

In the closing scene of Sophocles' *Electra*, Orestes prolongs his moment of triumph by taunting Aegisthus for his failure to live up to his prophetic credentials (1481):

καὶ μάντις ὦν ἄριστος ἐσφάλλου πάλαι;

And you're the greatest prophet, yet were fooled all this time?

Kells (1973, *ad loc.*) takes Orestes' comment at its most literal and postulates a lost tradition that Aegisthus was a prophet: "The line obviously implies that Aegisthus had some special qualifications in μαντική (cf. 1499). This is part of the background story which appears to have been lost." His conjecture, followed by other commentators (e.g. March 2001, *ad loc.*), fails to consider this reference to prophecy in its full dramatic context. Sophocles' *Electra* presents a pair of competing interpretations of a *tekmērion*: first Aegisthus, then Orestes seeks to impose his own public interpretation of the shrouded corpse in this the culmination of a series of recognition scenes. When Aegisthus finally realizes that he has misinterpreted the evidence, Orestes forces him to admit that his own interpretation is the right one (1475-80). In this instance, it is in his capacity of ruler that Aegisthus has been making mantic pronouncements, and Orestes' subsequent claim to the role of *mantis* (ἐγὼ σοι μάντις εἰμὶ τῶνδ' ἄκρος, 1499), formulated in a likewise competitive manner, marks his assumption of political power. A fragment from Soph. *Euryplus* (fr. 208 Radt) presents another pair of competing interpretations of signs, using a similar formulation (ἄριστος... μάντις ὦν, 5); here one character interprets the croaking of a crow as a good omen (3-4) and another considers its prophetic utterance to be dysphemic (5-6).

This paper hopes to break new ground by examining a number of Sophoclean contexts in which the term *mantis* and its cognates is used in a broader sense, referring not to a soothsayer *per se* (a Tiresias or a Calchas) but to other characters who interpret signs. This conception of the *mantis* is not peculiar to Sophocles - their skill in interpreting *tekmēria* is perhaps what elevated prophets, bards, doctors, and rulers above other mortals in the estimation of Empedocles (fr. 132 Diels-Kranz), and the conception of the poet as *mantis* goes back at least to Hesiod (Nagy 1989, 23-4).

These instances include three in which the chorus lays claim to the role of *mantis* (*O. T.* 1086, *El.* 473, and *O.C.* 1075-80). In each case, the chorus' pronouncements have perlocutionary intent: they represent bids to predict, amid uncertainty, a positive future on the basis of their interpretation of the recent past. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, their interpretation is, like that of Oedipus, tragically misguided. The paper also highlights the central role played by the ruler at every stage of the process of consulting an oracle (Parke & Wormell 1956, Potter 1994); the close connection between prophecy and power explains why rulers such as Oedipus in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Creon in *Antigone* expect a favorable prophecy and regard the dissonant voice of the prophet Tiresias as a political threat.