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Tyranny in Tragedy

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Abstract

The meaning of the word *tyrannos* in Greek tragedy is much debated. Some have assumed that the word is always a neutral term signifying 'ruler' alone. Others argue for competing ideologies regarding tyranny: the result of an evolution in thinking on autocracy. This article challenges both of these assumptions. The negative meaning of *tyrannos* is always latent in tragedy, even where the word is used objectively and not as a term of abuse. *Tyrannos* does not simply indicate a powerful individual but implies absolute power, fortune and wealth. This absolute power leads to ruin and tyrannical vice. *Tyrannos* signifies not a bad or illegitimate ruler, but rather one with the potential to develop such characteristics. It is the tyrant who evolves, whereas Greek conceptions of tyranny remain largely unchanged from at least the time of Aeschylus to that of Aristotle.

Keywords

Aeschylus – Euripides – hybris – Oedipus – Sophocles – tyranny – tragedy

1 Introduction

What does the term τύραννος signify in Greek tragedy? Scholars such as R.P. Winnington-Ingram have provided one possible answer: 'in Greek tragedy as a whole, τύραννος and τυραννίς mean "king" and "kingship"'.[1] Victor Parker

1 R.P. Winnington-Ingram, 'The second stasimon of the Oedipus Tyrannus', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 91 (1971), pp. 119–135, at p. 126 and *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 192; for similar statements cf. U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff,

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has virtually declared this view a consensus: 'in tragedy the word [*tyrannos*] … means, as is well known, simply "king"'.[2] And yet here Parker displays a confidence that is far from appropriate, since possible exceptions exist.

One such exception, and perhaps the most famous, is provided by the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles. In a seminal 1954 article, Bernard Knox raised the question 'why is Oedipus called *tyrannos*?' He observed that Richard Jebb, in the most authoritative translation and commentary of the play in English at that time, had indeed rendered the Greek word τύραννος, and its associated terms, variously as 'king', 'prince' or 'royalty'.[3] And yet, Knox noted, the word does not mean 'king' but 'tyrant' in at least one passage in the play. In the second stasimon, the chorus state that 'hybris begets the tyrant' (ὕβρις φυτεύει τύραννον, 873).[4] Jebb had in fact readily conceded this point: 'here [*tyrannos*

Euripides: Herakles (2nd ed., Berlin: Weidman, 1909), pp. 2 and 13; D.L. Page, *Euripides*: Medea (2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 98–99.

2 V. Parker, '*Tyrannos*: the semantics of a political concept from Archilochus to Aristotle', *Hermes* 126 (1998), pp. 145–172, at p. 158.

3 B.M.W. Knox, 'Why is Oedipus called *Tyrannos*?', *Classical Journal* 50 (1954), pp. 97–102, at p. 97 = *Word and Action* (Baltimore/London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 87–95, at p. 87.

4 The meaning of this phrase is obscure and potentially ambiguous and may signify either that hybris makes a tyrant, or that the hybris of others leads to the establishment of tyranny or, I think most likely, that hybris, as the mother of tyranny, has shaped and imbues the tyrant's *physis* (just as, in the previous stanza, there is a god in the laws – μέγας ἐν τούτοις θεός, 872 – that were themselves divinely begotten at 866–8): see R. Scodel, 'Hybris in the second stasimon of the *Oedipus Rex*', *Classical Philology* 77 (1982), pp. 214–223.; N. Fisher, *Hybris: a study in the values of honour and shame in ancient Greece* (Warminster: Aris and Philips, 1992), pp. 333–335. In any case, the unavoidable conclusion is that the tyrant is an evil that is intrinsically connected with hybris. Moreover, as the child of hybris, he is antithetical to the child of heavenly Olympus (865–8), natural law, with which the preceding stanza was concerned. Winnington-Ingram ('Second stasimon', p. 126; *Sophocles an Interpretation*, p. 192) argued, however, that the text of *OT* 873 had to be corrupt (and he has been followed by R.D. Dawe, *Sophocles*: Oedipus Rex (2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 147–148). His attempted solution was Blaydes' conjecture ὕβριν φυτεύει τυραννίς. Yet there is no reason to suspect the transmitted text other than the idea that the sentiment described is impossible: a sentiment which is in fact firmly founded in Greek thought (see C. Austin, '*Oedipus Tyrannus* 873', *Classical Quarterly* 34 (1984), p. 233; C. Carey, 'The second stasimon of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 106 (1986), pp. 175–179, at pp. 175–176; P.J. Finglass *Sophocles:* Oedipus the King (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 437; R. Nicolai, 'Perché Edipo è chiamato τύραννος? Riflessioni sull'Edipo re come tragedia del potere', in S. Bigliazzi, F. Lupi and G. Ugolini (eds.), *Συναγωνίζεσθαι: Studies in Honour of Guido Avezzù* (Verona: 2018), pp. 251–276, at p. 261). Moreover, the proposed change does not help matters much. Winnington-Ingram preferred Blaydes' alternative because it signified merely that 'kingship engenders hubris' and not that a *tyrannos* is by definition a bad or tyrannical ruler in himself. Yet, even in this case there remains an inherent and natural link between hybris and tyranny.

means] not "a prince" – not even, in the normal Greek sense, an unconstitutional ruler (bad or good) – but in our sense, "a tyrant"'.[5] It is therefore not uncommon for *tyrannos* in tragedy to be translated as either 'king' or 'tyrant', though with a marked preference for the former unless the context requires the latter. In the case of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, this policy is followed consistently in the latest commentaries by Bernd Manuwald, Patrick Finglass and Jenny March, who all (like Jebb) translate *tyrannos* consistently as 'king' or 'König' except at line 873.[6] 'Elsewhere in Sophocles', Finglass explains, 'τύραννος has a neutral sense, but the negative meaning was well established in this period … and the context makes it inevitable here'.[7]

If two different meanings are possible, are these divergent uses of the term informed by differing ideologies regarding kingship, by different times, places or political systems? Some commentators have indeed hypothesised that the 'neutral sense' belongs to an earlier period, while the 'negative meaning' was a later development. This view is informed in part by the longstanding belief that the archaic tyrants were in some cases popular rulers.[8] By contrast, the negative

5 R.C. Jebb, *Sophocles*: Oedipus Tyrannus (2nd edition, Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 2004), p. 118.

6 B. Manuwald, *Sophokles* König Ödipus (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), p. 194; Finglass, Oedipus, p. 436; March, J. *Sophocles*: Oedipus Tyrannus (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), p. 117; cf. M. Stella, *Sofocle:* Edipo re (Rome: Carocci, 2010), p. 257 on line 873: 'qui, e per l'unica volta in senso proprio nell'arco di tutta la tragedia, davvero "tiranno"'; Manuwald Ödipus, p. 195 '*tyrannos* ist an dieser Stelle durch den Kontext eindeutig negativ konnotiert', and p. 125 '*tyrannos* und … *tyrannein* und *tyrannis* haben im *König Ödipus* (wenn man von dem in der Deutung strittigen v. 873 einmal absieht) nicht den möglichen pejorativen Sinn ("Tyrann"), sondern bezeichnen den Monarchen mit einem Wort, das im Sprechvers der Tragödie gegenüber dem anderen Wort für Alleinherrscher eine metrisch einfacher zu handhabende Variante bietet'; March, Oedipus, p. 251: 'there seems little doubt that the term *tyrannos*, although used elsewhere in the play and in Sophocles generally in a politically neutral way meaning simply "king", is used here in the derogatory sense of "autocratic despot"'. *Contra* J. Bollack, *L'*Oedipe Roi *de Sophocle* (Lille: Presses universitaires de Lille, 1990), III pp. 556–557, who argues that the word here cannot have the full meaning of violent 'tyrant', but refers rather to Oedipus' exceptional power as king, hence his translation (I 247) 'la violence fait le roi'.

7 Finglass, Oedipus, p. 436.

8 See e.g. M. White, 'Greek tyranny', *Phoenix* 9 (1955), pp. 1–18, at p. 1, who argues that while 'later tyrants conform to the modern meaning of the term', the archaic rulers should 'more accurately be described as the successful champions of a growing middle class, who overthrew the restrictive aristocracies of birth and so freed their cities for a development which, under favourable circumstances could and sometimes did lead to democracy'. On this basis, A. Andrewes, *The Greek Tyrants* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1956), p. 23, argued that the tragedians retained the traditional meaning of the word *tyrannos* just as the negative understanding of this term was becoming more prevalent in prose. For further references, see E. Stewart, 'The Tyrant's Progress: The Meaning of TYPANNOΣ in Plato and Aristotle', *Polis* 38 (2021), pp. 208–236, at pp. 211–212.

view of tyranny has been seen as a product of Athenian democracy, and (for Parker) a peculiar feature of Attic dialect, that only came to be dominant in the fourth century.[9] On this basis, Lowell Edmunds has attempted to identify two different and distinct views of tyranny: the ambiguous Panhellenic ideology and an Athenian ideology that saw tyranny as 'the opposite of democracy and unqualifiedly negative'.[10] But again, given the apparently recent appearance of this 'Athenian' understanding of *tyrannos*, scholars such as Roberto Nicolai have assumed that the audience would have expected the word to have had a neutral meaning unless they were told otherwise.[11]

In this article, I attempt to move beyond the dichotomy of 'king' and 'tyrant', since neither English term is entirely appropriate (as the ongoing scholarly discussion summarised above amply demonstrates).[12] In the first part, I argue that the word *tyrannos* is used in different ways from other terms signifying 'ruler'. Characters in tragedy employ different labels for princes and their family members in different circumstances. Their choice of terminology appears to depend initially on whether they are supporters or enemies of a regime. Among a tyrant's followers (in the plays of Sophocles and Euripides), that choice further depends on the social status and gender of the speakers and also the social status and gender of their interlocutors. Put simply, those of inferior status generally describe rulers as *tyrannoi* only in the presence of their equals. This suggests, I argue, that the 'negative meaning' of *tyrannos* is potentially

9 Parker, '*Tyrannos*', pp. 168–171. See also C. Mossé, *La Tyrannie dans la Grèce antique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1969), pp. 133–145, on the apparent contrast between the negative view of tyranny held by the fourth-century philosophers and the realities of historical tyrannies. More recently L. Mitchell, *The Heroic Rulers of Archaic and Classical Greece* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 32, has claimed that the later contrast between bad tyrants and good kings was 'a product of a construct of ruling developed in the late fifth and fourth centuries, especially at Athens.'

10 L. Edmunds, 'Oedipus as tyrant in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*', *Syllecta Classica* 13 (2002), pp. 63–103, at pp. 67–70.

11 Nicolai 'Edipo', p. 260: 'Il pubblico era abituato a un uso non negativamente connotato del termine τύραννος, e quando la connotazione è negativa c'è sempre qualche segnale che suggerisce la giusta interpretazione.'

12 On *Oedipus Tyrannus* see Winnington-Ingram (1971); Austin, '*Oedipus Tyrannus* 873'; Carey, 'Second stasimon'; K. Sidwell, 'The argument of the second stasimon of *Oedipus Tyrannus*', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 112 (1992), pp. 106–122; Edmunds, 'Oedipus'; J. Kucharski, '*Tyrannoi* and Tyrants on the tragic stage', *Classica Cracoviensia* 15 (2012), pp. 167–89; Nicolai 'Edipo'; on *Oedipus at Colonus* see P. Demont, 'Tyrannie et royauté dans *l'Oedipe à Colone* de Sophocle', *Ktema* 40 (2015), pp. 105–114; on tyranny in tragedy see R. Seaford, 'Tragic Tyranny', in K. Morgan (ed.), *Popular tyranny: Sovereignty and its discontents in ancient Greece* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), pp. 95–115; on the semantic uses of *tyrannos* J.L. O'Neil, 'The semantic usage of tyrannos and related words', *Antichthon* 20 (1986), pp. 26–40; Parker, '*Tyrannos*'; M. Koiv, '*Basileus, tyrannos* and *polis*: the dynamics of monarchy in early Greece', *Klio* 98 (2016), pp. 1–89.

latent even in those cases where the word is used as a purely descriptive label for a ruler: one that is applied objectively and by supporters of the regime. The simple translation of *tyrannos* as 'king' throughout the tragic corpus is indeed inadequate, since the Greek word does not have an entirely neutral sense, but neither is a wholly negative value judgement implied (as in the English 'tyrant'). Thus far my analysis conforms to the widely held notion that *tyrannos* is a term that is potentially multivalent. It is further argued, however, that a speaker's use of the word *tyrannos*, as opposed to other synonyms for 'ruler' or 'king', is far from arbitrary or coincidental, but depends on the status of the speaker relative to his or her interlocutor.

In the second and third parts of this article, however, I argue that the hypothesis of multiple ideologies regarding tyranny (Athenian vs. Panhellenic, archaic vs. contemporary / anachronistic) is an inadequate explanation for this multivalence. Here I build on an argument first advanced in a 2021 article in *Polis*, to which this paper is in essence a sequel. In that work, I challenged the underlying assumption that Greek views on tyranny 'evolved' over the course of the classical period or that genuinely competing attitudes towards autocracy are in evidence in our literary sources.[13] Pindar and Herodotus' understanding of *tyrannis* was, in fact, closer to that of Plato and Aristotle than has been acknowledged. Rather, it is tyrants themselves who 'evolve', in a process I termed the 'tyrant's progress'. The word *tyrannos* does not principally signify a bad ruler, but an absolute ruler who possesses a monopoly on power and wealth in the *polis*. However, this position of absolute power was believed throughout the archaic and classical periods to 'corrupt absolutely', to borrow Lord Acton's memorable phrase. Thus, while not all those called *tyrannoi* need exemplify the ideal of the bad ruler (and while it was possible, therefore, to describe a ruler objectively as *tyrannos* with reference only to his position of power), it is assumed nonetheless that the possession of *tyrannis*, unrestricted power, will inevitably lead to a gradual moral decay. This very process of evolution and decay in tyrants and their regimes has in fact been noticed regularly by students of the tragic poets and other authors, such as Herodotus.[14] Yet what has not been fully recognised, and which I attempt to

13 Stewart 'Tyrant's Progress'.

14 See recently, on the plays of Sophocles, Demont 'Tyrannie', p. 111: 'les rois sophocléens sont pris dans une évolution qui fait tomber sur eux les malheurs, au fur et à mesure qu'ils s'isolent dans la colère et l'impiété, et deviennent des tyrans'. On Herodotus cf. e.g. C. Dewald, 'Form and content: the question of tyranny in Herodotus', in K. Morgan (ed.), *Popular Tyranny: Sovereignty and Its Discontents in Ancient Greece* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), pp. 25–58, at p. 32, where she observes 'the tendency of powerful autocratic regimes to become more powerful still and to transgress more and more against the persons of those they rule in the process'.

outline here, is the significance of such change for our understanding of the word *tyrannos* in Greek drama. Virtuous rulers, such as Oedipus, can be classed together with hybristic tyrants, such as Lycus, Eteocles or Creon in *Antigone*, not because they *are* the same in terms of personal morality, but because they are in the continuous process of *becoming* tyrants due to their common possession of tyrannical power (*tyrannis*).

2 Is *Tyrannos* a Neutral Term for 'Ruler'?

Tyrannos is in a sense synonymous with other terms for 'ruler': it is part of a broad vocabulary of terms that can be used to describe individuals endowed with political power. These include ἄναξ (lord), ἄρχων (ruler), ἀρχαγός, ἀρχηγέτης (leader), βασιλεύς (king), δυνάστης, κοίρανος, κοιρανίδης, μόναρχος and πρύτανις (prince, sole ruler, lord). Tyrants possess the same trappings of power that are associated with all rulers: κράτος (might), ἀρχαί (magistracies), θρόνοι (thrones), σκῆπτρα (sceptres).[15] And, as is the case with Oedipus and other tragic heroes, more than one of these titles and attributes can be ascribed to the same person: a 'king' can also be described as a 'tyrant'. On this point, the case for the purely 'neutral' understanding of *tyrannos* principally depends. And yet, even if two words are used to describe the same person, and the same type of person, it does not follow that they have exactly the same meaning. The word *tyrannos* is in fact used very differently from other words signifying 'ruler'.

With one exception (see below), no ruler in all of tragedy is ever addressed in the vocative as τύραννε, despite the notably frequent occurrence of the words *tyrannos* and *tyrannis* in comparison to other terms for 'ruler'. Here the language of tragedy accords with that of everyday speech, since τύραννε is likewise never encountered as a form of address in Greek prose.[16] By contrast, the most usual, and seemingly correct, way to address a ruler in tragedy is the

15 Compare Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*, who claims to hold 'all powers and thrones' (ἐγὼ κράτη δὴ πάντα καὶ θρόνους ἔχω, 173). He later claims to be 'have reverence for his own office' (τὰς ἐμὰς ἀρχὰς σέβων, 744). Other characters, however, imply that he is a tyrant (60, 506, 1056, 1169). On the sceptres wielded by tyrants see *OC* 449 (καὶ σκῆπτρα κραίνειν καὶ τυραννεύειν χθονός); cf. the 'tyrannical sceptre' of Lycus in Euripides' *Antiope* (τυραννικῶι / σ]κ[ή]πτρωι, fr. 223.17–18 *TrGF*).

16 E. Dickey, *Greek Forms of Address: From Herodotus to Lucian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 91–93. Note, however, that, according to Dickey, the vocative βασιλεῦ is only rarely used in prose for Greek or Roman monarchs, as opposed to barbarian kings. There are significant exceptions however, most notably Alexander and his successors, so that 'the difference between someone who could be addressed as βασιλεῦ and someone who could not was one of power, not merely nationality' (p. 92). The avoidance of the term βασιλεῦ is not connected to any scruples regarding the morality of kingship, since

vocative ἄναξ. This word (a suitably archaic term for 'lord' not found in prose) is a polite form used either by a subordinate when speaking to a superior, by equals speaking to other members of an elite group, or by a tyrant when making a request of an inferior (as Oedipus does when he appeals to Teiresias at *OT* 304 and Creon at lines 85 and 1468). In the Aeschylean corpus (excluding *Persians*) mortal rulers of Greek cities are addressed in this manner on nine occasions. Less frequent are ἀρχηγέτα (twice), βασιλεῦ (twice) and the feminine form βασίλεια (on one occasion).[17] In the plays of Sophocles, there are no fewer than forty-three uses of ἄναξ in the vocative to address mortal rulers or elite members, while the titles κοίρανε and κοιρανίδαι appear each on one occasion and the feminine ἄνασσα three times.[18] The address ἄναξ similarly appears on sixty occasions in the plays attributed to Euripides, ἄνασσα twice, while rulers are addressed as βασιλεῦ or βασίλεια nine times and once as ἀρχηγέτα.[19] This analysis shows a significant difference in the way in which apparently synonymous terms are employed: while characters may regularly refer to rulers as *tyrannoi*, they almost never *address* them as such.

Where a specific ruler is labelled a tyrannos, the speaker will in many cases be an opponent of the regime. This is the case in the plays attributed to Aeschylus: here *tyrannos* and its cognates are employed relatively rarely and generally by hostile parties. The chorus of the *Agamemnon* and Orestes in the *Libation Bearers* describe Aegisthus and Clytemnestra as such following the murder of Agamemnon. Similarly, Prometheus and his interlocutors in *Prometheus Bound* speak bitterly of the new tyranny of Zeus.[20] By contrast, in the *Oresteia*, Agamemnon and his family are consistently termed *basileis* and Aegisthus

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where the word is used to address a Greek monarch in the vocative the speaker is seeking to indicate polite deference to a person of greatness.

17 Fr. 132a8.4 *TrGF*; *Sept*. 39, 372; *Supp.* 328, 349, 616, 908; *Ag*. 509, 961; ἀρχηγέτα fr. 390.3 *TrGF*; *Sept*. 999; βασιλεῦ *Ag*. 783, 1489 and 1513; βασίλεια *Ag*. 84.

18 *Creusa* fr. 354.1; *Aj.* 166, 190, 510, 593, 901, 1321, 1361; *OT* 85, 103, 286, 650, 690, 697, 746, 770, 834, 852, 1002, 1173, 1468; *Ant*. 223, 278, 388, 398, 563, 724, 766, 1103; *Phil.* 26, 94, 150, 507, 510, 963; *OC* 629, 1014, 1130, 1173, 1177, 1499, 1505, 1759. Ἄνασσα, fr. 314.258 *TrGF*; *El.* 666; *Trach*. 291; κοίρανε *OC* 1759; οἱ κοιρανίδαι *Ant*. 940.

19 *Alexander* fr. 47.1, 56.1; *Antiope* fr. 223.79, fr. 223.97; *Cretans* fr. 472e.2; *Cyc*. 189, *Alc.* 510, 539, 1042, 1116, *Heracl.* 124, 181, 232, 273, 348, 372 453; *Hipp*. 88, 834, 891, 900, 1249; *Hec*. 759, 828, 1144; *Supp.* 113, 164, 252, 255; *Electra*: 796; *HF* 321, 707; *IT* 1156, 1159, 1163, 1335, 1410, 1435; *Hel.* 1428, 1512, 1620, 1643; *Phoen*. 17, 293, 697; *Or*. 1507; *Bacch*. 666, 670, 760; *IA* 3, 13, 414, 436, 633; *Rhes*. 130, 264, 334, 465, 733, 747; ἄνασσα *Ino* fr. 415; *Hypsipyle* fr. 757.col.xv.854 *TrGF*; βασιλεῦ *Archelaus* fr. 229.1; *Tro*. 799; *IA* 43, 140; *Rhes*. 380; βασίλεια *El.* 988; *Tro*. 178, 341, 966; ἀρχηγέτα *Tro.* 447.

20 Aegisthus and the murder of Agamemnon: *Ag*. 1354–5, 1364–5, 1633–5; Aegisthus and Clytemnestra: *Cho*. 973–4; the tyranny of Zeus: *PV* 221–5, 304–6, 309–14, 356–7, 735–7, 755–6, 909, 941–2, 955–9, 996.

and Clytemnestra never themselves own the title *tyrannos*.[21] On at least one occasion it is implied that Agamemnon belongs to a broader group comprising tyrants, but he is never explicitly described as one. In *Libation Bearers*, Orestes notes that Agamemnon did not die in the manner of a tyrant, that is in a fitting way for a potentate (τρόποισιν οὐ τυραννικοῖς θανών, 479). Similarly, Agamemnon is presented by the chorus as the attendant of the gods of the underworld, who are the 'greatest tyrants there under the earth' (τῶν μεγίστων / χθονίων ἐκεῖ τυράννων, *Cho*. 358–9; cf. νερτέρων τυραννίδες, 405). And yet, when the chorus speak of Agamemnon himself in the same stanza he is said to be a 'lord' and 'king' (ἀνάκτωρ, 356; βασιλεύς, 360). The same pattern is observable in Pindar, who on occasion implies that a *laudandus* belongs to the broad category of *tyrannoi* but never directly addresses or calls his patron *tyrannos*.[22] There thus appears to be a (generally accepted) difference between the way *tyrannos* and other terms for ruler are employed in the Aeschylean corpus – and in tragedies belonging to the first half of the fifth century, something that should give us pause before we categorise the negative understanding of *tyrannos* as a late innovation.[23]

By contrast, in the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, unlike in Aeschylus, tyrants themselves often refer to their regimes as *tyrannides*, as do their servants, supporters and visiting strangers. This has been a major point in favour of the 'neutral' meaning of *tyrannos*. Clearly in these cases the word is not meant as a term of reproach. And yet, if we look more carefully at how these different groups of speakers employ terms for 'ruler', significant patterns of usage emerge.

Let us begin with characters of inferior status. These individuals generally avoid any use of terms associated with *tyrannis* in the presence of their masters. On the very rare occasions when characters of lower status refer to a regime as a *tyrannis* in the presence of a ruler they are echoing the incumbent's own description of the power he holds.[24] Otherwise, slaves and inferior supporters

21 *Ag*. 114–5, 157, 521, 783, 1346, 1489, 1513; *Cho*. 343, 360, 724, 1065, 1070; Clytemnestra is also described as *basileia*: *Ag*. 84, cf. 96.

22 Stewart 'Tyrant's Progress', pp. 220–223.

23 As noted by e.g. H. Berve, *Die Tyrannis bei den Griechen* (Munich: Beck, 1967), I p. 194, who contrasts the clear distinction between these terms in Aeschylus and the more promiscuous use of terminology in Sophocles and Euripides; cf. E. Fraenkel, *Aeschylus*: Agamemnon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 638; Kucharski '*Tyrannoi*', p. 171. Parker, '*Tyrannos*', pp. 158–159 concedes *Ag*. 1354–5 and 1364–5 as exceptions to his proposed rule of the neutral sense of *tyrannos* in tragedy, yet suggests that Aeschylus 'may cleverly be playing with another meaning of the word which had currency in Athens'. He concludes, however, that Aeschylus 'never actually [transgresses] the conventional, primary meaning of the term in tragedy' (pp. 160–161).

24 See Hector's command to Dolon in *Rhes*. to 'state your fee: anything except my tyranny' (τάξαι δὲ μισθόν, πλὴν ἐμῆς τυραννίδος, 165), to which Dolon replies 'I do not desire your

of the regime never suggest that a reigning monarch is a tyrant in his presence. It is only with their peers that they call a particular individual 'the tyrant'.

A good example of this pattern is provided by Sophocles' *Electra*. The Paedagogus arrives on stage and speaks to the women of the chorus (660–1, trans. Jebb):

> ξέναι γυναῖκες, πῶς ἂν εἰδείην σαφῶς
> εἰ τοῦ τυράννου δώματ' Αἰγίσθου τάδε;
>
> Foreign ladies, how might I know for certain if this be the palace of the king (*tyrannou*) Aegisthus?[25]

The chorus inform the stranger that he has guessed correctly, which allows the Paedagogus to assume that the woman he can see on stage is Aegisthus' wife: 'she is indeed regal (*hōs tyrannos*) to look upon' (πρέπει γὰρ ὡς τύραννος εἰσορᾶν, 664). The chorus again confirm his supposition, at which point the Paedagogus speaks directly to Clytemnestra for the first time: 'Greetings, royal lady (*anassa*)' (ὦ χαῖρ', ἄνασσα, 666). Except when he is speaking directly to Clytemnestra, the Paedagogus refers to her and her husband as *tyrannoi*. This corresponds to the general pattern (noted above), according to which *tyranne* is almost never a term of address. Jebb's translation obscures, I suggest, the nuances of the original.

It may be objected that the choice of vocabulary here is coincidental. And yet this exact pattern recurs on several occasions in tragedy, which may suggest more care in the poets' choice of forms of address than is generally supposed. In the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the Corinthian Messenger similarly asks the chorus if he has found the 'house of the tyrant Oedipus' (τὰ τοῦ τυράννου δώματ' ... Οἰδίπου, 925). The Messenger also brings word to Iocasta that the Corinthians also will make him their tyrant (τύραννον, 939). But following the tyrant's entry at 950, the Messenger calls him 'lord' (ἄναξ, 1001) and 'master' (δέσποτα, 1132).[26] The same pattern is potentially evident in Euripides. In the *Andromache*, the stranger Orestes asks the chorus whether he has found the 'tyrannical dwelling-place' (τυραννικαὶ στέγαι, 882) of Neoptolemus.

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tyranny, which preserves the city' (οὐ σῆς ἐρῶμεν πολιόχου τυραννίδος, 166). See also my discussion of Creon and Teiresias in *OT* below.

25 Cf. P.J. Finglass, *Sophocles*: Electra (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 296, who notes that the use of *tyrannos* here is not one of the exceptions to the rule that 'in tragedy it is almost always a neutral term for "ruler"'.

26 Note that δέσποτα is also an acceptable, though highly deferential, form of address for rulers in Greek prose. See Dickey *Forms*, pp. 96–97.

But when Neoptolemus' wife Hermione reveals herself, he calls her 'the lady of the house, this daughter of Menelaus' (δόμων ἄνασσαν τήνδε Μενέλεω κόρην, 897). In Euripides' *Suppliants*, another visiting stranger, the Theban herald, asks who is the tyrant of the land (τίς γῆς τύραννος; 399). Theseus, however, in a possible break from the norm, is present to overhear this question and firmly rebuts any suggestion of there being a tyrant in Athens (403–5).

Where a character of inferior status does imply that a ruler is a tyrant in the presence of a superior, that superior is always a woman. Inferior characters may thus show more confidence in the presence of *female* members of the tyrant's family. In the *Oedipus Tyrannus* (939), the messenger tells Iocasta that the Corinthians will make Oedipus their tyrant (but does not, as we have noted, use any equivalent term while her husband is on stage). Similarly, in Euripides' *Phoenician Women* (197), the Paedagogus urges his young charge Antigone to return to 'house of the tyrants' (πρὸς δόμους τυραννικούς). Here the servant has two possible grounds for confidence: he is an adult who is addressing a female child in his care. And in Euripides' *Andromache* (302–3), the chorus indicate that Andromache is *no longer* a tyrant, due to a change in fortune. Such condescension is perhaps most in evidence, however, in Euripides' *Ion*. Here the Old Man refers, in the presence of Creusa, to Xuthus' supposed plan 'to hand the *tyrannis* of the land' to Ion (τυραννίδ' αὐτῶι περιβαλεῖν ἔμελλε γῆς, 829). But the relationship between Creusa and the Old Man is unusually close for a mistress and her slave: the Old Man was the tutor of Creusa's father and so, as Creusa herself confirms (725–34), there is a special bond of affection between the two. Another potentially significant factor is, again, the difference in age. Thus the old slave can speak to his mistress in tones of virtual equality, for which he hardly apologies (808–11).

Otherwise, characters in the Euripidean and Sophoclean corpora who refer to a ruler as 'tyrant' in his presence are, as in Aeschylus, hostile to the regime. Indeed, this may be taken as a sign of unusual frankness and even audacity. One example is provided by the chorus of the *Bacchae* (775–7):

> Ταρβῶ μὲν εἰπεῖν τοὺς λόγους ἐλευθέρους
> πρὸς τὸν τύραννον, ἀλλ' ὅμως εἰρήσεται·
> Διόνυσος ἥσσων οὐδενὸς θεῶν ἔφυ.
>
> I fear to speak freely to the tyrant, but nevertheless I will speak: Dionysus is second to none of the gods.

Since the chorus is willing to tell Pentheus that he is wrong, it is perhaps unsurprising that they are also prepared to call him a tyrant to his face. Yet

they are afraid – and they are not the only ones.[27] The Messenger, who has just delivered an account of the miraculous doings of Dionysus' followers, had first sought permission to speak with freedom (παρρησία, 668; cf. τοὺς λόγους ἐλευθέρους, 775). The reason is, he says, his *fear* of his master's 'sharp temper and excessively kingly quality' (καὶ τοὐξύθυμον καὶ τὸ βασιλικὸν λίαν, 671). The chorus and the messenger are afraid, then, to say the same things for the same reasons, but while the abducted and foreign chorus is prepared to call Pentheus a tyrant, the Theban Messenger only suggests that his own master is 'too much of a king'. Pentheus' own retainer (like the servants of tragic heroes generally) does not have the temerity to suggest that he is a *tyrannos* in his presence and so offers a suitable euphemism to express an identical concern. Again, these nuances are lost if we insist on treating *tyrannos* as a neutral term.

Unlike the chorus of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* or Euripides' *Bacchae*, however, most of those who dare to cross a tyrant rarely do more than imply that their opponent is a *tyrannos*. Sophocles' Antigone, though a fearless critic of Creon, only speaks in general terms about 'tyranny' (ἡ τυραννίς, *Ant*. 506): it is heavily implied, but she does not actually call her opponent a tyrant. In the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Teiresias, though engaged in an angry exchange with Oedipus, still only says 'even if you are a tyrant …' (εἰ καὶ τυραννεῖς, 408) – and only after Oedipus has himself implied that his rule is a tyranny (380). Creon similarly tells the chorus that he is present having heard of the allegations that 'Oedipus the tyrant' has made against him (τὸν τύραννον Οἰδίπουν, 514). But Creon never calls Oedipus a 'tyrant' to his face and only indirectly implies that he possesses a tyranny (588, 592) when this has been stated unequivocally by Oedipus himself (535). And even here Creon only refers to his own hypothetical possession of tyranny and never explicitly calls Oedipus' regime a *tyrannis*.

It is therefore tyrants themselves, and members of the elite inner circle (principally the tyrant's family), who are most comfortable, in certain circumstances, with acknowledging their own current or former 'tyrannical' power, or even (in two instances) the tyrannical power of other rulers. The single use of the vocative *tyranne* occurs in the *Rhesus* attributed to Euripides (but which is now generally agreed to have been written in the fourth century). On his first appearance Rhesus calls to Hector: 'Hail noble son of a noble father, tyrant of this land' (χαῖρ', ἐσθλὸς ἐσθλοῦ παῖ, τύραννε τῆσδε γῆς, 388). Unlike the examples above, this is an exchange between rulers and equals. This is emphasised by the genitive, τῆσδε γῆς, which signifies that Hector is only tyrant over this particular land and that Rhesus is therefore not one of his subordinates.[28] If this

27 Fear to speak one's mind is a recognised feature of tyrannical regimes: see most recently A. Gottesman, 'The concept of *Isēgoria*', *Polis* 38 (2021), pp. 175–198.

28 See Dickey *Forms*, pp. 90, 94–95.

is indeed an unusually tactless way to speak to a king and ally, then it may perhaps illustrate the brash and arrogant character of Rhesus and prepare for the somewhat testy exchange between Hector and Rhesus that follows. And yet Hector is himself ready to acknowledge that his own rule is a *tyrannis* on two occasions in the play (165, 484). Similarly, in the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Pylades references 'your tyranny' (σῆς τυραννίδος, 681) when speaking to Orestes, but here it is a conversation between equals and in a situation where Orestes is currently unable to enjoy its possession.

Rulers who refer to their own power as a *tyrannis* may be exhibiting the rash self-confidence of a tyrant emboldened with great powers. In the plays of Sophocles, this would seem to be true of Agamemnon in *Ajax* (1350); arguably Oedipus in *Oedipus Tyrannus* (380, 535, 541) and Creon in the *Oedipus at Colonus* (851). For the Euripidean corpus, such confidence is displayed by Lycus (*HF* 251); Theoclymenus (*Hel.* 1170), Eteocles (*Phoen.* 523) and Hector (*Rhes.* 165, 484). In the plays of Euripides, terms associated with *tyrannis* are used, however, as often by rulers who are *no longer* in power. Here the intention appears to be to inspire pity in the former ruler's interlocutor: as is the case especially of Adrastus' appeal to Theseus as 'a grey-haired tyrant who was once fortunate' (πολιὸς ἀνὴρ τύραννος εὐδαίμων πάρος, *Supp.* 166). It may again be significant that all other reflections of this kind are made by women – Megara (*HF* 65, 474); Andromache (*Andr.* 3; *Tro.* 748, 1169); Hecuba (*Hec.* 809; *Tro.* 474) – or about women (see Polydorus on Hecuba, *Hec.* 55).

We have seen, therefore, that while *tyrannos* is not always used as a pejorative term of reproach, characters in tragedy appear reluctant to use the term within a ruler's hearing. This is especially true of those outside the circle of the ruling family: strangers, messengers and slaves. These individuals are generally fond of their masters and might be expected to hold a positive view of tyranny or espouse a 'Panhellenic' ideology (to use Edmunds' term). And yet, this analysis suggests a general underlying assumption in tragedy that there are negative connotations associated with *tyrannis* – connotations moreover that are evident to the followers of tyrants and potentially also to tyrants themselves. In what follows we will consider what those connotations might be.

3 What Does *Tyrannos* Mean? – Why It Is Not Always a Term of Abuse

We now need to consider not merely the context in which characters in tragedy use the words *tyrannos* or *tyrannis* but also what they understand tyranny to be. Any understanding of the word *tyrannos* must explain, first, why the word *tyrannos* can be used objectively and not solely as a term of reproach and,

second, why it is nonetheless not a 'neutral' form of reference or address (that is one that all characters are comfortable with using in all circumstances). The result, it is hoped, will be to show why it is unnecessary to posit different ideologies or approaches to tyranny in order to make sense of the various contexts in which *tyrannos* is employed. Instead, it is argued, a single and coherent understanding of tyrannical rule underlies the use of terms associated with *tyrannis* throughout the tragic corpus.

In this section we will deal with the first problem: why tyrannos is not always a term of abuse. As we have seen, those scholars who accept that *tyrannos* is a multivalent term tend to posit the English 'tyrant' or 'ruler / king' as alternative translations in different contexts. Here 'king' is understood to signify simply someone with power, with no moral undertones. But this distinction is flawed and in fact both English terms fail to capture all of the nuances of the original. First, let us consider what is meant by the English word 'tyrant'. It might be tempting to suppose that when *tyrannos* means 'tyrant' it signifies an immoral ruler (as it does seemingly at *Oedipus Tyrannus* 873, with which we began). Knox, in acknowledging that *tyrannos* sometimes can be used in a 'neutral' sense, defined the word when used pejoratively as 'an unconstitutional ruler, who generally abuses the power he possesses'.[29] Similarly, for Chris Carey where *tyrannos* means '"tyrant" in our sense of the word', as he believes it does by the fourth century BC, he assumes that this signifies a 'bad ruler'.[30] And so when defining the *tyrannos qua* 'tyrant', it might appear natural to begin to enumerate 'typical characteristics of the tyrant', including 'impiety, distrust of his close associates (*philoi*), and greed', as Richard Seaford does at the start of his discussion of Tragic Tyranny.[31] Similarly, when Victoria Wohl asks the question 'why is Sophocles' Oedipus *turannos*?', the answer appears again to revolve around tyrannical characteristics: excessive pleasure, or *jouissance*, that exceeds the bounds of civic and cosmic law, and in particular parricide and incest ('the two tyrannical crimes par excellence').[32]

Yet such lists have the potential to be either too narrow or too expansive to account for the variety of tyrannical regimes and characters. In reality, not every characteristic needs to be always present in each case: can all tyrants, for example, distrust all their associates all the time? While Oedipus certainly distrusts his friends on occasion, is he especially impious or greedy? Oedipus' parricide and incest cannot be the reason why the characters of the *Oedipus*

29 Knox, 'Oedipus', p. 97 = *Word*, p. 87.

30 Carey, 'Second Stasimon', p. 176.

31 Seaford, 'Tragic tyranny', p. 96.

32 V. Wohl, *Love Among the Ruins the Erotics of Democracy in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 213.

Tyrannus call him *tyrannos*, and why he calls his own rule a *tyrannis*, since for most of the play this fact is unknown. And while excessive pleasure or *jouissance* is indeed an important factor, as we shall see, it remains unclear what the link is between this characteristic and the typical moral degeneracy of tyrants (especially since Oedipus, as Wohl notes, does not 'rule harshly or against the people's will').

For the category of *tyrannoi* to be meaningful, therefore, it is crucial to distinguish between the primary or core meaning of the word and the characteristics or 'family resemblances' which are commonly attributed to the ideal or stereotypical type (but not always to every member of the 'family'). Or, to employ a potentially more apt metaphor, these character traits are varying (and progressively worsening) symptoms of a common malady. As an illustration of this method, we might note how Aristotle, for example, defined (*Pol.* 3.8.1279b11–1280a7) an oligarchy not as the rule of the few (which it generally is) but the rule of the rich (which it always is). Oligarchy is only the rule of the few because the rich tend to be few. Or, to take another, Nick Fisher has argued that ὕβρις should be understood primarily as an act of violence intended to cause dishonour and not simply an attitude of overweening arrogance.[33] The latter generally motivates or accompanies the former, but it would be wrong to define ὕβρις simply as 'overconfidence', as 'hybris' is understood in English. Building on Fisher's work, Alan Sommerstein has similarly shown how ἄτη means not 'folly' but 'harm, damage, loss': the association of the one with the other is due to the fact that '*human suffering is the outcome of human folly*'.[34]

In the case of *tyrannos*, the failure to make any such distinction has caused much confusion. The key characteristic of *tyrannis*, as the following discussion will show, is not legality, legitimacy or morality but the possession of exceptional power, honours and wealth. Hence comes the supposition of a 'neutral' meaning. Knox was correct, however, to say that tyrants 'generally' abuse this position (the reasons for which will be explored in the next section). Tyranny is associated with immorality because, to adapt Sommerstein's phrasing, *immorality is the outcome of exceptional power*. If this analysis is correct, it should confirm my earlier argument that *tyrannos* primarily signifies an individual who holds a monopoly of the good things in the *polis* – a position which tends to lead to the negative behavioural traits with which tyranny is generally associated.[35] It is for this reason that neutral and pejorative senses

33 Fisher, *Hybris*.

34 A.H. Sommerstein, '*Atē* in Aeschylus', in D. Cairns (ed.), *Tragedy in Archaic Greek Thought* (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2013), pp. 1–15, at p. 3 (emphasis original).

35 Stewart 'Tyrant's Progress'. The tragic poets therefore hold a similar concept of tyranny to fourth-century philosophers such as Aristotle, who, as is noted by R.K. Balot, *Greed and*

of *tyrannos* cannot be distinguished as the products of distinct ideologies or historical contexts.

Tyrants, like all other rulers and magistrates, wield power. But the word *tyrannos* signifies not merely a powerful individual, but one gifted with complete or even excessive power. This is suggested by Creon in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, when he attempts to prove that he has no interest in overthrowing Oedipus' *tyrannis*. Creon points out that he currently has great power as the tyrant's brother-in-law, but he takes none of the risks associated with tyranny (592–3):

> πῶς δῆτ' ἐμοὶ τυραννὶς ἡδίων ἔχειν
> ἀρχῆς ἀλύπου καὶ δυναστείας ἔφυ;
>
> How then could tyranny (*tyrannis*) be more pleasant for me to have than painless office (*arche*) and power (*dynasteia*)?

Creon has power, essentially the same powers indeed as Oedipus (τά γ' αὔθ' … κράτη, 586), but he is not a tyrant. His authority depends on Oedipus and so is conditional and limited. Oedipus, on the other hand, says that he has been freely granted this exceptional position by the Thebans (383–4). The reason is that he is an exceptional individual, who performed a great service in ridding Thebes of the Sphinx. He is not an unconstitutional ruler, if by 'unconstitutional' we mean a usurper or a magistrate who has exceeded his legal powers. Rather he can only be described as 'unconstitutional' in the sense that the community at Thebes is constituted as the rule of one person, Oedipus.

A tyrant thus possesses not merely power, but absolute power. In the *Antigone*, Creon claims to possess '*all* powers and thrones' (ἐγὼ κράτη δὴ πάντα καὶ θρόνους ἔχω, 173, cf. παντελῆ μοναρχίαν, 1163). Though he asks for the chorus' support for his decree, this is in fact something of a formality, as the chorus themselves acknowledge (211–14):

> σοὶ ταῦτ' ἀρέσκει, παῖ Μενοικέως, ποεῖν
> τὸν τῇδε δύσνουν καὶ τὸν εὐμενῆ πόλει·
> νόμῳ δὲ χρῆσθαι παντί, τοῦτ' ἔνεστί σοι
> καὶ τῶν θανόντων χὠπόσοι ζῶμεν πέρι.

Injustice in Classical Athens (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 23, 54–55, conceives of tyrants as ones who wish to possess the entire *polis*.

> It is your pleasure to do this, son of Menoeceus, to the enemy of this city and to its friend; and this is in your power: to use any law, both for the dead and those of us who live.[36]

In the *Oedipus at Colonus*, by contrast, Creon claims to be acting under the instructions of the Thebans 'though being a tyrant nevertheless' (καὶ τύραννος ὢν ὅμως, 851). Here he implies that tyrants are usually at the beck and call of no one.

A tyrant in tragedy is thus primarily a great man and tyranny is greatness – so much so that Eteocles announces his ambition 'to possess the greatest of the gods, Tyranny' (τὴν θεῶν μεγίστην ὥστ' ἔχειν Τυραννίδα, Eur. *Phoen.* 506), while Hecuba speaks of 'god-like tyranny' (τῆς ἰσοθέου τυραννίδος, *Tro.* 1169). A speaker in Euripides' *Archelaus* (fr. 250 *TrGF*) similarly remarks on:

> τυραννίδ' ἣ θεῶν δευτέρα νομίζεται·
> τὸ μὴ θανεῖν γὰρ οὐκ ἔχει, τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ἔχει.
>
> Tyranny, which is thought second to the gods: immortality it does not possess, but it has everything else.

The possession of tyranny is a sign of ultimate felicity, closest to the supreme happiness enjoyed on Olympus. Admetus, in the *Alcestis*, can thus argue that Pheres ought to have been willing to die for his son as someone who had had a good life, and who had 'lived out his youth in possession of a tyranny' (ἤβησας μὲν ἐν τυραννίδι, 654). Alcestis, by contrast, had previously noted that she was prepared to die for Admetus even though she could have remarried any husband she wished and so lived 'in a prosperous house in possession of a tyranny' (καὶ δῶμα ναίειν ὄλβιον τυραννίδι, 286).

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36 It has sometimes been supposed that Creon has some characteristics of a democratic statesman, but as James Kierstead notes (Kierstead, J. 'Democracy's Humility: A Reading of Sophocles' Antigone', *Polis* 34 (2017), pp. 288–305, at p. 294), this passage shows that Creon should in fact be seen as a 'paradigmatic' tyrant. Compare also E.M. Harris, 'Antigone the lawyer, or the ambiguities of *nomos*', in E.M. Harris and L. Rubinstein (eds.), *The Law and the Courts in Ancient Greece* (London: Duckworth, 2004), pp. 41–80, where it is argued that Creon is in breach of both divine law and the law of the *polis*, despite Creon's assertions to the contrary. Note alternative reading of πού γ' ἔνεστί: Harris, pp. 71–72, in arguing that Creon's decree cannot in fact be regarded as a law, notes that this reading of the text provides 'hardly a ringing endorsement' for either the legality of Creon's decree or his actual ability to make any law he wishes.

A strong association between tyranny and material prosperity is evident here and elsewhere. Glauce in Euripides' *Medea* may be said to have achieved exactly the life that Alcestis renounced out of love for Admetus: she is the daughter of a ruler, mistress of a prosperous house and, with Medea expelled, soon to be the wife of a famous hero. When Jason tells Medea to spare her gifts (for the princess is rich enough, 960–1), she responds (964–7):

> μή μοι σύ· πείθειν δῶρα καὶ θεοὺς λόγος·
> χρυσὸς δὲ κρείσσων μυρίων λόγων βροτοῖς.
> κείνης ὁ δαίμων, κεῖνα νῦν αὔξει θεός,
> νέα τυραννεῖ·
>
> Don't deny me: gifts persuade even the gods, as the saying goes. And gold is better than ten thousand words for mortals. Divine Fortune is with her, the god now increases her estate, in her youth she is a tyrant.

Tyranny is thus a state that is both closest to the gods and one in which the possessor appears to have the favour of the gods.

Since *tyrannis* signifies greatness and prosperity, it is not surprising that rulers are sometimes prepared to acknowledge their status as tyrants. It is also the case, as we have seen, that rulers who reflect on their tyrannical power do so when they have *ceased* to be tyrants. In these cases, it is the severity of a change of fortune from good to bad that is emphasised. Priam is perhaps the archetypical tyrant and he and his family are regularly described as *tyrannoi*: he was a ruler of great power and wealth, blessed with many children, who lived to see his city burned, palace destroyed, sons slain and his wives and daughters enslaved.[37] This same understanding of tyranny is displayed by the messenger in Sophocles' *Antigone*, who reports the fall of the tyrant Creon (*Ant*. 1161–71):

> Κρέων γὰρ ἦν ζηλωτός, ὡς ἐμοί, ποτέ,
> σώσας μὲν ἐχθρῶν τήνδε Καδμείαν χθόνα,
> λαβών τε χώρας παντελῆ μοναρχίαν
> ηὔθυνε, θάλλων εὐγενεῖ τέκνων σπορᾷ·
> καὶ νῦν ἀφεῖται πάντα. καὶ γὰρ ἡδοναὶ
> ὅταν προδῶσιν ἀνδρός, οὐ τίθημ' ἐγὼ
> ζῆν τοῦτον, ἀλλ' ἔμψυχον ἡγοῦμαι νεκρόν.
> πλούτει τε γὰρ κατ' οἶκον, εἰ βούλῃ, μέγα,

37 E.g. Eur. *Hel*. 35 Πριάμου τυράννου; *Andr*. 3 Πριάμου τύραννον ἑστίαν ἀφικόμην; cf. Aesch. *Ag*. 828; Eur. *Hec*. 55, 365–6, 809; *Tro*. 474, 748, 1169.

καὶ ζῆ τύραννον σχῆμ᾽ ἔχων, ἐὰν δ᾽ ἀπῇ
τούτων τὸ χαίρειν, τἄλλ᾽ ἐγὼ καπνοῦ σκιᾶς
οὐκ ἂν πριαίμην ἀνδρὶ πρὸς τὴν ἡδονήν.

For Creon was once to be envied, as far as I could see: he set on a straight course the land of Cadmus having saved it from its enemies and having assumed *complete* (παντελῆ) sole power in the land and flourished with a noble brood of children. And now *all* (πάντα) is lost. For when man is deprived of his pleasures, I do not consider that man to be living, but I think of him as an animate corpse. For you can be rich in your house, if you wish, in a great way and you can live *in the manner of a tyrant* (τύραννον σχῆμ᾽ ἔχων); but if the joy of these things is absent, I would not buy the rest from the man for a whiff of smoke when set against pleasure.

The messenger is clearly sympathetic to Creon and reflects with sorrow upon his reversal of fortune. Yet he also associates Creon's former greatness as 'complete sole power' (παντελῆ μοναρχίαν) with 'the manner of a tyrant' (τύραννον σχῆμα). Here tyranny is primarily characterised by all the ways in which a person can be blessed: greatness, power, riches, children – and all of these to the full. But the irony of tragedy is that tyranny, and everything that goes with it, can be lost in the passing of a day and end in a sorrow as complete as the happiness it originally promised. And this, we will see, is part of the reason why *tyrannos* is not a neutral term and why tyrants are such an important subject for the tragic poets.

4 Does the 'Tyrant's Progress' Exist in Tragedy? – Why *Tyrannos* Is Never an Entirely 'Neutral Term'

In the preceding section we saw that *tyrannos* signified an especially, perhaps excessively, great individual. It is natural, therefore, that this word should be applied often to the heroes of tragedy, such as Oedipus, who are god-like beings in their powers, virtues and abilities. It is also appropriate that this word should be used to describe those who have suffered the ultimate change of fortune: the fall from tyranny to poverty and servitude that is so characteristic of much of tragedy. But while greatness and prosperity are not evils in themselves, and may testify to the extraordinary character and achievements of the tyrant, the Greeks assumed that *greatness naturally preceded a fall*.

As Douglas Cairns has shown, being great or 'thinking big' (μέγα φρονεῖν), can be seen to attract the gods' envy and hostility, even if no offence was intended.

Simply being great can be seen as hybris, since 'excessive pursuit of honour constitutes an implicit assault on those who possess the most *timē* of all' (i.e. the gods).[38] A clear example of the dangers of success is the story of the tyrant Polycrates and his ring, as narrated by Herodotus. Following Polycrates' seizure of power on Samos and military successes, the Pharaoh Amasis urged his ally to be cautious (3.40.2):

> ἡδὺ μὲν πυνθάνεσθαι ἄνδρα φίλον καὶ ξεῖνον εὖ πρήσσοντα, ἐμοὶ δὲ αἱ σαὶ μεγάλαι εὐτυχίαι οὐκ ἀρέσκουσι, ἐπισταμένῳ τὸ θεῖον ὡς ἔστι φθονερόν.
>
> It is pleasant to learn that a man who is a friend and guest-friend is faring well, but your great good fortune does not please me, as I know that the divine is envious.

Amasis' solution is for Polycrates to cast away whatever treasure he most values, and thereby reduce his stock of good fortune. But when Polycrates' prized ring, which he had flung into the sea, is miraculously returned, Amasis knows that Polycrates' end will be bad, paradoxically on account of his continuing excessive good fortune. Similarly, as Cairns argues, 'Oedipus challenges the gods in the way that any successful human is a potential rival to the gods.'[39] Just as greatness is thus not a simple good, the title *tyrannos* can point simultaneously to a ruler's success and his vulnerability. If Cairns is right that merely 'thinking big' is in effect a form of hybris, then this readily explains why the chorus of *Oedipus Tyrannus* see an inherent connection between tyranny and hybris.

Yet, this is not the only manifestation of hybris to result from *tyrannis*. On the contrary, I have argued previously that tyrants in wider Greek thought inevitably undergo progressive moral decay, sometimes over several generations within one dynasty.[40] This gradual corruption is the natural result of an accumulation of power and not simply the result of the divine anger – a case of the god maddening first the ones he wants to destroy. Rather, the contextual pressures that are naturally attendant on sole rule encourage the tyrant to increasingly extreme

38 D.L. Cairns, 'Hybris, dishonour, and thinking big', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 116 (1996), pp. 1–32, at p. 14; cf. M. Canevaro, 'The public charge for hubris against slaves', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 138 (2018), pp. 100–126, at p. 120, who argues that the Athenian law prohibiting hybris committed against slaves did not recognise that slaves were worthy of honour, but rather sanctioned 'self-aggrandizing behaviour which reflected an individual's overestimation of his claims to *timē* beyond community standards and what the community was willing to recognize in him.'

39 D.L. Cairns, 'Divine and human action in the Oedipus Tyrannus', in D.L. Cairns (ed.), *Tragedy in Archaic Greek Thought* (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2013), pp. 119–171, at p. 158.

40 Stewart, 'Tyrant's Progress', p. 210.

measures in order to maintain power. But because tyrants do not tend to monopolise power all at once, this moral decay is potentially a slow process and not all of its symptoms may be recognisable at any one time. If the tragic poets assume a similarly gradual process, then this would potentially explain the apparent multivalence of the word *tyrannos*: the word can be applied comfortably to a variety of rulers who have reached different stages along a common path to perdition.

In order to test this theory, we may ask, first, whether the 'Tyrant's Progress' is discernible in tragedy and, second, whether characters in tragedy show any awareness of an inherent connection between tyrannical power and moral degeneracy. If so, this will suggest again that *tyrannos* is not a 'neutral' term, not because it necessarily signifies a bad ruler, but because it signifies one who has the *potential* to be bad. The assumption that *tyrannos* is a neutral term in tragedy unless the context signifies otherwise would, in that case, be less safe than scholars such as Jebb and Finglass have supposed.

First, let us consider relations between the *polis* and the tyrant. As we have seen, tyrants do not need to be violent usurpers or cruel rulers. At the start of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the Thebans come once again to ask for Oedipus' help. Oedipus responds by pledging to work for the benefit of the *polis*, for which he is much concerned (63–4). In this regard, as scholars such as Jacques Jouanna have in fact noted, Oedipus (though perhaps a more likeable individual) bears a striking resemblance to Creon in *Antigone*, whom James Kierstead has recently dubbed a 'paradigmatic' tyrant and who obviously progresses much further on the path to tyranny throughout the course of that particular play.[41] Both rulers are called upon or aim to set the *polis* right in a moment of crisis (ἀνόρθωσον πόλιν, *OT* 46; cf. *Ant.* 162–3; ἡνίκ' Οἰδίπους ὤρθου πόλιν 167; τοιοῖσδ' ἐγὼ νόμοισι τήνδ' αὔξω πόλιν, 191). But in both plays, the tyrants end in seemingly monopolising citizen rights. Oedipus in his outburst against Creon dramatically calls on the city (ὦ πόλις πόλις, *OT* 629), to which Creon responds that 'I have a share of the *polis*, it is not yours alone' (κἀμοὶ πόλεως μέτεστιν, οὐχὶ σοὶ μόνῳ, 630). Similarly, in the *Antigone* (734–8) Haemon tells his father Creon that the *polis* does not consist of one man alone. This sentiment is echoed by the priest in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, when he argues that Oedipus' interests should be aligned with those of Thebes' inhabitants and that he should not be content with ruling an empty town (54–7). It is true, as Finglass observes, that Oedipus has never made any explicit claim on the *polis*, yet these passages nonetheless mark a latent suspicion that the tyrant will not simply love the *polis* as her son and servant, but rather come to desire her as his own possession.[42] And in desiring tyranny above all, the tyrant can become a threat to the *polis*.

41 J. Jouanna, Sophocle (Paris: 2007), p. 384; Kierstead, 'Democracy's Humility'.

42 Finglass, Oedipus, 370.

Jocasta asks Eteocles whether he wishes to 'be tyrant or to save the city' (πότερα τυραννεῖν ἢ πόλιν σῶσαι θέλεις, Eur. *Phoen.* 560), but her son has already shown a determination to risk war rather than accept limitations to his rule. In each case, the individual personalities may be different, but the structural pressures caused by autocracy are the same.

A natural result of the consolidation of power in a tyrant's hands, and his possession of the largest or (ultimately) the only share in the *politeia*, is that the tyrant can impose his will by force. Or, as Antigone puts it, '*tyrannis* can do and say what it likes' (ἡ τυραννὶς … κἄξεστιν αὐτῇ δρᾶν λέγειν θ' ἃ βούλεται, *Ant.* 506–7). Compulsion becomes a mark of tyranny: Menelaus in Euripides' *Helen* can claim that he was *not* a tyrant because he did not force the Greeks to join him on the expedition to Troy (τύραννος οὐδὲ πρὸς βίαν στρατηλατῶν, 395). In effect, all nominally free citizens are the tyrant's slaves. Lycus in *Heracles* tells a hostile chorus to 'remember that you have become slaves of my *tyrannis*' (μεμνήσεσθε δὲ / δοῦλοι γεγῶτες τῆς ἐμῆς τυραννίδος, 250–1). And although Oedipus does not display the murderous intentions of Lycus, his position in the city is no different from that of other tyrants. The real relation of power between Oedipus and his subjects is made clear by Teiresias (408–10; trans. Finglass):

> εἰ καὶ τυραννεῖς, ἐξισωτέον τὸ γοῦν
> ἴσ' ἀντιλέξαι· τοῦδε γὰρ κἀγὼ κρατῶ.
> οὐ γάρ τι σοὶ ζῶ δοῦλος, ἀλλὰ Λοξίᾳ·
>
> Even if you are a monarch (*tyranneis*), the right of equal reply must be equalised, at least; for of that I too am master. For my life is enslaved not at all to you, but to Loxias.

In a tyranny, as Teiresias here implies, subjects do not usually have the ability to speak as equals (ἴσ' ἀντιλέξαι) that they have in a constitution of equality by the law (ἰσονομία). And, as Finglass notes, such political equality is often opposed to tyranny.[43] Teiresias does not try to deny that Oedipus has the power to prevent free speech, nor does he claim that that power is checked by any law. Rather, he asserts that, despite Oedipus' position as tyrant, he is in a privileged position as the slave of a yet greater power, Apollo. In doing so, he assumes that the other subjects of tyrants are indeed essentially slaves, which, again as Finglass acknowledges, is typical of other 'tragic tyrants'.[44] It is somewhat

43 Finglass Oedipus, p. 300; e.g. *PMG* 893,896, where the Athenian tyrannicides are said to have killed the tyrant Hipparchus and so established ἰσονομία at Athens.

44 Soph. *Ant.* 478–9, fr. 873 *TrGF*; Eur. *Her.* 250–1, *Bacch.* 803.

surprising, therefore, that Finglass nonetheless translates τυραννεῖς above as 'you are a monarch'. Once again, if we assume an entirely 'neutral' meaning, the significance of the word is lost.

Because *tyrannis*, as we have seen, is a position of supreme power and success it is naturally an object of envy not merely of the gods (as noted above) but of the tyrant's followers. It is Oedipus' suspicions of a plot that prompt his angry cry 'Oh riches and tyranny and cunning of cunning' (ὦ πλοῦτε καὶ τυραννὶ καὶ τέχνη τέχνης, 380). While Oedipus did not (he believes) commit violence in order to achieve his position as tyrant, he implies that this is a natural way in which a *tyrannis* might be acquired whilst mocking Creon's supposed conspiracy (540–2; trans. Finglass):

> ἆρ' οὐχὶ μῶρόν ἐστι τοὐγχείρημά σου,
> ἄνευ τε πλούτου καὶ φίλων τυραννίδα
> θηρᾶν, ὃ πλήθει χρήμασίν θ' ἁλίσκεται;
>
> Isn't this enterprise of yours foolish, to hunt without wealth and friends after monarchy (*tyrannis*), something that is captured by a group of people and by money?

But once again, we need not assume *tyrannis* to be a 'neutral' term, as Finglass does when he translates it as 'monarchy'. As Finglass notes, the most obvious parallel is Pisistratus in Athens, who in Herodotus is said to have strengthened his tyranny with money and mercenaries (ἐρρίζωσε τὴν τυραννίδα ἐπικούροισί τε πολλοῖσι καὶ χρημάτων συνόδοισι, 1.64.1).[45] Oedipus imagines here that a violent coup aided by foreign troops would be Creon's most obvious route to power. And yet tyrants are not all usurpers: what unites them is possession of *tyrannis* which, because it is widely desired, encourages coups. Creon, the prospective usurper according to Oedipus, desires not just to become a tyrant *but to possess Oedipus' tyranny* (λῃστής τ' ἐναργὴς τῆς ἐμῆς τυραννίδος, 535).

Because of these potential threats, Creon argues (*OT* 584–6), the tyrant lives a life full of fear. From this, we may infer, the 'tyrannical' traits of paranoia, distrust and isolation follow naturally. Creon, unlike the tyrant Oedipus, is not entirely isolated from the rest of the people but can intercede with Oedipus on their behalf and so win their gratitude (596–7). As Finglass points out, Oedipus' situation is exactly analogous with that of the tyrant Hieron in Xenophon's dialogue, who complains of his enforced isolation as tyrant (6.2–3).[46] And paranoia also encourages another tyrannical trait: violence. Oedipus' fear, and that of

45 Finglass, Oedipus, p. 344.
46 Finglass Oedipus, pp. 359–360.

other tyrants, is ultimately the same one that inspired the tyrant Thrasybulus of Miletus' well-known advice to the Corinthian Periander (Hdt. 5.92.ζ1–η1): cut down the highest-sprouting corn, kill the *aristoi*! Creon indicates that as a tyrant he would be drawn necessarily to crime because of his fear (590–591):

> νῦν μὲν γὰρ ἐκ σοῦ πάντ' ἄνευ φόβου φέρω,
> εἰ δ' αὐτὸς ἦρχον, πολλὰ κἂν ἄκων ἔδρων.
>
> For now I obtain everything from you without fear, but if I myself were ruling, I would be doing many things against my will.

Here Finglass comments: 'Creon anticipates having to do things that he does not want in order to maintain his rule', which presumably includes the shedding of blood.[47] This is made explicit in Euripides' *Suppliants*, where Theseus contends that rulers kill the best men out of fear for their *tyrannis* (δεδοικὼς τῆς τυραννίδος πέρι, 446). Similarly, in the *Bellerophon* it is noted, as a sign that there is no divine justice, that *tyrannis* 'kills many and takes away their possessions' (φήμ' ἐγὼ τυραννίδα / κτείνειν τε πλείστους κτημάτων τ' ἀποστερεῖν, fr. 286.5–6 *TrGF*) and that in doing these things tyrants are 'blessed' (εὐδαίμονες, 8). Tyrants who do not adopt this pattern of behaviour may not live long. In Euripides' *Medea*, the Corinthian tyrant Creon fails to act tyrannically by driving Medea into exile because, he admits, he does not have the stomach, or 'tyrannical temper', to do what is necessary (ἥκιστα τοὐμὸν λῆμ' ἔφυ τυραννικόν, 348). Tyrants must either learn to be ruthless, even if they are not so naturally, or perish like Creon in *Medea*.

Tyranny therefore becomes a form of life that *leads* to crime, whether the tyrant wishes it or not. But it is not simply fear that encourages hybristic tendencies, but also the feeling of pride and superiority that naturally accompanies greatness. Such is their own self-estimation that tyrants will not gladly recognise the claims of others. As Agamemnon in the *Ajax* puts it, 'it is not easy for a tyrant to show reverence' (τόν τοι τύραννον εὐσεβεῖν οὐ ῥᾴδιον, 1350). Nor, being used to obedience, will tyrants happily tolerate opposition or advice, something which, as in the case of Creon in *Antigone* or Pentheus in *Bacchae*, can have disastrous consequences. The Nurse in *Medea* (119–121) comments:

> δεινὰ τυράννων λήματα καί πως
> ὀλίγ' ἀρχόμενοι, πολλὰ κρατοῦντες
> χαλεπῶς ὀργὰς μεταβάλλουσιν.

47 Finglass Oedipus, p. 358.

> Terrible are the spirits of tyrants and somehow being ruled in little, but having power in much, they change their tempers with difficulty.

Moderation and self-control are similarly hard for the exceedingly prosperous to master. Creon in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* knows this and, in apparently renouncing tyranny, shows he is one 'who understands how to have self-control' (ὅστις σωφρονεῖν ἐπίσταται, 589). A similar attitude to tyranny is also found in Euripides' *Hippolytus* (1013–15), where again the hero denies any ambition for tyranny.

> ἀλλ᾽ ὡς τυραννεῖν ἡδὺ τοῖσι σώφροσιν;
> ἥκιστ᾽, ἐπεί τοι τὰς φρένας διέφθορεν
> θνητῶν ὅσοισιν ἀνδάνει μοναρχία.
>
> But will you say that ruling as a tyrant is pleasant for those who are self-controlled? Hardly, since indeed sole rule destroys the minds of mortals who find it pleasing.

The transmitted text of line 1015 is probably corrupt and some scholars have even suspected that the whole passage is an interpolation.[48] The text above incorporates Barrett's suggestion of ἐπεί τοι in place of the manuscript reading ἥκιστα γ᾽, εἰ μή. If correct, this would make good sense: Hippolytus, as a man of self-control, would (like the Theban Creon) avoid tyranny because *it tends to destroy* the very quality that he values most highly.

5 Conclusion

These, I argue, are the reasons why tragic heroes are frequently labelled *tyrannoi*, even as minor characters show a marked disinclination to address them as such or imply a connection with *tyrannis* in their presence. If we assume a neutral and value-free reading of *tyrannos* in all instances except where the context compels a negative interpretation, then we are in danger of eliding its subtle and latent undertones. A *tyrannos* is a great, powerful and fortunate man. The unwise might be tempted to be proud of such wealth and power: it is not surprising that tyrants

48 See W.S. Barrett, *Euripides*: Hippolytos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 353–354; J.H. Kells, 'Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1009–16, and Greek women's property', *Classical Quarterly* 17 (1967), 181–3; D. Kovacs, 'Tyrants and demagogues in tragic interpolation', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 23 (1982), pp. 31–50, at pp. 45–48.

and their supporters are prepared at times to admit frankly the status of their rule as a *tyrannis*. The wise know that tyranny invites eventual corruption and ruin. Characters of inferior status appear to know this too and seem to fear to pronounce the word *tyrannis* in the presence of their rulers.

The pattern of the Tyrant's Progress can help us understand why a tyrant (such as Oedipus) can both be the spawn of hybris and also a good man struggling against a terrible and unavoidable fate. The Greeks, including the tragic poets, understood that the personality of a ruler is less important than the structural pressures of absolute rule, which tend to force a tyrant to adopt tyrannical patterns of behaviour, whether he wishes it or not. The stereotype of the 'despotic tyrant' and the 'blessed tyrant', as Janek Kucharski has put it, 'represent the two faces of the tyrannical Other.'[49] But, more than that, it is the tyrant's fortune and greatness that *leads* directly to despotism and disaster. *Tyrannos* is never a neutral term and the tragedians' understanding of tyranny differs little from that of Plato and Aristotle in the fourth century.[50]

49 Kucharski, '*Tyrannoi*', p. 185.

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