THREE DOUBLE MESSENGER SCENES
IN SOPHOCLES

BY

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A resemblance between the messenger scenes of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 924-1185, and *Trachiniae*, 180-495, has often been noted, and critical attention has been focused on the scenes in which both messengers are on stage together, in the presence of the tragic figure (messenger and herdsman *OT* 1121-1185, messenger and Lichas, *Tr*. 393-496). This encounter, however, is the culmination of a larger structure, and there is a consistent parallelism between the two plays which begins with the arrival of the first messenger, and ends with the tragic protagonists apprehending the information that results in their downfall. In the course of the messenger scenes a contrast is developed between the protagonist who seeks information, and the lower class characters who possess it, while the truth of the message they eventually deliver is demonstrated dramatically: it results in immediate and irreversible action by the tragic character. Having considered these parallels between *OT* and *Tr.* in detail, I will go on to suggest that in *Philoctetes* the interaction between Philoctetes, the false merchant and Neoptolemus, 220-627, has many similarities to these double messenger scenes in terms of structure and presentation of character, but that it has a quite different function within the drama as a whole. No longer does the tragic character, by his own efforts, lay hold of an unquestioned truth upon which his destiny turns, nor is there any longer the same contrast between the tragic protagonist and his lower class informants. He is rather the victim of his supposed inferiors, and the information conveyed to him receives dramatic confirmation only much later, and in a most unexpected way, through Herakles’ epiphany.

Beginning with *OT*, one can see that the messenger scenes are

divided as follows: 924-1085: first messenger; 1086-1109: choral interjection; 1110-1185: second messenger. Upon his arrival the Corinthian messenger, having learned Jocasta’s identity, immediately draws attention to his subservient position with a “captatio benevolentiae, from a lower member of society to his betters”;2) ‘may she ever be happy and with those who are happy, since she is his queen’, 929-30.3) He asserts both that ‘the word I shall soon speak will bring you pleasure’, 937, and that his own truthfulness as messenger is not to be doubted: ‘If I am not telling the truth [τάληθες], I say that I deserve to die’, 944. Following the heated exchange between Oedipus and Jocasta on the subject of oracles, 964-88, the messenger inserts himself into the dialogue again with a cautious question about Oedipus’ fears—‘But who is the woman who makes you afraid?’, 989, and, when he has ascertained that it is safe to proceed, he offers fresh information on the subject of the King’s relationship to Polybus and Merope: ‘Why, since I have come in friendship, do I not release you from this fear, my lord?’, 1002-03. The cautious sounding out of Oedipus’ attitude before imparting the information he brings (e.g. ‘What is it about her that causes you to be afraid?’, 991), and the reminders of his good intentions, mark his insecure position in the presence of a more powerful superior, as does his acknowledgment that he has not come in an official capacity (he speaks ‘as the story went there’, 940, rather than bringing a formal announcement from Corinth). Only when he has learned that it is safe to proceed he explicit about his motives for coming: ‘Why I came here most of all in the hope that when you came home I might acquire some benefit!’, 1005-06.

The messenger’s ὁ πᾶς, 1008, following Oedipus’ failure to understand the situation, temporarily eclipses this social distinction with the natural seniority of age, and the discrepancy in the information they possess is marked as a shift in power by Oedipus’ response—πρὸς θεῶν δίδασκε με, 1009. Subsequently, in giving his account of

2) R.D. Dawe, Oedipus Rex (Cambridge 1982), ad loc. He adds “his third person γένος, if genuine (γένος Wecklein) will be a further expression of polite deference; he does not like to accost the queen directly.”

3) All translations are from H. Lloyd-Jones’ Loeb edition of the plays (Cambridge 1994).