The Power of δράω: Verbs of "Doing" in Sophocles

This paper explores how Sophocles imbues the verb δράω ("to do") with special and consequential value that other verbs of "doing" (ἐργάζομαι, ἔρδω, ποιέω, πράσσω, and ῥέζω) lack. In fact, in each of Sophocles' seven tragedies, there are many instances where he consciously and carefully distinguishes between δράω and non-δράω verbs of action, and the tension between these two types of "doing" often leads to the dramatic and, indeed, tragic results of his plays. I will be focusing on three such examples in the Sophoclean corpus: the "conscious" δράω, the "right" to δράω, and the "moral" δράω. In each of these three applications of the verb, it is clear that δράω denotes important, monumental, and potent action where the speaker and/or subject is aware of the full repercussions of his or her deed, while other verbs of "doing" frequently denote unwitting, insignificant, ineffective, and improper behavior, or express a desire by the speaker to distance himself from the action being described. The verb δράω is the lifeblood of δρᾶμα, and the conflict between this verb and other verbs of "doing" is at the heart of Tragedy.

The first type of δράω I will discuss is that of the "conscious" δράω where Sophocles uses the verb to comment upon a character's agency in or awareness of performing action that holds consequence and weight. In the *Trachiniae*, for example, Deianeira's initial ignorance and subsequent realization of the fatal consequence of sending the cloak to Heracles are marked by a shift from non-δράω verbs to δράω verbs. In her conversation with the Chorus describing her plan to send the cloak, Deianeira uses non-δράω verbs to describe her planned actions (587, 597) while the chorus—the voice of caution—uses δράω verbs (588, 602). The Trachinian women are serving as a contrast to Deianeira, and the different verbs used by each are epitomizing that distinction: the chorus demonstrates their consciousness that uninformed action can lead to bad

outcomes while Deianeira believes that her deeds do not amount to the weight and significance of δράω. She is, in her own words to Lichas, merely participating in action indicative of πράσσω (600): inconsequential, not lasting, and immaterial. But when she first begins to question her initial judgment and acknowledges that sending the cloak may have more severe consequence than she had assumed, Deianeira begins to use δράω (664, 684, 688). In short, the moment of Deianeira's comprehension is signaled by her use of δράω. She has moved from being an unsuspecting agent of dramatic action to one who is aware or, at the least, more aware than before.

The second type of δράω I will discuss—what I am describing as a character's "right" to use δράω—is used when a character or group are aware of the efficacy and significance of δράω, but because of their position or limited usefulness, they cannot or choose not to participate in dramatic action. A prime example of this is Ismene in the *Antigone*. In the first scene of the play, Ismene deliberately distances herself from the verb δράω unlike her sister. For Antigone, to break Creon's law prohibiting Polyneices' burial is worthy of δράω (e.g., 35, 70, 443, 469). She embraces the gravity and consequence that the verb entails. In contrast, Ismene does not think it is appropriate for a woman to lay claim to such power and therefore, in this scene, she uses non-δράω verbs (68, 78) and explicitly disconnects herself from the clout of δράω (τὸ δὲ / βίᾳ πολιτῶν δρᾶν ἔφυν ἀμήχανος, 78-79).

The final application of δράω this paper will discuss is the "moral" δράω where characters infuse this verb with moral implications. For example, in the *Philoctetes*, Neoptolemus and Philoctetes use δράω for noble behavior (95, 478, 672, 803) and non-δράω verbs for dishonorable conduct (87, 88, 1010, 1227, 1269, 1353, 1399), while Odysseus tries to force his own interpretation of what constitutes good and bad action by also playing with δράω

and non-δράω verbs (e.g. 111). Thus, this battle of the different interpretations of the "moral"

δράω is a key part to understanding the ethical dilemma of the *Philoctetes*, and the interplay

between these two types of verbs speaks to Neoptolemus' progression from being a submissive

boy unsure of who he is to becoming an independent, resolute young man. This is, in short, a

story of a young man's education in ethics.

To conclude, it is clear that Sophocles was conscious of and careful when choosing

between δράω and non-δράω verbs. While this may not hold true for every line and every verb in

the Sophoclean corpus, there is enough authorial hand evident in the selecting of these verbs to

argue that the Athenian dramatist valued the potency and consequence of δράω.