McCornack, Steven. (1992b) "Empirical Test of Information Manipulation Theory". *Communication Monographs* 59, 17-25.