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A Musical Motif in Oedipus at Colonus

The first part of *OC* is tied together by a metrical motif that serves as a theme for the growing relationship between Oedipus and the chorus. Previous commentators on the play (including Scott, *Musical Design in Sophoclean Theater*, 1996; Lloyd-Jones and Wilson, *Sophoclea*, 1990; Kamerbeek, commentary, 1984; Dawe, *Studies on the Text of Sophocles 3*, 1978; Dale, *Metrical Analyses of Tragic Lyrics*, 1970; Pohlsander, *Metrical Studies in the Lyrics of Sophocles*, 1964; Jebb, text and commentary, 1889) have not discussed this motif, partly because their colometries obscure it. The colometry in the oldest and arguably best manuscript of the play similarly makes this motif invisible to the reader. I argue that the motif would have been audible in performance, in fact increasingly so as the play goes on, and that the ancient and modern analyses that treat this colon inconsistently are incorrect.

The motif is a pherecratean expanded by three choriamb, -- -uu- -uu- -uu- -uu- -. It appears in the parodos, 176 ~ 192, in the lyric dialogue where the chorus interrogates Oedipus about his past, 510 ~ 512, and finally in the Colonus ode, 696 ~ 709. In the last appearance, moreover, it is preceded by a pherecratean expanded by two choriamb. The colon is a single period in its first and third occurrences, and in the first and second it is a single sentence in both strophe and antistrophe.

In Laurentian 32.9 (L), the late-10th-century MS that is our oldest witness to the text of *OC*, the colon is broken over two lines at each occurrence, in two different ways. In the parodos, it is broken after the 10th syllable, producing apparent anapests. In the lyric dialogue, the lineation is inconsistent, with break after the 13th syllable in the strophe, after the 11th in the antistrophe. This is probably a mistake in the strophe, with one extra word copied to the first line. The antistrophe is more likely to show the intended colometry as the first line there (line 521) ends in mid-word. Modern commentators have analyzed these lines as ionic, beginning with a contracted metron; this is unlikely as contracted metra never appear in the first positions of a stanza. Finally, in the Colonus ode, the first colon (pher^{2c}) is broken after the 6th syllable and the second (pher^{3c}) after the 11th as at line 521, with the result that the first colon appears choriambic and the second ionic.

In fact, neither ionics nor anapests make sense in the three contexts in which this colon appears in the play; it must be aeolic in each case. Aeolic meter is emotionally unmarked, whereas ionics in drama always seem to connote softness, effeminacy, luxury, or the exotic East, usually all at once. The chorus of old men of Attica would be unlikely to use them. Moreover, although there are mixed ionic-aeolic stanzas in other plays, the general metrical simplicity of the lyrics of *OC* argues against finding them here.

This metrical pattern is indeed formally ambiguous, and it is just possible that when it first occurs, in the parodos, the audience might have been uncertain whether it was anapests, ionics, or aeolic. In the parodos and the lyric dialogue, word ends do not

provide any useful clues, as they neither divide ionic metra into neat groups (2+3 or 3+2) nor set off the choriamb in the expanded pherecratean. By the third occurrence, in the Colonus ode, however, word ends do set off the choriamb, as is typical in expanded pherecrateans and glyconics.

The expanded pherecratean functions as a leitmotif for the relationship between Oedipus and the chorus. At its first occurrence, the chorus have not yet even found out the name of the intruder in the grove of the Eumenides. Its second occurrence comes when Oedipus has sent Ismene off to propitiate the goddesses, and the chorus, somewhat reassured about his good intentions, question him about his past. The third and final occurrence of the metrical motif is in the first actual ode of the play, when the chorus finally accept Oedipus as a full member of their community. At this occurrence, the motif rings out clearly in aeolic. After this we do not hear it again. From here on, the chorus are solidly on Oedipus's side.