

INTRODUCTION

1 DATE OF THE FIRST PERFORMANCE

Oedipus the King is probably the fourth of the seven plays of Sophocles that have survived complete, as we can infer from various formal criteria.¹ Over time Sophocles seems to have become readier to employ interlinear hiatus – ending one line, and beginning the next, with a vowel, when there is no accompanying pause in the sense; *Oedipus the King* comes fourth of the seven when this increasing tolerance is rendered numerically.² Over time, too, Sophocles seems to have made more use of *antilabê*, or mid-line speaker change; here *Oedipus the King* comes fourth in raw instances of *antilabê*, third when the number of instances is expressed as a percentage of the number of speaker changes in a given play.³ The play that it swaps places with is *Ajax*, but as I wrote in my edition of that play:

The smaller amount of *antilabê* in [*Oedipus the King*] compared with *Ajax*, as a proportion of all speaker change found in trimeters (*OR* has 33 changes of speaker for every hundred trimeters, *Aj.* only 22), reflects the greater density of speaker change in the trimeters of the former play. So even though *OR* has more instances of *antilabê* than *Aj.*, the comparative rarity

¹ See my *Ajax* pp. 1–11 for a detailed account of the criteria mentioned in this section.

² The proportion of trimeters ending with hiatus but without pause to trimeters with hiatus and pause, expressed as a function of the proportion of all trimeters without pause to all trimeters with pause, is as follows: *Tr.* 22.1, *Ant.* 33.6, *Aj.* 33.6, *OR* 39.5, *El.* 40.6, *OC* 53.9, *Phil.* 57.7 (figures from Stinton (1990) 367).

³ The figures for the number of instances of *antilabê* in a play, the total number of speaker changes, and the former expressed as a percentage of the latter (that last figure printed in bold) are as follows: *Ant.* 0, 222, **0.0**; *Tr.* 2, 199, **1.0**, *OR* 10, 378, **2.6**, *Aj.* 8, 214, **3.7**, *El.* 16, 295, **5.4**, *Phil.* 37, 325, **11.4**, *OC* 44, 340, **12.9**.

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-41126-4 — Sophocles: *Oedipus the King*
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 Excerpt
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of speaker change in the latter (caused by the greater number of long speeches and monologues) ensures that its percentage figure is lower. Moreover, *OR* arguably shows greater maturity in its handling of *antilabe*, since it is found there not just in blocks (626–9, 1173–6), as in *Ajax* (591–4, 981–5), but also in single lines (676, 1120).⁴

Two other criteria align *Oedipus the King* with the three plays likely to be closer to the beginning of Sophocles' career (*Trachiniae*, *Antigone*, and *Ajax*) rather than with the three likely to be closer to its end (*Electra*, *Philoctetes*, or *Oedipus at Colonus*). First, *Oedipus the King* contains dactylo-epitrites, a metre found in *Trachiniae*, *Antigone*, and *Ajax* but not in *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, or *Oedipus at Colonus*.⁵ Second, whereas in *Trachiniae*, *Antigone*, *Ajax*, and *Oedipus the King* there is a marked tendency for the opening of choral odes to be indirectly, not directly, connected with the preceding episode (twelve indirectly connected, four directly), in *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* that tendency is reversed (three indirectly connected, six directly).⁶ But the use of three-cornered dialogue tends to align *Oedipus the King* with the three later plays; noting a certain formality in its handling in earlier tragedy, Rutherford contrasts this with the 'more fluid' situation prevailing in *Oedipus the King*, where 'in one scene Jocasta, Oedipus, Creon and the chorus are all involved in the dispute between the king and his brother-in-law (634–96); in another Oedipus' questioning of the aged shepherd is backed up by the Corinthian ... (1110–85)'.⁷

⁴ My edition, pp. 6–7.

⁵ Thus Talbot and Sommerstein, in their edition of Sophocles' fragmentary plays, II 94.

⁶ Figures from Mastronarde (2010) 148, which discusses the phenomenon.

⁷ Rutherford (2012) 41; cf. Reinhardt (1947) 123–4 = (1979) 113–14, Gardiner (1987) 107, and my *Ajax*, pp. 8–9.

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Turning this evidence into hard dates is not easy. All seven surviving plays must have been performed after 467 (the last year for which we know of a performance of a play without a *skênê* building) and written (and perhaps performed) before 405 (the date of Sophocles' death). *Philoctetes* was performed in 409, *Oedipus at Colonus* posthumously in 401; *Oedipus the King* is likely to be rather earlier than these plays. *Trachiniae* must be from after 458 (the date of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, with which it interacts); *Oedipus the King* is likely to be rather later than this play. Splitting the difference puts us in the 430s; if forced to name a specific decade, this is the one I would go for, but a date in the 440s or 420s would not surprise. Indeed, were a papyrus discovered that firmly dated the play to, say, 451 or 418, that would only underline how fallible are the criteria, how incomplete the data, on which we have to draw.

Attempts to discern a more precise date are unpersuasive:⁸

- (i) The information that the tetralogy that included *Oedipus the King* was defeated by Philocles does not help, since Philocles was certainly producing plays between 424 and 411, and could have been competing as early as 460.⁹
- (ii) Musgrave argued that the account of the plague afflicting Thebes at the start of the play was suggested to Sophocles by the plague that struck Athens in 430, 429, and 427/6, and which would later be so eloquently described by Thucydides.¹⁰ This idea was

⁸ The discussion of the play's date in Müller (1984) is problematic; Wilson (1985) responds to his arguments in detail.

⁹ See my *Ajax* p. 2 n. 9, adding A/O on Ar. *Thesm.* 168–70.

¹⁰ Musgrave on 25: 'descriptionem hanc pestis, iterum aliis verbis retractatam [168/9–187] Poetae, ni fallor, suggessit celebris illa Atheniensium calamitas Thucydidi (ii. 49.) diligenter enarrata, deinde et Lucretio, lib. vi'.

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supported by Dindorf and elaborated by Knox;¹¹ thanks to Knox's influence the play is commonly dated to the early 420s, both in works aimed at a general audience and in scholarly books and articles.¹² Yet this hypothesis is deeply unsatisfactory:

- (a) Outbreaks of disease were a fact of life in ancient societies; no doubt there were others during Sophocles' lifetime about which we are not informed because they lacked their Thucydides to immortalise them.
- (b) Sophocles did not need to observe a plague to describe one. His decision to begin his work with a plague needs no precedent of any kind, but for what it is worth, we have a literary forerunner for such an opening, namely the *Iliad*; if we require a source of influence we can look there just as well as to any sickness in the real world. The Iliadic plague will have been in the minds of many in Sophocles' audience.¹³ Both plagues occur prominently at the beginning of a work; in both the chief character takes the lead in attempting to address its cause, by consulting a divine spokesman;¹⁴ in both the attempt to follow the god's prophetic advice leads to

¹¹ Dindorf (1836) 21; Knox (1956) = (1979) 112–24. Knox argues for a date of 425.

¹² Thus for example the English, Spanish, and German Wikipedia entries (accessed 22 February 2017), the first referring specifically and solely to Knox's article; and so e.g. Burton (1980) 145 ('probably performed during the earlier years of the Peloponnesian War'), Raphals (2013) 306 (429), Allan and Potter (2014) 7 ('some forty years' after the production of Aeschylus' *Septem* in 467), Dougherty (2014) 147 n. 32 (425, citing Knox). See further Hester (1977) 60 (although Hester himself does not adopt that position).

¹³ These passages in their turn may have been recalled by the readers of Thuc. 2.47–54, as T. Morgan (1994) 206 and Kallett (2013) 361 argue.

¹⁴ Cf. Nooter (2012) 82, noting this parallel between Oedipus and Achilles.

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a catastrophe greater than the plague, which as a result before long fades away. Musgrave's hypothesis has something of the romantic fallacy about it, whereby poets can write only about things that they actually experience.

- (c) Putting such a vivid description of a plague before an audience that had only recently suffered from one in reality might be thought to detract from a tragedy rather than to add to it, since its impact will have been so recent and so traumatic that an audience will not have responded well to the reminiscence.¹⁵ As a result, Musgrave arguably dated the play to the period in which it was least likely to have seen its première.¹⁶ More generally, such topical references are not the usual province of tragedy.¹⁷ As for Knox's idea that the combination of blight with plague – λιμός with λοιμός, as he puts it – is not attested before Sophocles and

¹⁵ Cf. Jebb p. xxx: 'If Sophocles had set himself to describe the plague at Athens as he had known it, it might have been held that, in an artistic sense, his fault was graver than that of Phrynichus, when, by representing the capture of Miletus, he "reminded the Athenians of their own misfortunes" [Hdt. 6.21.2].' So also Hester (1977) 60.

¹⁶ Similarly, whereas according to Longrigg (1992) 28, 'it is curious ... that Aristophanes should have made no mention of the plague in the catalogue of ills caused by the war recited in the *Acharnians* [425]', in fact it is no surprise that Aristophanes passed over such a recent intense trauma. 'The plague is in fact never mentioned in any surviving text (or fragment of a text) composed for public performance or delivery at Athens during the classical period (unlike Thucydides' history or Plato's *Symposium*, which were composed for private reading). It was apparently taboo in a way that military disasters like Syracuse or Aegospotami were not, and this could be held to tell against any date for the play later than 430' (AHS).

¹⁷ According to Taplin (1986) 167, 'the only years which we can exclude with confidence as the date for the first performance of *Oedipus Tyrannos* were the years of the plague', because tragedy does not make 'particular topical incursions across the stage/auditorium line'.

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thus requires special explanation, the pairing is already attested in Hesiod.¹⁸

- (iii) According to some, Oedipus' cry ὦ πόλις πόλις (629) is parodied (or rather repeated) in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (27), first performed in 425, and in Eupolis' *Cities* (fr. 219.2 *PCG*), a play dated to 422 or 420.¹⁹ But 'we possess only a small fraction of the tragedies known to Aristophanes, and this unremarkable phrase could easily have occurred in a lost drama'.²⁰ Moreover, although 'sometimes the works quoted or parodied by comedians would have been relatively fresh in the audience's minds ... more often the source texts were years or even decades old'.²¹ For instance, Euripides' *Telephus*, of 438, is parodied in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (425), *Thesmophoriazousae* (411), and *Frogs* (405), and line 585 of *Ajax* (probably 440s) is repeated as line 62 of Aristophanes' *Peace*. A guaranteed comic parody of a tragedy provides at best a *terminus ante quem* for the date of that tragedy; and with our play we have seen no reason to acknowledge a parody in the first place.

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(A) FESTIVAL AND AUDIENCE

The festival at which *Oedipus the King* was originally performed must have been significant enough to have attracted not just Sophocles but also Philocles, no mean

¹⁸ Knox (1956) 136 = (1979) 114; so rightly Calder (1976) 603, citing Hes. *Th.* 242–5.

¹⁹ Thus W. Schmidt (1934) 361 n. 3, though with doubts.

²⁰ Finglass (2013c); similarly Calder (1976) 603, citing Rau (1967) 185, who cites tragic instances of ὦ πόλις and ἰὼ πόλις, together with Ar. *Eq.* 813 = *Plut.* 601 ὦ πόλις Ἄργους, κλύεθ' οἷα λέγει;

²¹ Wright (2012) 147.

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dramatist, as competitors. The City Dionysia, the major dramatic festival in Attica, is most likely, but a performance at the Lenaea or even the Rural Dionysia cannot be ruled out.²² Wherever the play was first performed, the audience will have contained women as well as men, and an audience at the City Dionysia, at least, will have included substantial numbers of Greeks from outside Attica, too.²³

The hypothesis tells us that the trilogy of which *OR* was part came second and that Philocles was victor. In general, Sophocles was a remarkably successful poet, at least at the Dionysia. An inscription from c. 300 BC states that he won eighteen first prizes at that festival alone;²⁴ his total number of victories is variously given as eighteen, twenty, and twenty-four;²⁵ and he was never placed third.²⁶ Second place must have been disappointing for a poet with such a record, especially if the particular excellence of *Oedipus the King*, so appreciated from at least the time of Aristotle, was apparent to its author and his friends. Yet we should not rush to conclusions about the reception of the play, or of the tetralogy, on the basis of this result. The results of the competition were determined not by popular vote but by the ballots of ten judges, from which a random selection of ballots was made; hence the winning playwright may have received a minority of the votes cast.²⁷ Sophocles' success over time in the competition reveals that his plays generally won the favour of audiences; but it is hard to draw conclusions from a particular tetralogy falling short.

²² For these last two festivals see my *Ajax*, p. 11.

²³ See Finglass (forthcoming 4) with the references there cited.

²⁴ *TrGF* I DID A 3a.15 = Millis and Olson (2012) 144.

²⁵ Diod. 13.103.4 (test. 85 *TrGF*), Carystius fr. 18 *FHG* (test. 1.33 *TrGF*), *Suda* σ 815 (test. 2.10 *TrGF*).

²⁶ Thus Carystius. For Sophocles' success in the fifth century see further Finglass (2015c).

²⁷ See Marshall and Van Willigenburg (2004) 102.

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(B) SETTING THE SCENE

The *skênê* represents Oedipus' palace at Thebes; decorated panels may indicate this.²⁸ There is an altar in the middle of the orchestra, and perhaps an altar on one or both sides of the central door. One *eisodos* (which I label A) leads out of Thebes; the other (B) leads elsewhere in the city.

Two scenes refer to an altar or altars. The first reference is in the Prologue, when the Priest tells Oedipus that he can see how a crowd has gathered 'at your altars' or (with singular for plural) 'at your altar' (16); Oedipus later tells the children to 'get up from the steps' (142–3), referring to the steps of the altar(s). This suggests a substantial structure capable of accommodating several people. The most obvious place for such an altar would be some way into the orchestra; there is no reason to think that this space was used only by the chorus.²⁹ There may have in addition been smaller altars nearer to the *skênê* around which the suppliants also gathered, although these are unlikely to have had steps and so could not have been the only altars in question. Moreover, it is dramatically more effective if Oedipus is confronted with the suppliants straight in front of him when he comes through the *skênê* door, rather than having them only to his immediate left and right.

The next reference to an altar comes at the start of the third episode, when Jocasta comes to 'the shrines of the gods' (912) to make offerings; as she does so she invokes Lycian Apollo and says that he is 'nearest' (919). This

²⁸ The commonly expressed idea that Thebes represents some kind of 'anti-Athens' in tragedy was masterfully refuted by Easterling (1989b); see further Taplin (2010) 242, Finglass (2012d), and for portrayals of Thebes in archaic and classical literature see Berman (2013), (2015), S. Larson (2017) 110–15.

²⁹ Thus Rehm (1988) 279. For the presence of an altar some way into the orchestra, perhaps at its centre, see Rehm (1988), Ley (2007) 46–69 (pp. 64–5 on our play); Ashby (1991) argues for an altar on the periphery of the orchestra.

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could be an altar near the *skênê*,³⁰ or it could be the same altar in the orchestra around which the suppliants were gathered.³¹ The latter alternative is attractive, emphasising as it does the connexions between the supplication of the petitioners at the beginning of the play, and the supplication of Jocasta as the drama approaches its dénouement.³² But the former staging would presumably have involved an altar dedicated to Apollo, with his statue permanently overlooking the action; such an image would ‘hint... at the fact that Apollo has been the prime mover for everything we see unfold within this play..., and that everything in the play will eventually move back towards him.’³³

(C) ENTRANCES AND EXITS

- Before 1 A group of children crouch around the altar in the orchestra, and perhaps the altar of Apollo *Agyieus* as well. Since this is probably a cancelled entry (i.e. one in which the action is considered to begin after some figures have already taken their place on stage), it may not matter where they come from; if it does, they come from *eisodos* B.
- 1 Oedipus enters from the *skênê*, with attendants.
- 78–84 Creon enters from *eisodos* A.
- 150 Oedipus leaves via the *skênê*, with attendants; Creon, the Priest, and the suppliants leave via *eisodos* B.
- 151 The chorus enter from *eisodos* B.
- 216 Oedipus enters from the *skênê*, with attendants.
- 297–300 Tiresias enters from *eisodos* B, led by a slave.
- 462 Oedipus leaves via the *skênê*, with attendants; Tiresias leaves via *eisodos* B, led by a slave.
- 513 Creon enters from *eisodos* B.

³⁰ For such altars in honour of Apollo *Agyieus* see *El.* 635n.

³¹ Thus Arnott (1962) 47; Poe (1989) 138 seems agnostic.

³² See 911–1085n., 911–13n. ³³ Revermann (2013) 86–7.

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- 532 Oedipus enters from the *skênê*.
 631–4 Jocasta enters from the *skênê*.
 677 Creon leaves via *eisodos* B.
 862 Oedipus and Jocasta leave via the *skênê*, with attendants.
 911 Jocasta enters from the *skênê*, with attendants.
 924 The Corinthian messenger enters from *eisodos* A.
 946 One of Jocasta's attendants leaves via the *skênê*.
 950 Oedipus enters from the *skênê*.
 1070 Attendants leave via *eisodos* B.
 1072 Jocasta leaves via the *skênê*.
 1110–19 Laius' former slave enters from *eisodos* B, with attendants.
 1185 Oedipus leaves via the *skênê*, the Corinthian messenger via *eisodos* A, and Laius' former slave via *eisodos* B.
 1223 The Theban messenger enters from the *skênê*.
 1297 Oedipus enters from the *skênê*.
 1416–22 Creon enters from *eisodos* B, with attendants.
 1469–75 Attendants enter the *skênê* and fetch Oedipus' two daughters.
 1523 Oedipus, Creon, and the daughters leave via the *skênê*, with attendants.

(D) PART DIVISION

Eight parts were distributed between the three actors. I list them below, accompanied by the number of lines belonging to each,³⁴ and the sections of the play during which they appear on stage:

³⁴ I draw these figures from my text, taking an iambic trimeter, an anapaestic dimeter, a lyric 'line' as printed in my text, and an exclamation to represent a single line for this purpose. Lyric 'lines' are generally shorter than trimeters, but arguably the extra demands made on a singing actor compensate for this. Only Oedipus sings.