‘When a god is involved, everyone both laughs and weeps’. The deities in Sophocles bring both goods and evils to mortals—this is an interpretative key to many of his plays, especially Ajax, Oedipus Tyrannus, Trachiniae, and Oedipus at Colonus, but it arises in all of them. The focus is sometimes on an individual deity, like Athena in Ajax or Apollo in Oedipus Tyrannus, and we will come to the major divinities in the tragedies, but first let us begin with a survey of the gods in general.¹

1. The Gods as a Group

Critics have much to say about the gods of Sophocles, but what do Sophoclean characters and choruses themselves believe that the divinities in general like or dislike? What goods and evils do they bring to mankind? First of all, not surprisingly, the gods appreciate those who show them respect and are displeased by those who do not. According to the Chorus of Oedipus Tyrannus (863–870) the laws/traditions (nomoi) regulating verbal and behavioural propriety were ‘born’ in the sky, and Olympus was their father. The gods, understandably, are concerned with these nomoi and punish violations of them. ‘Believe’, says Oedipus in Oedipus at Colonus, ‘that the gods look upon the mortal who is “properly respectful of the gods” (εὐσεβῆ), that they look upon those who are not, and never yet has there been an escape of any “religiously incorrect” man (ἀνοσίου)’ (278–281). Later he claims that ‘the gods see well, but late, when a person, having dismissed “the divine

¹ It should be noted that all translations are my own.
² For helpful discussions of Sophoclean deities in the context of the whole corpus, not just in an individual play, see Parker (1999); Mikalson (1991); Lloyd-Jones (1983) 104–128.
things”, turns to madness’ (1536–1537). Lichas in Trachiniae claims, ‘Not even divinities like hubris, and those who are arrogant from an evil tongue are themselves all residents of Hades’ (280–282). Calchas, a prophet and an authoritative figure in Ajax, was reported to have said that ‘exceptional and foolish people fall upon heavy failures from the gods, a person who born a mortal then does not think like a mortal’ (758–761). Occasionally these concerns of the gods in general are attributed to Zeus himself. He, too, according to Heracles as deus ex machina, considers all things secondary to ‘proper respect’ in matters concerning the gods (Phil. 1440–1443) and ‘hates the boasts of the big tongue’, slaying the hubristic Capaneus with his lightning-bolt (Ant. 127–133). The gods are as concerned with disrespectful words as they are with such deeds. They see them well, although sometimes late, so that we may expect a time lag between crime and punishment—but punishment is, in the end, inescapable.

The goddess Athena herself in Ajax (132–133) claims that gods love ‘those of sound thoughts’ (τούς σωφρόνας) and hate the evil, and the Chorus of Antigone warns Creon that ‘swift-footed harms from the gods cut short those who “think badly”’ (1103–1104). Such ‘bad thinking’ can connote injustice as well as a hubristic disrespect towards the gods. For the Chorus of Oedipus Tyrannus their worship of the gods depends on the gods punishing acts of hubris, disrespect to the gods, and injustice (883–896). Philoctetes, addressing Odysseus in Philoctetes, shows confidence in the gods’ concern for justice: ‘You will perish for having treated unjustly this man, if the gods are concerned with justice, and I know that they are’ (1035–1037), and in the same play the Chorus warns Neoptolemus that he must do what is right if he is to escape the ‘righteous anger’ (νέμεσις) of the gods (510–518. Cf. 601–602).

So suffer those who are disrespectful to the gods, hubristic, or unjust. But what divine favours can those who avoid this sin expect? Such favours are generally described in terms of safety and help. The guard of Antigone, after his rough encounters with Creon, gives the best statement of this: ‘Now, after I have been saved beyond what I expected and thought, I owe much gratitude (χάρις) to the gods’ (330–331). Theseus in Oedipus at Colonus attempts to encourage Oedipus: ‘Know that you are safe if one of the gods keeps me safe as well’ (1209–1210). In Ajax the messenger hopes that they can ‘save’ Ajax with a god’s help (778–779). In that play even the disreputable Menelaus can claim that ‘a god saves me’ (1128), and the equally disreputable Clytaemestra in Electra makes monthly offerings to the ‘saving gods’ (280–281). When the protagonist of Philoctetes suffers from an acute attack of his disease, Neoptolemus asks him why he calls upon the gods;