

## πέλει in the First Stasimon of Sophocles' *Antigone*

Given the exhaustive attention which has been lavished on seemingly every square inch of the famous “Ode to Man,” the first stasimon of Sophocles *Antigone*, it is surprising that the unusual main verb πέλει which ends the meticulously crafted opening of the ode (πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδὲν ἄν- / θρώπου δεινότερον πέλει·, 332-33) is basically ignored. Answers to the fundamental question “What is the ode about?” (as Podlecki 2013: 665 puts it) stem from the various interactions of human beings with each other and with the world around them over the course of the ode. But the apparent detachment of the ode from its immediate surroundings (e.g. Goldhill 2012: 87-88), as important to its meaning as the contents of the song, arises from *how* things are said as much as from *what* is said. The universalizing picture of humanity in the ode, which applies to everything and yet to nothing specific in the *Antigone*, arises in no small part from the cyclical, generalizing undertones of the verb πέλω at the end of the first sentence.

πέλω is a relatively common verb in Aeschylus, where it appears over 30 times, but it occurs more rarely in Sophocles and Euripides (9x in each). Whereas πέλω appears once each in a handful of Euripides' plays and fragments, its distribution in Sophocles is strikingly uneven: it appears four times in the *Antigone*, once in five other plays (*Electra*, *Ajax*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Trachiniae*, and one fragment) and not at all in the remaining two extant plays (*Philoctetes*, *Oedipus Tyrannos*). Wherever πέλω is used in the *Antigone* (333, 874, 990, 1027), it appears in a generalizing statement, either alongside a form of the indefinite pronoun ὅστις (874, 1027) or in a gnomic statement about a class of individuals (333, 990). While the *Lexicon Sophocleum* does not include the *Antigone* in its list of citations where the etymological sense of “turning” is active (via the root πελ- / πολ-), πέλει in *Antigone* 333 has a different sense than either of the more

common linking verbs that might have been used, εἶμι or γίγνομαι. What does πέλει add to the opening of the first stasimon?

First, it colors the meaning of the sentence. The meaning(s) of δεινός in particular has rightly been singled out as key to understanding this verse and the song more generally (representative presentations include Griffith 1999: 185, Segal 1981: 153). But the use of the unusual verb πέλει, with its etymological undertone evoking the cyclical nature of human experience and of the world around us, strengthens and caps the generalizing meaning of the rest of the sentence. This same idea reappears at the end of the first strophe, as the farmer's conquest of the earth is given a timeless cyclical quality by its association with the seasons: ἰλλομένων ἀρότρων ἔτος εἰς ἔτος / ἰπείω γένει πολέων (340-41). Both the genitive absolute construction and the root of the last word in the strophe, πολέων, recapitulate the cyclical sense of the first main verb, πέλει. This repetition creates a ring around the opening strophe as a whole centered on this cyclical motif. Indeed, a recursive structure is a particularly effective way to dramatize this notion.

Second, πέλω creates a symmetrical, highly elaborate chiasmic structure of related sounds that underlines the meaning of the opening statement in a complementary way. The first and last words of the first sentence, πολλά and πέλει, have the same consonants in the same positions. In between, forms of δεινός bracket the central expression κούδεν ἀνθρώπου, which is composed primarily of o-type sounds with an ου diphthong at the beginning and the end and two [vowel]-v sounds in between. The all-important central word, ἀνθρώπου, bridges the gap between the first and second cola in the strophe, casting the “man” in the “Ode to Man” as “a binding force” (Ditmars 1992: 12) in the opening of the first stasimon. The orderly sequence of sounds that

structures this sentence, which is capped by πέλει at the end, is as much a part of its meaning for an audience hearing the play performed as the lexical meaning of the words.

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