SOPHOCLES AND SOPHROSYNE

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The most controversial of the three Greek tragedians has always been Sophocles. There has been disagreement over the interpretation of his plays individually as well as about the interpretation of his general philosophy of life. Amongst the points in dispute has been the question of what Sophocles regards as the ideal of human excellence. Webster, for instance, believes that Sophocles was committed to the ideal of *sophrosyne* (safe-mindedness).

"Sophocles" he says "regards the virtue of *sophrosyne* as second only to piety".[1]

He calls it the aristocratic ideal[2]. Webster's view has, I believe, been shared by the majority of classical scholars.

Whitman, on the other hand, cannot agree that "the heroic figures of his tragedies were created out of the straw of *hybris* in order to be knocked down as an object lesson in *sophrosyne*."[3]

Corresponding to their difference of opinion on this point are their diametrically opposed views on the Sophoclean chorus. To Webster the chorus is apparently the voice of Sophocles.[4] To Whitman the chorus is not the voice of Sophocles.[5] Webster's views on *sophrosyne* are connected with his view of the chorus, because it is the chorus who will normally be found in Sophocles to be commending the ideal of *sophrosyne*. And it is true, as Webster says, that "his chief characters are not remarkable for it"[6] His chief characters, lacking this quality, usually come to a tragic end. It is also true that a figure like that of Odysseus in the *Ajax* is an admirable incarnation of this human, and humane, ideal of '*sophrosyne*', with all its implications of self-knowledge, knowledge of one's limitations, recognition of the rights and limitations of others, prudence etc. And yet, Odysseus, in that play, acknowledges the excellence of Ajax. He cannot allow Agamemnon to dishonour him by refusing him burial. He considers him the best of all of them who came to Troy. To dishonour

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[1] Webster, *An Introduction to Sophocles*, 65 (Oxford 1936).

[2] *op. cit.* 39.

[3] Whitman, *Sophocles* 16 (Cambridge, Mass: 1961).

[4] cf Webster, *An Introduction to Sophocles*, 18-19 and 80-2.

[5] cf Whitman, *Sophocles*, 31-2.

[6] Webster, *An Introduction to Sophocles*, 65.

him would be both to deny justice and to violate the laws of the gods.[1] It might perhaps be thought that the violation of the divine law here consisted merely in the refusal to bury a human being – a thing which the Greeks normally regarded as a sin – but Sophocles leaves no room for doubt that the sin lies in refusing to honour a good man, by his specific statement that

"It is not right to harm a good man when he is dead even if it is true that you hate him".

Now Ajax is one of those figures who was not conspicuous for *sophrosyne*. Yet, if the man of ideal excellence is made to acknowledge and honour excellence in Ajax, may we not rightly hold that Sophocles too saw excellence in him? If that is so there can then be forms of excellence that are without *sophrosyne*. One of the clearest examples of such excellence is Antigone who was anything but 'safe-minded'. Yet, in the event, though she goes to her death, she is proved to be right, while Creon and the chorus (who counselled *sophrosyne*) have to admit that they were wrong. The truth of the matter may very well be then that Sophocles himself was divided in mind as between the two ideals of excellence. One of them, *sophrosyne*, we might consider as excellence at the purely human level; the other, heroic excellence, we might regard as excellence at an other than human level which, as we shall presently see, could be above the human level. The presence of *sophrosyne* makes those who possess this virtue eminently fit for survival in society. Thus Ismene survives Antigone, and Odysseus in the *Ajax* not only survives Ajax but is even able (somewhat ironically) to secure for Ajax recognition of his dues. This form of excellence one might consider a limited form of *arete* — the form best suited for the average man who does well to aim at the golden mean. It is not without significance that *sophrosyne* is the virtue that Plato, in the *Republic*, concedes to his third estate. Now the Sophoclean hero is never an ordinary man. He possesses certain qualities of excellence which lift him above the ordinary. In particular he refuses to allow any considerations of human weakness to deter him from pursuing the course which he regards as consistent with his conception of duty and nobility. The certainty of death will not deter Antigone

[1] *Ajax*, vv. 1332-45.

from burying Polyneices. Ajax prefers death to living in disgrace. In fact he dies because he will not accept the limitations that naturally accompany the human condition. This is the point of that wonderful soliloquy in which he reflects upon Time and the mutability of life.[1] This speech has been a point of major dispute amongst scholars Many regard it as a revocation of Ajax's original intention to commit suicide and an act of submission to the Atreidae. But they are then hard put to it to explain the act of suicide which follows almost immediately after. Whitman would seem to provide the more acceptable interpretation – namely that the speech is not an expression of his yielding to the Atreidae but an ironical rejection of Time and change.[2] Time is a symbol of human limitation. To live means to accept the changes which Time brings with it, to see winter follow summer, dishonour follow honour; it means learning to yield to inferior men like the Atreidae because they happen to be in positions of authority. Such a life is impossible for the hero. Since, then, this is the stuff of life, Ajax will have none of it – he will opt out of Time. His rejection of Time and his suicide are ultimately an expression of a desire to transcend the limitations of the human condition towards the permanent, the infinite, the immortal. This aspiration is a characteristic of the heroic ideal of *arete* which Sophocles took over from Homer. This, and not *sophrosyne*, as held by Webster, was the truly aristocratic ideal. *Sophrosyne* with its willingness to take into account the limits to one's own power and the rights of others, to accept the vicissitudes of Time, and to come to terms with all these things, is ideally the democratic form of *arete* It is essentially the virtue that makes life in community possible. People like Odysseus in the *Ajax* and Ismene in the *Antigone* possess this virtue. These are people one can live with. People like Ajax and Antigone are uncomfortable to live with. Their standards are so exacting and they make so little allowance for our human weaknesses. It will be noted that the Sophoclean hero is invariably an isolated figure, because he is an individualist. I would like to suggest that Sophocles found himself confronted with a problem – the problem of how to reconcile the aristocratic ideal of heroic virtue with the democratic way of life which demands the exercise of *sophrosyne*. Sophocles was living in a democracy,

[1] *Ajax*, 646 ff.
[2] Whitman, *Sophocles*, 74.

real politics. Philoctetes must be taken to Troy if the Greeks are to be victorious Since he cannot be taken by force he must be taken by guile. So Odysseus urges Neoptolemus to lie in a good cause[1]. Though the word *sophrosyne* is not specifically used, the whole tenor of the argument indicates that Odysseus is pointing out the prudence of not attempting to overcome Philoctetes by force since he is stronger, armed as he is with poisoned arrows. He appeals to Neoptolemus in the name of nobility, addressing him as "son of a noble father", and bribing him with the hope of winning two rewards - of "being called both wise and good (noble)". The association of wisdom here with goodness (nobility) makes it quite clear that Sophocles does not want wisdom here to be equated with mere cleverness which could be villainy. Wisdom as the kind of right thinking in practical matters which is also good would have to be equated with *sophrosyne*. In a subsequent scene between the two, when Neoptolemus has decided to return the bow to Philoctetes, Sophocles uses the word *sophos* again; he also uses the word *sophrosyne* and plays on both of them with telling irony.[2] To Odysseus's charge that both his words and his actions are unwise, Neoptolemus retorts that "justice is better than wisdom". When Odysseus uses the word 'wisdom' he obviously means 'prudence'. Neoptolemus in his reply quite clearly dismisses as villainy the kind of wisdom Odysseus refers to. The neatest piece of irony occurs at the end of that exchange. When Odysseus unable to persuade Neoptolemus, draws his sword against him and Neoptolemus promptly draws his own, Odysseus, prudent man, has second thoughts and merely threatens to denounce him to the army; whereupon Neoptolemus congratulates him on his '*sophrosyne*'. In the context the word has an ugly ring about it. We may conclude then that Sophocles keeps an open mind about *sophrosyne* - it can be good, it can be bad, depending on the context.

In the case of heroic excellence Sophocles had to face a slightly different problem. The qualities of superhuman endurance and courage which are displayed by the heroes, though 'imprudent', are always admirable. Yet they are accompanied by qualities of harshness and intransigence which sometimes render the heroic figures almost inhuman. In fact I would suggest that the incompatibility between the heroic and the humane values was a problem

[1] *Philoctetes*, 96-119
[2] *Philoctetes*, 1240-60

which constantly engaged the attention of Sophocles. I would even go so far as to suggest that this may well be the key to the understanding of some of his plays, in particular the *Ajax* and the *Trachiniae.*

These two plays share a common structural peculiarity: each falls into two apparently distinct parts. In the *Ajax* we have first the events leading up to the death of Ajax, and then the argument over the burial of Ajax. In the *Trachiniae* we have the events leading up to the death of Deianeira followed by the picture of the dying agony of Heracles. Scholars have disagreed violently over the explanation of this oddity. On the one hand we have critics who find in this evidence of artistic disability on the part of the playwright[1], on the other, we have a variety of explanations seeking to establish the connection between the two parts. The charge of artistic incompetence hardly deserves consideration. Three out of the seven surviving plays of Sophocles follow this pattern - the third is the *Antigone.* Under the circumstances it would be a reasonable supposition to make that the structure might have something to do with the meaning. Much more disturbing are some of the explanations given by those who acknowledge the artistic competence of Sophocles. It is, for example, disturbing to find an otherwise excellent critic like Kitto saying of the *Ajax* that "the end is rather the triumph of Odysseus than the rehabilitation of Ajax"[2]

This would surely make the play a play about Odysseus primarily, as Kitto virtually admits when he says that

"the keystone is the importance of Odysseus".

It is a little difficult to understand why, if that is so, Ajax should be a more prominent figure than Odysseus[3], and why the title should carry the name of Ajax. I would suggest that the division of the play into two parts is an image of the incompatibility between the heroic virtues of Ajax and the humane values of Odysseus. This incompatibility is already brought out in the prologue. Ajax is

[1] Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist,* ed. 2. Chapter 5 in toto, especially 58-9 (Cambridge 1966)

[2] Kitto, *Greek Tragedy,* 122 (London 1939)

[3] Kitto admits this.

presented as one of the those primitive heroes whose code is to hate their enemies and to go all out to do them harm. Odysseus is the man of refined conscience who will not gloat over the misfortunes even of an enemy. In fact one might note a greater affinity betwen Athena and Ajax than there is between Ajax and Odysseus. Athena is bent on destroying her enemy Ajax, even as Ajax is bent on destroying his. Athena gloats over the humiliation of Ajax even as Ajax is shown gloating over the humiliation of what he believes to be his enemy Odysseus. There is the same kind of absoluteness about the attitude of Ajax as there is in the attitude of Athena. It is precisely this quality of absoluteness that differentiates the hero from the ordinary human being – which makes him therefore a-human, if not positively inhuman. In this particular scene Ajax is inhuman. Yet he is closer to the divinity. If we do not call Athena inhuman, though her attitude is the same, that is because the word has no relevance to divine beings – they are just not human. The tragedy of the heroic individual is that, while in spirit he has affinities with the divine, he is held in bondage to the human flesh, to human obligations and human values. In the resulting conflict between the two sets of values, he unhesitatingly rejects the human. So Ajax in this play rejects the bonds in which his human condition holds him. Faced with disgrace he will not live. Though Tecmessa has human claims on him he refuses to be moved by them. The harshness of his rejection and the pathos of Tecmessa's plight are heightened by the deliberate reminiscence of the Hector–Andromache scene in the Iliad which the scene in Sophocles evokes.[1] The values which Ajax rejects are the values of normal civilised human living. In the end he makes a total rejection of the human condition by ending his life. We might note that, almost as if to affirm the validity of the primitive code by which he lived, he will let his enemy's sword kill him. That "enemy must kill enemy" is for him essentially right.

In the first half of the play, then, Sophocles shows us an Ajax who is outside the pale of humanity. But being outside humanity is not the same thing as being sub-human. This is indicated throughout the play. Already there was a hint of it in the parallelism between Ajax and Athena which I have mentioned.

[1] Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* ed. 2, 21 (Oxford 1945)

Further indications are the high esteem in which Ajax is held by Tecmessa and by his sailors. These hints are developed into a certainty in the second half of the play. First there is the expression of Teucer's feeling for Ajax. More convincing is the revelation of the difference between the greatness of Ajax and the meanness of the Atreidae. The Atreidae are, by convention, also members of the same heroic caste. Yet their behaviour is totally unheroic. Both of them enter blustering threats against Teucer, both enjoy reminding him of his slavish lineage; they show no appreciation of his loyalty to his brother and his courage in standing up for him, and, as Teucer reminds us, they show no gratitude for all that Ajax has done for the Greeks. The most damning statement of all is that made by Menelaus[1],

"though we could not control him alive we'll certainly control him dead".

Could any boast be less heroic? They are presented as vulgar bullies. Ajax was infinitely superior to them. His superiority is finally affirmed by Odysseus's acknowledgement of his greatness and vindication of his cause. There is a certain irony in the fact that the hero who rejected the conditions of ordinary civilised human living finally owed the decency of burial to the humanity of the man whom he most hated. The irony of the situation itself hints at the incompatibility between the two ideals. But on this point Sophocles does more than hint. He points it clearly by Teucer's polite but firm refusal (in spite of his gratitude to Odysseus) to allow Odysseus to participate in the funeral obsequies because

"I hesitate to let you touch his grave lest I do something hateful to the dead".

Rejecting Odysseus's offer of help, Teucer invites all those who were friends of "this excellent man" to join in burying him. Ajax, the excellent, will be offended by the services of Odysseus the humane. Even in death there is no reconciliation between the heroic and the humane. Since Teucer is acting on behalf of Ajax it is virtually Ajax who rejects the civilised gesture. Once again,

[1] *Ajax*, 1067-8

as in Homer's *Odyssey* the ghost of Ajax has turned its back upon Odysseus. Sophocles has put his own interpretation on that scene.

The antipathy between the heroic and the humane ideals is even more strikingly presented in the *Trachiniae*. The two principal figures, Deianeira and Heracles, represent two diametrically opposed values, Deianeira, decent civilised living and Heracles, heroic excellence. Heracles is an even more primitive version of the hero than Ajax. He belongs to a remoter past and represents sheer brute strength and masculine vigour. He is also undomesticated. He has a wife, but no home - a point made by Deianeira with her statement that

"we begot children, but he sees them as little as a farmer sees some out of the way field of his - only when he sows and when he reaps"[1]

Domesticity is a symbol of civilisation. Heracles is uncivilised. He is also inordinate in his passions; he has sacked a city to abduct a princess. And yet, we are reminded in the same breath, almost, that he is "the splendid son of Zeus and Alcmena". Deianeira also tells us that no man has loved more women than Heracles. Who, after all, can glut the appetite of a god? In Heracles we have a strange combination of virtue of a sort, power almost akin to the power of the gods, and, from any normal human point of view, wildness. As against Heracles, the totally masculine, is set Deianeira, the totally feminine; against the wild man, the refined woman; against the almost god the completely human. Deianeira is feminine in her weakness and her fears, refined in her domesticity and above all in her sympathy with the captive women sent by Heracles, especially with the princess Iole. But she is also completely human in her jealousy when she discovers that Iole is Heracles's mistress, and in her decision to try to win back her husband's love by a charm. In many respects Deianeira resembles the Odysseus of the *Ajax*. Like him she is aware of the mutability of things human,

"And yet, if we see clearly, there is cause to fear that today's success may be tomorow's failure"[2].

[1] *Trachiniae*, 31 ff.
[2] *Trachiniae*, 297-7.

This is the basis of her sympathy with the captive women. Awareness of this fact is a characteristic of *sophrosyne*, the civilised virtue, which she shares with Odysseus. But in one significant respect she differs from Odysseus. She failed in prudence when she used upon Heracles a weapon given her by his enemy. Jealousy clouded her judgement and destroyed her morally. Physical self destruction follows naturally from the discovery of her failure. Sophocles brings out with tragic irony the nature of her blindness in the very language she uses when she contemplates the deed,

"Yet, as I said, it is not well for a woman of sense to cherish anger. But I will tell you, friends, what means I have of relief. I have a gift given me of old by an ancient monster..."[1]

In one and the same breath, in the name of good sense, she rejects anger, but uses the gift of a 'monster'. The contradiction between the two is pointed. The civilised woman is driven by her very desire to cherish civilised values to use uncivilised means to tame the uncivilised hero. After the event, too late, she recognises her rashness,

"Why should the dying monster, who died because of me, show goodwill towards me?"[2].

Deianeira dies and passes out of sight with only a little over half the play done. The rest of the play consists of the agony and death of Heracles after he has worn the poisoned robe. This scene is a baffling one. Heracles commissions his son, Hyllus, to do him two favours - both of them repugnant to human sensibility - that Hyllus should set fire to his body, still alive, with his own hands, and that Hyllus should marry his mistress Iole. Hyllus's vehement protests leave no room for doubt that he finds them repugnant. Yet he is blackmailed into performing them, though some concession is made to him on the first point. What is one to make of this?

Some strange excuses have been made for Heracles's conduct. Bowra, for instance, says, in connection with the first request that though

[1] *Trachiniae*, 552-6.
[2] *Trachiniae*, 707-8.

"Heracles, concerned with his own end, does not stop to consider what Hyllus will feel about it, when he knows, he yields. He is remote and imperious, not absolutely brutal".[1]

One might just let that pass – though one might be pardoned for wondering whether one would, however concerned one was with one's own end, forget that to ask a son to burn his father alive is hardly the thing to do. Heracles was careful to make his son swear an oath that he would carry out his commands before he specified them. The inference is clear. On the second request Bowra finds that Sophocles

"shows an unexpected trait of tenderness and justice in Heracles. The great hero still loves Iole for whom he has done so much and for whom, in a sense, he dies ... His words seem to show his love for the girl:

'You know the maiden, child of Eurytus?'

Hyllus must marry her because he can be trusted to care for her. Moreover this is also an act of justice".[2]

It is difficult to see what there is so much that Heracles has done for Iole, and how, even in a sense, he can be dying for her. He has certainly killed Iole's father and sacked her city. It was done to gratify his lust, not 'for her'. As for dying he died because of her, which is not the same thing as dying 'for her'. Finally I fail to see where he finds an indication of love for the girl in the single line he has quoted in proof of it. Anyway Heracles has made the reason for his request clear; no one but his son must take her since she has been his mistress! This is not love for Iole but selfishness – a divine form of selfishness, if you like, since she has evidently been consecrated.

Kitto has a better approach. He sees the end as "essentially a presentation of Heracles" whom he describes as being "entirely self centred, ruthless to enemies, acquisitive, possibly affectionate but entirely selfish towards his family, unfeeling to his wife, transient with other women, and a very great man".[3] In effect this is another

[1] Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy*, 142.
[2] ibid.
[3] Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, 293-4.

way of saying that Heracles is an extreme specimen of the heroic type. Kitto however does not tell us what purpose is served by the presentation of Heracles at the end of the play. In fact he considers that this scene destroys the formal unity of the play because he can see no connection between it and the first part.[1] I would suggest that the connection lies in the idea of the utter incompatibility between the humane values represented by Deianeira and the heroic values represented by Heracles. The dichotomy in structure is an image of the idea. Heracles and Deianeira are united in a bond of marriage but never once meet in the play. It is a union which is no union. The one attempt made by Deianeira to make of it a true and lasting union succeeds in destroying both of them.

The *Electra* provides another example of Sophocles's awareness of this conflict between two sets of values. In this play the conflict is fought out in the mind of a single individual - Electra. On the one hand, Electra is identifiable as belonging to the heroic type. Nobility prevents her from putting up with the wrongs inflicted on her in her father's house. She is contrasted with the sister Chrysothemis whose policy is to bow before the storm for safety's sake, even though she admits that Electra is in the right. Chrysothemis represents *sophrosyne*, Electra heroic rashness. However, Electra being a woman, her heroism, when the play begins, can only find expression in the nursing of her grief and resentment while she awaits the arrival of her brother to save her and the house. On the other hand, Electra also has some of the characteristics of the humane type. This emerges in the beautiful scene of Electra's mourning for Orestes when she believes that he is dead, and in the even more beautiful scene of joy when she recognises Orestes. Sophocles dwells at some length on these scenes. He must have had some purpose in doing so. I suggest that the purpose was to bring out one side of Electra's character - her total femininity. The purpose of that is to prepare the ground for the conflict in her between her two natures. This conflict is presented in two scenes. The first is in dialogue with the chorus when she apologises for nursing her resentment.[2] That speech ends with the significant cry

[1] ibid.

[2] *Electra*, 254

"Surrounded by evil as I am, I am *driven* to do evil.[1]"

This is the only play in which a heroic figure apologises for his or her 'heroic' conduct. The second occurs in the course of the argument with Clytaemnestra, where after her outburst against her, Electra apologises again for her violence. In both cases she is 'ashamed', and in this case she adds

"Your hatred and your actions *drive* me to act so in spite of myself. Vile conduct is taught by vile example."

But the conflict exists only in the first half of the play. As the action progresses the demands of heroism supersede the demands of humanity. The change occurs at the point where Electra is convinced that Orestes is dead. Then she decides to perform the act of vengeance herself Since Chrysothemis refuses to join her she will even do it single-handed. In the scene between the two *sophrosyne* and heroic daring are specifically opposed to each other. Chrysothemis, remembering their weakness as women, is for caution; Electra is for following the dictates of nobility and justice even though Chrysothemis warns her that "justice is sometimes dangerous". Thus the way is prepared for the final transmutation of Electra's nature which Sophocles reveals in the murder scene. Here is no longer the tender, loving, sister or the apologetic heroine, but a bloodthirsty fury. What other impression can one get of an Electra who, when she hears Clytaemnestra's first cry as she is struck down, calls out to her brother,

"Strike her, strike again"?

All feelings of human compunction and of shame have been extinguished. The act of venfgeance, though executed in the flesh by Orestes, is in spirit the act of Electra. The 'heroic' in Electra has killed the humane. That is the tragedy of the *Electra*.

There is then justification for believing that the conflict between heroic virtue and the humane values associated with civilised life in society (represented usually by *sophrosyne*) forms an important part of Sophocles's thinking. In plays like the *Ajax, Trachiniae*, and *Electra* he sees no reconciliation between humane values and the type of heroic virtue represented by the Homeric and pre-Homeric heroes. But Sophocles created his own image of a hero in whom he showed the terms in which the reconciliation

[1] *Electra*, 309

could be effected. That hero was Oedipus as he is presented in the two plays that bear his name. The foundation for the image had already been laid in the *Oedipus Tyrannus.* The edifice is completed in the *Oedipus at Colonus.* Sophocles was evidently fascinated by the legend of Oedipus. The main details of that story he found in the myth But the personality of Oedipus, as he emerges in the two plays, is the creation of Sophocles In this creation he presents a figure who combines ideally the heroic and the humane values.

In the *Oedipus Tyrannus* Oedipus is the good citizen and the good ruler. As good citizen he identifies himself totally with the well-being of his people. As good ruler he takes it for granted that it is his responsibility to save his people from the troubles which afflict them The people in their turn look to him as spontaneously as he assumes his responsibility. In the pursuit of his task he shows the singleness of purpose and fortitude that are characteristic of the hero. He will let nothing deter him from his task. The very intensity of his dedication makes him misjudge the prophet Teiresias. Here is a man who knows what will save the city and yet will not speak. He therefore accuses him of treachery. In that scene, impelled by heroic dedication to his task, he transgresses against *sophrosyne*, taunting the prophet with his blindness and exulting in his own perspicacity. It was he, after all, who solved the riddle of the sphinx while the prophet was dumb. But, in spite of his rashness, Sophocles sees to it that he does not transgress entirely the limits of humanity. Thus, he consents, as a favour to Jocasta and the chorus, to spare the life of Creon whom he believes to be conspiring against him. He spares him even though he is sure that it will mean his death or exile.[1] He is heroic in his yielding to the demands of humanity, though, from his point of view, his action will be lacking in *sophrosyne.* The humanity shown by him here is consistent with the picture of him given in the opening scene, where he shows his deep concern for the priests who sit in supplication before him, addressing them as his "children, tender nurselings of ancient Cadmus".

His true heroism is finally shown when he stands on the edge of the discovery that he is the son and the murderer of Laius.

[1] *Oedipus Tyrannus,* 669–70

In the interview with the shepherd there comes a point when he knows what is about to come out and yet moves irresistibly forward, compelling the shepherd to utter the terrible words which he has already heard in his heart[1]. He has been harsh, inhumanly so, in this scene with the shepherd. But the reason for his harshness is the same as the reason for his anger against Teiresias. And if he does not spare the shepherd, he does not spare himself.

There can be no doubt that Oedipus belongs to the type that one would call 'heroic'. But he is not the primitive, Homeric version of that type, like Ajax or Heracles. He is a more civilised version. It is significant that, unlike them, he is set within a framework of domestic and civic life. He is also unlike them in his utter selflessness. The most significant difference, however between him and the earlier types is his readiness to accept the mutability of the human condition. The first indication of this is given in his reply to Jocasta's plea to him not to pursue the quest for his parentage;

"Have no fear. Even should I be proved a slave thrice-born, you will not be proved base."[2]

He is ready to face the possibility of being a slave by birth. To cap this comes his comment after Jocasta's departure,

"She has a woman's pride. Perhaps she is ashamed of my low birth. But I call myself the child of fortune, giver of good, and I shall not be shamed. She is my mother. My sisters are the Seasons; they cause my growth and my decline. Being what I am I would not wish to be any other and shirk the knowledge of my birth."[3]

Time, we saw, was the symbol of mutability and finitude. Its use here is therefore significant. Other heroes, like Ajax, rebelled against the limitations inherent in man's subjection to Time. Oedipus welcomes it with open arms. This acceptance is in itself an act of heroism by which Oedipus transcends the 'heroic'. The seal is set, as it were, on this acceptance by his act of self-blinding. Other heroes, like Ajax, would in similar circumstances kill themselves. By this act they find a way out of a situation

[1] *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1169–70
[2] *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1062
[3] *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1078–85

that they find unbearable. The situation in which Oedipus finds himself is more horrible than any situation in which any hero was involved. Yet Oedipus does not seek the normal, 'heroic' way out of misery and disgrace. By blinding himself he places upon himself the sign of his true condition - his utter blindness and his total dependence on other agents both human and divine. This is the true meaning of his act. All the other reasons given by Oedipus to the chorus are his fumbling attempts to rationalise an action which was performed by instinct rather than by reason. His first thought must surely have been of death. Thus, the messenger tells us that he ran round calling for a sword - for what purpose except to kill himself? But then, suddenly, he sees the brooch on Jocasta's dead body, and instantly snatches at it. This action in fact might be said to mark Oedipus's triumph over Destiny. Since he was destined to be blind, he will face his destiny blind. By doing so he disarms Destiny. It might be compared to the gesture of turning the other cheek.

The logical sequel to this triumph of Oedipus is his deification. If Oedipus has transcended the heroic, he has also transcended the human. For a man who has transcended both the human and the heroic what is left but divinity? The *Oedipus at Colonus* shows us this final stage in his evolution. His opening words in that play remind us significantly that he both recognises his littleness as man and possesses the new kind of heroism which accepts and even welcomes that condition.

"Who will welcome the wanderer Oedipus, today, with the barest of hospitality? I ask but little and am content with less than little. Pain, Time, my companion long since, and nobility these three have taught me to be content."[1]

Actually the word I translate as 'to be content' means more than that in the Greek. *Stergein* means 'to love'. It is a word used of the love of parents for children, of brothers and sisters for one another, and of friends. And what is it that Oedipus 'loves' here? What else but his condition of littleness and misery, which ceases to be misery when you take it to your bosom? We remember that in the earlier play he embraced the Seasons as his sisters The reference to nobility in his opening words recalls the heroic background. Here then is the new hero, fully man in his littleness and vulnerability, yet also fully hero in the

[1] *Oedipus Coloneus*, 3-8

spirit in which he endures, or rather, embraces his condition. Later in the play we hear him speaking of Time to Theseus,

"Dear son of Aigeus, only the gods never age or die. All things else all-powerful Time confounds. Vigour dies in the earth and in the flesh. Faith dies out and falsehood blooms and the spirit never remains the same, whether amongst friends or as between city and city."[1]

The substance of what he says is the same as what Ajax said in his play. But the spirit is so different. Here Oedipus, speaking from the heights of the wisdom he has achieved, instructs Theseus to prepare him for what will come. The tone is one of serene acceptance and assurance. These things which he accepts with serene confidence, regarding them as friends, are the very things which the heroes of old regarded as their enemies. Their code was to hate their enemies. Oedipus has transcended that concept.

From that point onward we have his progression towards divinity. Throughout the play there is a growing awareness in himself and in others that he is more than man. He began by overcoming the hostility of the men of Colonus; passionately he vindicated his innocence of guilt in the past. Now, with the aid of Theseus, a kindred spirit, who instinctively recognises his quality, he overcomes his enemies Creon and Polyneices. He prophesies and pronounces curses with the authoritative voice of a god. In the scene with Polyneices the harshness of Oedipus towards his son is, at first sight, disconcerting, because it seems inhuman. The humane attitude is pointedly brought to our notice by Antigone's pleas on behalf of Polyneices[2]. But, on reflection, his harshness is consistent with the concepts both of the hero and of the divinity. The hero is uncompromising, while between god and evil there can be no reconciliation. The ways of Polyneices have been evil in the past, as shown by Oedipus[3], while his purpose now is also evil. The latter point is made in the parting scene between Antigone and Polyneices. Antigone begs him to disband his army and not wage war upon his native city. But Polyneices will fight because he cannot bear to be thought

[1] *Oedipus Coloneus*, 607-13
[2] *Oedipus Coloneus*, 1181 ff.
[3] *Oedipus Coloneus*, 1354 ff.

a coward and to be mocked by his younger brother - the old kind of heroism again.

What is asserted in this part of the play is Oedipus's moral integrity. The scene is also the last of the trials to which Oedipus, in his human condition, is exposed The play has provided us with a succession of three trials. In the first of them he triumphs over the prejudice of ordinary well-meaning men and refines their notion of piety. In the other two he triumphs over the evil machinations of men who seek to use him for their own evil ends. Appropriately the struggle against evil is the last of his trials on earth. Immediately after that Oedipus hears the call from heaven and walks, unaided, towards his encounter with infinity. Oedipus becomes a god. But even as god, Sophocles has, through him refined the concept of divinity. There is a sharp contrast between the arrogant selfishness of Heracles in the *Trachiniae* whose divinity required that none but his son should marry his mistress, and the patient, long suffering Oedipus who, as man,was content with less than little, and, as god, will bring blessings on those who recognised his worth. Oedipus is god-man-hero spelled out by Sophocles in new terms.

This play was written by Sophocles on the eve of his death. It is something like his final testament to his beloved city. Incidentally he has also paid her the tribute of being the one city able to recognise the face of true human excellence.

NOTE: We regret that, due to a shortage of printing paper, two articles which were to have been included in the present Number have had to be held over for publication in Volume Two Number One. The articles are — "John Donne — an Unmetaphysical Perspective" *by Derek de Silva* and "The History of Ceylon, 1505 — 1658. A historiographical and bibliographical survey" *by C. R. de Silva and D. de Silva.*

Editor