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The ‘Ode to Man’ in Sophocles’ *Antigone* and Seamus Heaney’s *The Burial at Thebes*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the first stasimon of Sophocles’ *Antigone* and its 2004 translation by Seamus Heaney. Both texts explore human nature and the limits of human power. Sophocles’ text was affected by Sophism and its founder Protagoras, while Heaney’s text refers more explicitly to Protagoras. The “Ode to Man” warns humans and raises ethical questions regarding citizenship, duty, respect to the gods, and it propagates that humankind should accept human essence as it is. The article starts with a comparative analysis of the texts and outlines the influence of Protagoras on both authors and its implications. The last stanza in Sophocles’ and Heaney’s texts gives a warning that encapsulates the moral stance of both poets towards humanity. The comparative analysis aims to show the way Sophocles and Heaney approach humankind with a cautionary tale regarding their contemporary current affairs. As Heaney said “I can’t think of a case where poems changed the world, but what they do is to change people’s understanding of what’s going on in the world” (O’ Driscoll, 2009: 68).

KEY WORDS

Antigone, Sophocles, *The Burial at Thebes*, Seamus Heaney, Protagoras, Ancient Greek Drama, Translation, *Ode to Man*.

The first stasimon of Sophocles’ *Antigone* consists of a philosophic account on human nature. It gives the incentive for reflexion on the nature of humanity to scholars and philosophers alike. The ode is usually interpreted as— ironic or genuine— praise of humankind and its achievements (Kamerbeek, 1978: 13-15; O’ Brien, 1978: 176-178). At this juncture of the play a song about the nature of man could appear out of context to the audience. However, according to Segal (1966: 64), the focal point of the entire play is human nature. Antigone and Creon function as two complementary aspects of a whole— human essence— that is simultaneously simpler and more complex than the Hegelian fusion of the opposites (Segal, 1966: 64).¹ Therefore, the “Ode to Man” appears in alignment with the play’s central idea. Having in mind the fact that the “Ode to Man” is an organic part of *Antigone*, both the original and Seamus Heaney’s translation of the stasimon in *The Burial at Thebes* will be analyzed focusing on the philosophic undertones of the ode. The “Ode to Man” has led to conflicting interpretations because of its ambiguity. The present analysis aims to trace and analyze the influence of the philosopher Protagoras on both texts, indicating the fundamental philosophical approach of humanity encapsulated in the ode. This paper presents the influence

of Protagoras' ideology on Sophocles and how Heaney managed to give prominence to this influence through his translation.

Preceding the analysis, the texts from *Antigone* and *The Burial at Thebes* will be shortly presented.² The "Ode to Man" has two strophe and antistrophe pairs. In the first pair, Sophocles describes man's domination over the natural elements, and, in the second, he presents man's domination over himself along with the creation of society and man's cultural achievements. The Chorus points out that humanity, despite its achievements, could proceed to either further progress or to calamity. Heaney follows a different structure; his stasimon consists of five stanzas. In the first pair he describes man's achievements, a theogony being one of them. The second pair is similar to the original even though the image of the hunter is omitted. Heaney's last stanza, however, is a warning to the "δεινός" [horrible, terrific, wondrous],³ an open letter to George W. Bush (Heaney, 2005: 170) with a harsher and more sinister tone than the end of the final antistrophe of Sophocles.

Sophocles' text has been described as Protagorean (O'Brien, 1978: 47, 59). Heaney perceives the influence of the sophist and makes it even more explicit in his fourth stanza. It begins with a homoeoteleuton "Home-maker, thought-taker, measure of all things" (H 17) which echoes the *figura etymologica* of "παντόπορος· ἄπορος" [all-resourceful; he meets nothing in the future without resource (Sophocles, 1994: 37)] of Sophocles without, however, transferring its meaning. The word "παντόπορος" is usually translated as "all-resourceful" and it was used by Sophocles ἄπαξ (Kamerbeek 1978: 84). Heaney disregards the only limitation to human power listed by Sophocles, death, and alludes to Protagoras with the phrase "measure of all things". This gives quite a different sense to Heaney's passage because, according to the poet, human is omnipotent, his/her progress cannot be stopped. This idea of continuous progress is central in Protagoras' thought; hence, the quotation of his fundamental maxim emphasizes the optimism of the ode. "Measure of all things" is the first phrase of Protagoras' work *Refutations* (Sextus Against the Schoolmasters, VII 60) or *Truth* (Plato, *Theaetetus* 151 E-152 A) (O'Brien, 1972: 18-19). This maxim has introduced relativity and subjectivity in ancient Greek thought and emphasized how one's personal feelings and beliefs could become a measure of reality, the being "εἶναι" is replaced by "εἶναί τι", the subjective impression (Αυγελής, 2005: 173-175).

Protagoras (446-410 B.C.) is considered the founder of Sophism. The interpretation of his famous maxim *Πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ μὴ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν.* (as quoted in Plato, *Theaetetus*, 161c)

Of all things the measure is man, of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not. (transl. by O'Brien, 1972: 4) is problematic because of certain lexical ambiguities. However, the most common interpretation is that by the term "things" Protagoras implies both objects and abstract qualities like good, evil and justice (Αυγελής, 2005: 174). Man according to Protagoras' statement is measure of all things that they exist or that "they are in a certain way" (Αυγελής, 2005: 174). Man as measure is rendered the criterion for everything; therefore, the being is defined by the impression of a certain individual (Αυγελής, 2005: 175). As a result, Protagoras questions absolute knowledge; nothing can be verified because man understands everything not as it is but as it seems to be (Αυγελής, 2005: 176). Based on this way of thought sophists came to question the absolute validity of ethics and justice (Αυγελής, 2005: 177). This idea is implied by Heaney and contradicted later in his translation, through the use of the image of the weaver. This particular metaphor shows how some values are unalterable and unquestionable; they always bring rewards and respect. Sophocles employs the metaphor of the weaver in order to portray the lawful citizen who equally respects the divine and the human law (S 368).⁴ This quaint imagery demonstrates the way in which the ideal balance between the divine and the worldly can be accomplished. It has been argued that the weaver image refers to Antigone because of its implications with femininity (O'Brien, 1978: 49). Although it is an interesting observation, it cannot be supported. Antigone does not manage to maintain the perfect balance between human and divine law; her defiance of Creon's edict could lead to the destruction of the city, thus rendering every Theban "ἄπολις" [without a polis, city-state]. Heaney retains the image of the weaver in his translation but he omits respect to human law as one of the obligations of the "ὑψίπολις" [one with a high position in the city or one with a prosperous city]. He only mentions abstract values and respect for the divine (H 19-21). Heaney's appeal to the divine significantly points out that to the Irish poet human laws are conventions of the time, alterable and subject to the interpretation of every Protagorean homo mensura, while abstract values are eternally valid.

There are two other allusions to Protagorean thought in the "Ode to Man". The first is the idea of continuous progress. In Plato's *Protagoras* 318A, the sophist says "Young man, if you associate with me, you shall on the first day you enter my company, go home a better man for it, and so too on the next day; and everyday you shall unfailingly improve" (Plato, *Protagoras* 318A; O'Brien, 1972: 8). The idea of progress is quite obvious in Heaney's translation. In Sophocles, however, it is more implicit. Protagoras introduced the idea that "ἀρετή" [virtue] can be taught and thus everyone can participate in the matters of the state. The above view is

in harmony with the ideal of democracy and illustrates how everyone is equally capable of greatness. This idea can be detected in Sophocles' text when he states that man's abilities lead him "τότε μὲν κακόν, ἄλλοτ' ἐπ' ἐσθλόν" (S 367) [and he advances sometimes to evil, at other times to good (Sophocles, 1994: 37)]. The term "ἐσθλόν" [good] carries various political connotations; it refers to the nobility who defined themselves as "good" in contrast with the plebs. By stating that man is capable of both, Sophocles echoes this democratic idea of Protagoras.

The second reference to Protagoras is in the stasimon of *The Burial at Thebes* and the description of the birth of the gods. Protagoras' theological views were notorious in antiquity. According to Diogenes Laertius IX.51, he stated about the gods: "I cannot know either that they exist or that they do not exist; for there is much to prevent one's knowing: the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of man's life" (O'Brien, 1972: 4). Heaney's approach is on a similar note: he states that gods were created after humans, implying that they might have been invented by them. However, the Chorus states later that "When he yields to his gods [...] The city will reward him" (H 19-22). This contradiction is amended as the poet's thought progresses. Heaney, having in mind the importance of the gods as elements that provide stability, decides to finally retain their status intact. This is not the case in Sophocles: he genuinely believes that the gods provide security in life as the unchanging elements, as the conditions of our lives.

Finally, the myth of Protagoras in Plato's dialogue has far too many similarities with the "Ode to Man". Even though Plato's dialogue is set ten years after the staging of *Antigone*, the myth Plato's Protagoras tells expresses genuine beliefs of his teachings and is exemplary of the general climate of Athens of those times (O'Brien, 1978: 176). The sophist was teaching in Athens at the time of the staging of the play and the "Protagorean outlook" was the prevailing way of thought; namely optimism and confidence in man (O'Brien, 1978: 47). Sophocles embraces these ideas even though his optimism is restrained; he reminds man his limits and the significance of reverence. The "Ode to Man" of both *Antigone* and *The Burial at Thebes* echoes the myth of Protagoras (320C- 322D). The references detected are thematic and lexical. Protagoras describes the creation of man and how Zeus gave all men the sense of justice in order to allow them to live together in societies. Humans first acquire technical abilities— fire and the arts of Hephaestus and Athena— that Prometheus steals for them and then they form societies to protect themselves from the elements. Similarly, in "Ode to Man" Sophocles firstly lists man's technical achievements and then his social achievements. In

Protagoras' myth societies cannot function properly because man lacks the political art, therefore Zeus sends Hermes to deliver “reverence and justice”:

“To everyone”, said Zeus, “and let everyone have a share in them for cities would not come into being if only few shared in these as they do in other arts. And lay down this law by my order: let them put to death as a plague on the city the man who cannot share in reverence and justice”. (O'Brien, 1972: 26-27)

According to Protagoras then, the most important values are reverence and justice. The same values are considered the most important by both Sophocles' and Heaney's Chorus. In addition, the play deals with the fact that these innate— according to Protagoras— values are treated completely differently by Antigone and Creon. Both characters overstep reverence and justice in their attempt to uphold them. That is why they are punished as “plague”, rendering themselves “ἄπολις” [without a polis, a city].

Seamus Heaney managed to perceive the influence of Sophism and Protagoras on Sophocles' text in an insightful way and projected it explicitly in his translation, adapting it to contemporary circumstances. Man nowadays, as a new homo mensura questions various aspects of life that uphold the order of the world. Heaney, according to his beliefs on the purpose of poetry takes up the role to alert the public through his translation of Antigone. As he has stated “I can't think of a case where poems changed the world, but what they do is they change people's understanding of what's going on in the world” (O' Driscoll, 2009: 68). Both texts present the achievements of humanity but contradict them with its limits. The end of the stasimon is sinister, as it is a clear warning to the “δεινός”, to this wondrous being. Even though both poets adopt Protagoras' optimistic way of approaching the world, they moderate it by reminding humans their limits and by warning them of the dire consequences should they transgress them. The last stanza in Sophocles' and Heaney's poem gives a warning that encapsulates the moral stance of the poets towards humanity. Sophocles and Heaney offer humankind a cautionary tale regarding their contemporary current affairs and the stance they should keep.

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Footnotes

1. Segal in his analysis of the ode detects echoes of the language and themes of the ode in the episodeia, thus showing the organic way in which the stasimon is related to the entire play. For the parallels see Segal, 1966: 73-80.
2. The texts are in Appendix 1. All references to the texts will be abbreviated with an S for Sophocles and an H for Heaney and the line number.
3. All translations are by the author of this paper unless specified, because of the need of linguistic precision for the analysis.
4. Scholars disagree on the correct reading of S 368. For the arguments justifying the lectio “παρείρων” see Lloyd-Jones & Wilson, 1990: 124. The author of this paper chose to use the reading of the 1990 Oxford critical edition.

Appendix 1: Texts

Sophocle. (1955). *Trag (vol. 1)*, (A. Dain & P. Mazon eds.), Paris: Les Belles Lettres, [repr. 1967 (1st edn. rev.)], 332-375.

ΧΟ. Πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδεν ἀν-
θρώπου δεινότερον πέλει·
τοῦτο καὶ πολιοῦ πέραν
πόντου χειμερίῳ νότῳ
χωρεῖ, περιβρυχίοισιν
περῶν ὑπ' οἴδμασιν, θεῶν
τε τὰν ὑπερτάταν, Γᾶν
ἄφθιτον, ἀκαμάταν, ἀποτρύεται,
ἰλλομένων ἀρότρων ἔτος εἰς ἔτος,
ἵππεῖῳ γένει πολεῦων.

Κουφονόων τε φῶλον ὀρ-
νίθων ἀμφιβαλὼν ἄγει,
καὶ θηρῶν ἀγρίων ἔθνη
πόντου τ' εἰναλίαν φύσιν
σπείραισι δικτυοκλώστοις
περιφραδῆς ἀνήρ· κρατεῖ
δὲ μηχαναῖς ἀγραύλου
θηρὸς ὀρεσσιβάτα, λασιαύχενά θ'
ἵππον <ὑπ>άξεται ἀμφίλοφον ζυγὸν
οὔρειόν τ' ἀκμηῆτα ταῦρον.

Ant. 1.

Καὶ φθέγμα καὶ ἀνεμόεν
φρόνημα καὶ ἀστυνόμους
ὀργὰς ἐδιδάξατο, καὶ δυσαύλων
πάγων <έν>αίθρεια καὶ
δύσομβρα φεύγειν βέλη
παντοπόρος· ἄπορος ἐπ' οὐδὲν ἔρχεται
τὸ μέλλον· Ἄϊδα μόνον
φεῦξιν οὐκ ἐπάξεται, νό-
σων δ' ἀμηχάνων φυγὰς
ξυμπέφρασται.

Str. 2.

Σοφὸν τι τὸ μηχανόεν
τέχνας ὑπὲρ ἐλπίδ' ἔχων,
τοτὲ μὲν κακόν, ἄλλοτ' ἐπ' ἐσθλὸν ἔρπει,
νόμους παρείρων χθονὸς
θεῶν τ' ἔνορκον δίκαν
ὑψίπολις· ἄπολις ὄτῳ τὸ μὴ καλὸν
ξύνεστι τόλμας χάριν·
μήτ' ἐμοὶ παρέστιος γέ-
νοιτο μήτ' ἴσον φρονῶν
ὅς τάδ' ἔρδοι.

Ant. 2.

Heaney. S. (2004). *The Burial at Thebes: Sophocles' Antigone*. London: Faber and Faber, 16-17.

Chorus

Among the many wonders of the world
Where is the equal of this creature, man?
First he was shivering on the shore in skins,
Or padding in a dug-out, terrified of drowning,
Then he took up oars, put tackle on the mast 5
And steered himself by the stars through gales.

Once upon a time from the womb of the earth
The gods were born and he bowed down
To worship them. He worked the land,
Stubbed the forests and harnessed stallions 10
His furrows cropped, he feasted his eyes
On hay and herds as far as the horizon.

The wind is no more swift or mysterious
Than his mind and words; he has mastered thinking,
Roofed his house against hail and rain
And worked out laws for living together. 15

Home-maker, thought-taker, measure of all things,
He can heal with herbs and read the heavens.
Nothing seems beyond him. When he yields to his gods,
When truth is the treadle of his loom
And justice the shuttle, he'll be shown respect – 20
The city will reward him. But let him once

Overstep what the city allows,
Tramp down right or treat the law
Willfully, as his own word,
Then let this wonder of the world remember: 25
He'll have put himself beyond the pale.
When he comes begging we will turn our backs.