

CHARACTERIZATION IN SOPHOCLES

by

Michael Lloyd

(University College Dublin)

The introduction to this volume has a section on cognitive narratology (→) which is very helpful for the study of character and characterization in Sophocles. This chapter will accordingly begin with an examination of the relevant schemas available to Sophocles and his audience, followed by a discussion of how the schemas are modified by ‘bottom-up’ processing in the earlier parts of the plays.¹ The chapter will then investigate the various textual techniques used by Sophocles to construct character throughout the plays. This will include discussion of the question ‘who characterizes?’. There will inevitably be a certain amount of overlap between these two sections, but it seems worthwhile to give particular attention to the presentation of characters in the earlier parts of the plays in view of the importance of the effect of ‘primacy’ discussed in the introduction. Finally, the chapter will address the nature of character in Sophocles, with attention to such issues as the long-term stability of traits attributed to characters and the question of character development.

The real-world schema

The most basic schema used by Sophocles relates to human behaviour in general, and to the use by audiences of real-world interpretative skills for reading characters in drama. The real-world schema can be defined as ‘the cognitive structures and inferential mechanisms that readers have already developed for real-life people’.² This will undergo fairly rapid adjustment, especially when reading texts from other cultures, but characters in Sophocles would not be intelligible without some sort of real-world schema. Brian Vickers began his book *Towards Greek Tragedy* by stating that in Greek tragedy ‘people love and hate as we do’, for which he has come under attack for ignoring ‘the differences between ancient and modern constructions of

¹ The Greek word *skhēma* can, as it happens, mean ‘character’ or ‘role’, but ‘schema’ is used in a different sense in this chapter.

² Culpeper 2001: 10; cf. 27-28, 63-69.

affective relations and obligations'.³ [end of p. 337] Our bottom-up processing will doubtless involve consideration of the implications of the words *philia* and *erōs*, but it would be impossible to understand *Antigone* without any experience of affective relations. Such experience can of course be more or less direct. We do not need to have experienced isolation and pain exactly like that of Philoctetes to bring relevant understanding and expectations to the play. This does not imply any belief in unchanging human nature, confusion between characters in drama and real people, or indeed naïve confidence in our understanding of real people.⁴

The real-world schema relates not only to aspects of character, such as emotions, but also to character-types. This schema is in some ways more problematic for Sophocles than for some other Greek authors in that his characters are figures from myth who rarely correspond to real-world character-types. He contrasts in this with the more realistic character portrayal in Euripides (→).⁵ Nevertheless, the audience may apply a real-world schema even to figures who are remote from everyday experience. This is clear from some of the assumptions about characters such as Atossa and Agamemnon discussed in the chapter on Aeschylus (→). Oedipus (*Oedipus Tyrannus*) immediately invites interpretation in terms of the king schema. This is suggested by his entry from the palace to address a group of suppliants, dressed in clothes appropriate to his royal status, and reinforced by the terms in which he is addressed by the Priest (e.g. *OT* 14, 40). The king schema is a predominantly literary construct and does not correspond directly to a specific human type with which the audience would have been acquainted, although Oedipus can be interpreted more broadly as a representative of political authority which would have real-world analogies.⁶

³ Vickers 1973: 3, criticized by Goldhill 1990: 103. Vickers actually knows something about *philia* and 'the interlinked social groups which give an individual his identity and political status' (113).

⁴ Cf. Easterling 1990: 88-89.

⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1460b33-34: 'Sophocles said that he portrayed characters as they ought to be, while Euripides portrayed them as they are', on which see Csapo 2010: 124-125.

⁶ Cf. Gould 1988: 148 = 2001: 250. On the ruler schema for Creon (*Antigone*), see Griffith 1999: 38 n. 114, 122 (note on *Ant.* 7-8), noting that a father schema comes to the fore in the Haemon scene.

The real-world schema can be misleading when it is insufficiently modified by bottom-up processing as the play develops. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood thus appeals explicitly to 5th-C. schemas when she argues that ‘the Athenian audience would have perceived Antigone as a woman out of her proper place acting against what is considered proper female behaviour’.⁷ The original [end of p. 338] audience would indeed have brought to the play a real-world schema of behaviour appropriate to a young unmarried woman (*parthenos*), which seems relevant in the opening scene, but it becomes increasingly troubling when it is employed insistently by Creon as the play proceeds. Creon initially invites interpretation in terms of the schema of the good ruler when he expresses admirable sentiments about the importance of the *polis* in his opening speech (*Ant.* 162-210), but this too is soon modified.⁸

The genre schema

Secondly, Sophocles exploits a genre schema which creates expectations about how characters will be represented in a tragedy. We shall not (e.g.) be surprised to find that many of them are of royal status. On a less general level, an actantial or syntactic approach is relevant. All Sophocles’ plays feature ‘hero’ and ‘foil’ figures, and our reading of these characters cannot be separated from our understanding of their roles.⁹ The characters in *Oedipus Coloneus* can be related to their equivalents in other suppliant plays, with (e.g.) Creon in the role of the threatening outsider which in other plays is regularly a herald.¹⁰ Prophets in tragedy are always right, so no informed spectator will have any doubt about the veracity of Tiresias (*Antigone*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*); it will also be assumed that his advice will be disbelieved or resented by the rulers to whom he addresses it. Theseus (*Oedipus at Colonus*) activates the ‘Athenian’ schema: ‘Athenians in tragedy usually display virtue, piety, and respect for suppliants and the democratic principle of freedom of speech’.¹¹

⁷ Sourvinou-Inwood 1989: 140.

⁸ See (e.g.) the critique of Sourvinou-Inwood by Foley 1995. The various terms used for Antigone in the play (*pais*, *neanis*, *korē*, *numphē*, *parthenos*, *gunē*) are listed by Griffith 1999: 38 n. 113.

⁹ See Knox 1964.

¹⁰ See Burian 1974.

¹¹ Hall 1997: 103.

Plot requirements may supersede coherence of character, but are not necessarily incompatible with it.¹² In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, the play could not continue if Oedipus had immediately accepted Tiresias' statements of his true identity (*OT* 362 etc.), although this does not rule out an additional explanation in terms of character.¹³ Creon's inclination to secrecy (*OT* 91-92) is consistent with his attitudes elsewhere (cf. *OT* 1429-1431; *OC* 755-760), but this [end of p. 339] fairly trivial character point would not in itself explain his words here and they also have the functional purpose of prompting Oedipus' revealing reply (cf. *OT* 1287-1288).¹⁴ A Greek tragedy also comprises a variety of formal structures, which have their own integrity and momentum. An example is the iambic recapitulation of Electra's lyrics in her first speech (*El.* 254-309).¹⁵ The forensic style of her speech in her scene with Clytemnestra (*El.* 558-609) is partly determined by the conventions of the agon (formal debate), and cannot wholly be explained in terms of character. The play has an intricate linguistic texture, from which a character cannot simply be extracted.¹⁶

The myth schema

Thirdly, there is the myth schema, i.e. what is known about the characters from earlier versions in literature and myth.¹⁷ This schema is difficult to assess, since we cannot know for sure what knowledge Sophocles assumed in his audience. Nevertheless, it would clearly be insufficient to discuss Sophocles' portrayal of (e.g.) Heracles or Ajax as if he had invented these characters.

The name is the irreducible core of the myth schema. Seymour Chatman gives a lucid summary of Roland Barthes' influential discussion of the name in fiction: 'a

¹² See Wilamowitz 1917; Lloyd-Jones 1972.

¹³ See Goldhill 1986: 173-174.

¹⁴ Cf. Culpeper 2001: 146: 'we can assume that character behaviour [sc. in fiction] has additional significance or relevance, so that our processing efforts will receive sufficient cognitive rewards'.

¹⁵ For discussion of this convention, see Lloyd 2005: 40.

¹⁶ On rhetoric and character in *Electra*, see (e.g.) Budelmann 2000: 66-71; Finglass 2007: 173-176.

¹⁷ Yoon 2012: 2-3 contrasts anonymous characters, for whom there is no myth schema.

kind of ultimate residue of personality, not a quality but a locus of qualities, the narrative-noun that is endowed with but never exhausted by the qualities, the narrative-adjectives'.¹⁸ This is a more fundamental aspect of naming than the 'speaking names', which are especially prominent in Aristophanes (→); Ajax's association of his name ('Aias' in Greek) with the lament *aiai* is the most notable example in Sophocles (*Aj.* 430-431). One could develop Barthes' theory to illuminate mythical characters. The name is a rigid designator (which designates the same object in all possible worlds in which that object exists and never designates anything else),¹⁹ making it intelligible to say (e.g.) that the Helen of Homer's *Iliad* is the same character as the Helen of Euripides' *Helen*, [end of p. 340] although she has different traits and experiences. This aspect of names is also discussed in the chapter on Aeschylus (→).

The characters and main events of *Ajax* were well-known from earlier versions.²⁰ The first word of the play ('always') engages the audience in complicity with Athena's knowledge that Odysseus' behaviour is typical, and the opening dialogue expresses her traditionally close relationship with him. Odysseus' myth schema is also exploited in *Philoctetes*, where Achilles' contrasting myth schema is the basis for our reading of Neoptolemus.²¹ In *Ajax*, the audience needs no elaboration of the epithet 'shieldbearer' (*Aj.* 19), the statement that Ajax was 'angry because of the arms of Achilles' (*Aj.* 41), Odysseus' enmity (*Aj.* 2, 18, 78-79, 122), or Ajax's heroic qualities (*Aj.* 119-120). Ajax's martial greatness can be alluded to as something well known (e.g. *Aj.* 154-161, 205, 364-365, 502), and it is essential to Sophocles' presentation of him that it can be taken for granted that he is a great warrior.

The myth schema of Heracles (*Trachiniae*) was also well-established. The first reference to him is as 'the famous son of Zeus and Alcmene' (*Trach.* 19), his labours are mentioned as well known (*Trach.* 29-35, 112-121), and other familiar features are his drunkenness (*Trach.* 268), violence (*Trach.* 351-365, 772-782), and sexual excess (*Trach.* 459-460). As with Ajax, significant aspects of his greatness are understood from the myth rather than established in the text.

¹⁸ Chatman 1978: 131; cf. Barthes 1970: 196-197 (Section LXXXI).

¹⁹ Rigid designators: Kripke [1972] 1980.

²⁰ See Garvie 1998: 1-6; Finglass 2011: 26-41.

²¹ See (e.g.) Knox 1964: 121-122; Schein 2013: 23-25.

Sophocles also exploits the myth schema in vignettes of characters who appear briefly offstage. Examples are Calchas (*Aj.* 749-755), Agamemnon (*El.* 566-569), Eurytus (*Trach.* 262-269), and Laius (*OT* 800-809). These brief descriptions, vivid as they are, gain resonance from what we know about the characters in other contexts.

Establishing character

In some plays (e.g. *Ajax*, *Trachiniae*, *Philoctetes*), character is established by activation of the myth schema together with demonstration of the author's particular interpretation of it. The 'first appearance', an important characterization technique in Homer (→), is exploited by Sophocles as it is by most dramatists. *Ajax* (*Ajax*) would not be intelligible without the myth schema, but in that context his few lines in the opening scene establish a highly distinctive character. [end of p. 341]

In other plays, it is clear that Sophocles needs to do more to establish his characters. *Oedipus* (*Oedipus Tyrannus*), for example, is characterized in considerable detail early in the play. This suggests either that Sophocles did not have an established myth schema for his character, however notorious his deeds may have been (e.g. Antiphanes fr. 189 K-A), or at any rate that he was determined to override any such schema as existed. *Oedipus* is indeed so notable an expression of the 5th-C. enlightenment that it is difficult to imagine a remotely comparable figure being created very much earlier.²² *Oedipus'* second speech (*OT* 58-77) illustrates many of his main characteristics:

Pitiable children, I know why you have come, for I am well aware that you are all sick; and, sick as you are, there is none who is as sick as I. Your pain comes to each alone in himself, and to no one else, while my soul grieves for the city and for myself and for you together. So you are not rousing me from sleep, but be sure that I have wept much and gone down many paths in the wanderings of thought. I discovered one remedy in my investigations, and this I have done: I sent Creon son of Menoeceus, my brother-in-law, to the Pythian house of Phoebus, so that he might find out what I should do or say to save the city. And already when I reckon the passage of time it troubles me what he is doing, for he has been away beyond what one would expect, longer than the proper time.

²² See (e.g.) Knox 1957: 107, 137.

When he comes, then I would be bad if I do not do everything which the god reveals.

We see here Oedipus' pity for other people, capacity for cogitation, swiftness in taking action, decisive issuing of orders, impatience of the slowness of others, and confidence in his own abilities.²³ His character is established in considerable detail by the entry of Tiresias (*OT* 297), when he is challenged personally for the first time, and all of these traits remain prominent throughout the play. His sense of his identity and of his place in the world is qualified as the play proceeds, but it is essential to the meaning of the play that it is a very distinctive individual who is subjected to these challenges.

Electra and *Antigone* resemble *Oedipus Tyrannus* in establishing the character of the protagonist in detail early in the play. Sophocles' portrayal of Electra may develop that in Aeschylus' *Choephoroe*, but he does not seem to rely on the **[end of p. 342]** myth schema and presents the main features of her character in her opening anapaests (*El.* 86-120): dwelling on the death of Agamemnon, obsession with the guilt of his murderers, determination to continue lamenting, liminal status, solitariness, and hope for the return of Orestes. Sophocles made so many innovations in the myth of *Antigone* that Antigone effectively has no myth schema.²⁴ The essentials of her character and motivation are presented in the course of her dialogue with Ismene in the prologue (*Ant.* 1-99). Sophocles notably presents character at the beginning of a play through dialogue, rather than by explicit description as is done by many other dramatists including Euripides (→).

Sophocles' technique in *Oedipus Coloneus* is somewhat different. He immediately establishes the character of Oedipus as a blind beggar who has been wandering for many years being looked after by Antigone (*OC* 1-22), but other aspects of his character only emerge in the course of the play: the benefits which he can bring to Athens, his love for his daughters and hatred for his sons, his resentment at his expulsion from Thebes, and his attitude to his past crimes. This is a notable

²³ The memorable character sketch by Bernard Knox 1957: 14-29 focuses on the language used by and about Oedipus. Cf. Culpeper 2001: 199-202 for systematic study of the keywords of the speech of different characters in *Romeo and Juliet*.

²⁴ See Griffith 1999: 8.

example of the dramatic effect of the gradual revelation of character, and seems to contrast quite strongly with Sophocles' other plays.

Techniques of characterization

The second section of this chapter will now investigate the various textual techniques used by Sophocles to construct character, beginning with the question 'who characterizes?'. If the question is posed in these terms, as it is in the introduction to this volume, then we shall need something like Wayne Booth's concept of the implied author: 'He is not the narrator, but rather the principle that invented the narrator, along with everything else in the narrative, that stacked the cards in this particular way, had these things happen to these characters, in these words or images'.²⁵ Metaphorical characterization by contrast, for example, cannot be attributed to any particular character within a play. The concept of the implied author is controversial, and it may be better to dispense with this personification of the norms and choices of the text.²⁶

[end of p. 343]

Sophocles has a good deal of direct characterization by individuals within the plays. Direct characterization here means explicit attribution of traits to an individual. This does not have to be reliable.²⁷ There are thus frequent assessments of Ajax (*Ajax*) by other characters, notably when Athena exhibits him to Odysseus in the prologue, when Tecmessa describes his nocturnal exploit (*Aj.* 284-330), when the messenger reports the words of Calchas (*Aj.* 749-779), and finally when the question of his burial is discussed (*Aj.* 1047-1401). *Oedipus Coloneus* also contains much direct characterization, especially of Oedipus himself. This is especially notable in the three discussions of his past crimes (*OC* 208-274, 510-550, 960-1002), and the concern with how far those crimes expressed his nature. Compare Oedipus' arguments with Creon (e.g. *OC* 800-810), Theseus' condemnation of Creon (*OC* 904-931), Creon's reply (*OC* 939-959), and Antigone's plea to Oedipus (*OC* 1181-1203). This direct

²⁵ Chatman 1978: 148, citing Booth 1961: 70-71. The term 'narrator' is used in this quotation, but a play could also have an implied author in the same sense.

²⁶ See de Jong 2014: 19.

²⁷ Contrast Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 60, who states that direct characterization can only come from 'the most authoritative voice in the text'. It does, however, seem useful to distinguish 'direct' from 'authoritative'.

characterization has a strong ethical dimension. P.E. Easterling remarks that *Antigone* is notably ‘a play that invites judgement of its stage figures’, and has used it as a case study of ‘the way the text invites us to be actively involved in making constructions’, e.g. about the reason for Ismene’s claim to have shared in the burial or the reliability of Haemon’s report of popular opinion.²⁸ There is also a certain amount of explicit self-characterization in Sophocles. Creon’s self-defence is a good example (*OT* 583-602), with obvious parallels to the rhetorical use of self-characterization in the orators and in Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (983-1035). On the other hand, there is relatively little direct characterization of Oedipus in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, either by himself or by others.

Direct characterization in Sophocles is often subjected to ironic qualification. Athena’s view of Ajax (*Ajax*) is incomplete, because she sees only a man brought low by his lack of *sōphrosunē*, and never shows any awareness of his undoubted greatness. Irene de Jong expresses this in terms of narratology: ‘her divine focalization, though omniscient and coming early in the play, is not the dominant one’.²⁹ This is emphasized when similar criticisms are made later in the play by the Atridae, and Ajax seems all the greater for being attacked by such contemptible enemies. Oedipus (*Oedipus Coloneus*) is criticized in similar terms by Creon and by the more sympathetic Theseus and Antigone (e.g. **[end of p. 344]** *OC* 592, 855, 1193), which sharpens the question of how he should be assessed. Choruses present particular problems here, as they have authority as choruses but are often misguided or partial.³⁰ Direct characterization can also conflict with indirect. Winnington-Ingram thus writes of *Trachiniae*, ‘We are made to see Heracles in a repellent light. But that is not how Deianira saw him, nor Hyllus, nor the Chorus. They see him as a very great man’.³¹

Indirect (metaphorical) characterization by contrast is Sophocles’ most important characterization technique.³² Each of Sophocles’ seven surviving plays has

²⁸ Easterling 1990: 93, 94. Cf. Easterling & Budelmann 2010, citing also *Ant.* 20, 175-177, 441, 504-505.

²⁹ De Jong 2006: 93; cf. Budelmann 2000: 184-185.

³⁰ See (e.g.) Lloyd 2005: 71-75, with references to earlier discussions.

³¹ Winnington-Ingram 1980: 84.

³² Cf. Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 70 ‘When two characters are presented in similar circumstances, the similarity or contrast between their behaviour emphasizes traits

a dominating individual at its centre. This individual is not necessarily on stage for the majority of the play, and may not even speak the most lines, but his or her centrality is never in doubt. Winnington-Ingram describes the Sophoclean hero as follows: ‘A man or woman of excess, an extremist, obstinate, inaccessible to argument, he refuses to compromise with the conditions of human life’.³³ The distinctive good and bad qualities of these heroic figures are regularly defined by contrast with more moderate characters, e.g. Ismene (*Antigone*), Chrysothemis (*Electra*), and Creon (*Oedipus Tyrannus*). Odysseus (*Ajax*) and Theseus (*Oedipus Coloneus*) are also foils to the central figures, but are more substantial characters in their own right and create more complex contrasts.³⁴ Heracles and Deianira (*Trachiniae*) are figures of equal tragic weight, and much of the meaning of the play could be expressed in terms of the contrasts between them. Sophocles’ contrasts between characters tend to focus on the central ‘hero’ figure, although in *Ajax* (for example) there are significant contrasts between Athena, Odysseus, and the Atridae as well as between those characters and Ajax. The most significant contrast in *Philoctetes* is between Odysseus and Neoptolemus rather than between either of those characters and Philoctetes.³⁵ **[end of p. 345]**

Focalization as a means of characterization is relevant to many characters in Sophocles, with their intense and sometimes distorted views of the world. Oedipus (*Oedipus Coloneus*) is characterized by his contrasting attitudes to his children (e.g. *OC* 337-360), his approval of Theseus (*OC* 569-574, 642, 1042-1043), and his hatred of Creon (*OC* 761-799). Conversely, Creon and Polynices are characterized by their inability to see beyond Oedipus’ superficial squalor (*OC* 740-752, 1254-1263).³⁶ The ascription of properties to others can only illuminate character if we can test its

characteristic of both’. Pfister 1988: 195 treats contrast as ‘implicit-authorial characterisation’.

³³ Winnington-Ingram 1980: 9. Cf. Knox 1964: 1-4.

³⁴ On the admirable features of Odysseus and Theseus, see (e.g.) Blundell 1989: 95-103, 248-253.

³⁵ On contrasts between characters in *Antigone*, see Griffith 1999: 36-37.

³⁶ See Easterling 1967: 6. Easterling (1967: 9 n. 1) also discusses inconsistencies in Oedipus’ charges against his sons.

accuracy.³⁷ We see enough of Odysseus to recognize as unfair the hostile characterization of him by Ajax (*Aj.* 103, 379-382, 388-389, 445), the chorus (*Aj.* 148-153, 189, 955-960), and Tecmessa (*Aj.* 971). The accuracy of Electra's obsessive focalization is constantly under examination in *Electra*, and with it our view of her character.³⁸

Setting clearly has an important relationship to character in Sophocles. One need only to think of Ajax killing himself in an 'untrodden place' (*Aj.* 657), Antigone venturing out of the palace (*Ant.* 1), Heracles on Cape Ceneae (*Trach.* 749-806), or Oedipus arriving at the grove at Colonus (*OC* 84-110 etc.). Sophocles' plays are pervaded by contrasts between the *polis* and wilder spaces outside, and our understanding of his characters cannot be separated from these contexts. Nevertheless, it would exaggerate the centrality of character to treat them merely as 'trait-connoting metonymies'.³⁹

Physical appearance is one of the main ways we judge character in real life, as is noted in the chapter on Aristophanes in the present volume (→). It is also one of the most striking ways in which character is represented in many forms of literature, drama, and film. The use of masks in Greek drama meant that facial expression could not be used to express character, beyond the broad categories of age, gender, and status.⁴⁰ There is however a limit to [end of p. 346] the indeterminacy of dramatic characters.⁴¹ In performance, they inevitably have a particular, even if not idiosyncratic, appearance and vocal timbre. Oedipus either limps or he does not limp.⁴² We lack evidence for how Sophocles might have exploited these features for

³⁷ Cf. Margolin 2007: 73: 'One of the ways we infer that Quixote's grasp of reality is distorted is through his characterization of the people around him, for example seeing a group of prostitutes as "fair maidens" (I.3)'.

³⁸ On focalized spatial description in Sophocles, see R. Rehm in *SAGN* 3: 328-331.

³⁹ Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 66, discussing a character in William Faulkner. On 'the thematic and symbolic importance of space' in Sophocles, see R. Rehm in *SAGN* 3: 334.

⁴⁰ The implication of the use of masks for characterization can be exaggerated, as is noted by Seidensticker 2008: 339-341.

⁴¹ On the indeterminacy of characters in (non-dramatic) fiction, see Margolin 2007: 68-69.

⁴² Cf. Taplin 1983: 156.

characterization. Jocasta's description of Laius ('Dark, just sprinkling his hair with white, and his form was not very unlike yours', *OT* 742-743) is memorable not least because it is so very unusual in Sophocles,⁴³ and even here there is no suggestion that appearance expresses character. Electra's degraded appearance (*El.* 1174–1187) is significant, but Oedipus (*Oedipus Coloneus*) is a notable example of character not being straightforwardly reflected in physical appearance.

The relevance to characterization of membership of specific groups has already been touched upon in connexion with Sophocles' use of schemas (e.g. king, *parthenos*). *Antigone* is notable for attempts to assign characters to relevant groups, including the large categories of male or female (*Ant.* 484-485, 525, 677-680, 740) and the micro-social group of the doomed family (*Ant.* 471-472; cf. *El.* 121-122, 341-342). Creon and Oedipus attribute to Tiresias the venality and charlatanry which they associate with the professional group of prophets (*Ant.* 1055; *OT* 386-389, 705), while Menelaus and Agamemnon characterize Teucer as an archer, a foreigner, and a person of low social status (*Aj.* 1120-1123, 1228-1230, 1263). Class is much less prominent as a defining feature of character in Sophocles than it is in Euripides (→).⁴⁴

The ancient *Life* (21) remarked that Sophocles could 'create an entire character from a mere half-line or phrase', and there is space here only to hint at some of the ways in which he uses speech to indicate character.⁴⁵ Deianira (*Trachiniae*) has often been praised for the detail and subtlety of her characterization,⁴⁶ and this mostly derives from her own language which is marked by an awareness of misfortune (*Trach.* 1-5, 16, 41-42, 141-154, 375-379), fear (*Trach.* 22-23, 28, 37, 47-48, 175-177, 303-306, 550, 630-632, 663-671), awareness of the power of *erōs* (*Trach.* 441-448), fear of shame (*Trach.* 596-597, 721-722), the use of striking imagery (*Trach.* 144-150, 699-704), politeness (*Trach.* 227-228),⁴⁷ and pity (*Trach.* 243, 296-302, 307-313, 464). These characteristics are presented early in the [end of p. 347] play, as (unlike Heracles) she would not have had an established myth schema. Creon makes extensive use of *gnōmai* in *Antigone* (175-177, 178-181, 182-183, 188-190, 209-210,

⁴³ Deianira's description of the appearance of the river god Achelous (*Trach.* 9-14) is obviously a special case.

⁴⁴ On class in Greek tragedy generally, see (e.g.) Hall 1997: 110-118.

⁴⁵ See (e.g.) Easterling 1977: 128-129; Rutherford 2012: 309-312.

⁴⁶ See (e.g.) Lloyd-Jones 1972: 221 = 1990: 411.

⁴⁷ On politeness and characterization, see Culpeper 2001: 235-262; Lloyd 2006: 239.

221-222, 295-301, 313-314, 473-476, 477-479, 493-494, 495-496, 520, 580-581, 641-644, 645-647, 649-652, 661-662, 663-665, 672-676, 738, 780, 1043-1044, 1045-1047, 1113-1114). The implications of this for his character, especially in contrast to Antigone, have been much discussed.⁴⁸ It is remarkable that *gnōmai* are also a feature of his language in *Oedipus Tyrannus* (*OT* 87-88, 110-111, 549-550, 587-589, 609-610, 613-615, 674-675, 1430-1431, 1516), a fact highlighted by the limited use made of them by Oedipus (*OT* 280-281, 296, 1409). Creon does not use so many *gnōmai* in *Oedipus Coloneus*, but he seems to be characterized consistently in the three plays as concerned with the welfare of the city, somewhat narrowly conceived, to the exclusion of wider (especially religious) issues.⁴⁹ Ajax also has a fondness for *gnōmai* (*Aj.* 292-293, 580, 581-582, 586, 646-649, 664-665, 678-682).⁵⁰ The Guard in *Antigone* is a notable example of a lower-status individual characterized by distinctive use of language.⁵¹

The nature of character in Sophocles

A fundamental issue of characterization in Sophocles, as in other dramatists, is to distinguish long-term character traits from behaviour which is provoked by the particular circumstances of the action. Seymour Chatman distinguishes traits from ‘more ephemeral psychological phenomena, like feelings, moods, thoughts, temporary motives, attitudes, and the like’, but also remarks that any of these ephemeral phenomena may be ‘merely an exaggeration ... of a general and abiding disposition’.⁵² In a similar vein, Taavitsainen discusses ‘surge features’, defined as

⁴⁸ See Foley 1996: 60; Griffith 1999: 36; Budelmann 2000: 67-68, 74-80. Other aspects of Creon’s speech patterns have also been studied, e.g. his imagery and his use of the first person: see Griffith 1999: 36 n. 110, 162 (note on *Ant.* 207-210).

⁴⁹ See Margolin 2007: 70 on the ‘same’ character in different works, although mythical characters clearly differ in some respects from invented characters.

⁵⁰ See (e.g.) Lardinois 2006; Finglass 2011: 225-226 (notes on *Aj.* 292 and 293). Budelmann 2000: 78 n. 23 notes also Menelaus’ use of *gnōmai* (especially *Aj.* 1071-1083).

⁵¹ See Long 1968: 84-86; Griffith 1999: 165 (note on *Ant.* 223-331), 193 (note on *Ant.* 388-400).

⁵² Chatman 1978: 126.

outbursts of emotion expressing ‘transient and volatile states of mind’ like anger.⁵³ It is doubtful whether purely ephemeral psychological [end of p. 348] phenomena are of much significance in Sophocles. Anger, for example, tends to express a longer-term psychological disposition than Taavitsainen’s definition might suggest.⁵⁴

It was mentioned above that Sophocles establishes the character of Oedipus (*Oedipus Tyrannus*) before the tragic issues of the play emerge. He further demonstrates the long-term stability of Oedipus’ character by showing him at five distinct stages of his life: (i) youth, as described in the earlier part of his autobiography (*OT* 774-793); (ii) the encounter with Laius (*OT* 794-813); (iii) the earlier part of the play, in which there is no personal threat to him (*OT* 1-296); (iv) the central part of the play, from the entry of Tiresias to the discovery of the truth (*OT* 297-1185); (v) the final scene (*OT* 1297-1530). Oedipus’ main traits were sketched earlier in this chapter, and he manifests them in five separate phases of his life, which are further linked by the importance of memory in establishing continuity of character.

Ajax may be introduced at a moment of crisis and stress, but his lofty tone to Athena in the first scene (*Aj.* 112-113, 116-117) is in keeping with the way he spoke earlier in his life (*Aj.* 767-769, 774-775). The line which Tecmessa quotes (*Aj.* 293) shows that his mode of utterance is similar in a domestic context. Electra’s quotation of earlier criticisms by Clytemnestra (*El.* 289-292, 295-298) reinforces the sense that the argument between them represented in the play is the latest in a long series. It is equally clear in *Trachiniae* and *Oedipus at Colonus* that the characters have traits which are consistent over time.

The main characters in *Antigone*, by contrast, are not established before the tragic crisis which is the subject of the play. Creon says at the outset that one cannot know the *psukhē* (inner self), *phronēma* (mentality), and *gnōmē* (judgement) of a man until he has been tested in political office (*Ant.* 175-177), and his behaviour thereafter is inconsistent and prompted by reaction to other characters.⁵⁵ Antigone has only just

⁵³ Taavitsainen 1999: 219, cited by Culpeper 2001: 190.

⁵⁴ For the angry disposition of Sophocles’ heroes, see Knox 1957: 26-28; 1966: 21.

⁵⁵ Brown 1987: 147 (note on *Ant.* 176) observes that these three words, whatever the precise distinction between them, ‘are clearly meant to cover all intellectual and emotional qualities’. On Creon’s failure to live up to the principles expounded in his opening speech, see (e.g.) Blundell 1989: 132.

heard about Creon's edict at the beginning of the play, and Ismene is the first person she has told about her plans. She expresses herself in an excitable way, with disordered syntax, questions, and emotive vocabulary, and states a variety of motives in a way which suggests that she is only now in the process of formulating her response: family unity (*Ant.* 1, 10, 21-32), heroic honour (*Ant.* 72, 97), commitment to **[end of p. 349]** the dead (*Ant.* 73-76), the laws of the gods (*Ant.* 77).⁵⁶ This is not the place to discuss the coherence or validity of her position, but what is clear is that we cannot separate her longer-term character from her response to this particular situation. Ismene is also in the process of formulating her position, as is shown by her surprising decision to associate herself with Antigone's action (*Ant.* 536-537). Chrysothemis (*Electra*) is functionally similar to Ismene, in contrasting with a more assertive sister, and the main differences between them derive from the fact that her situation is long-established when the play begins.⁵⁷

Griffith finds 'hints of a long-standing antagonism' between Antigone and Creon,⁵⁸ but there is nothing specific to suggest that their mutual hostility predates Creon's edict and Antigone's reaction to it. We could construct a history for Antigone's sarcasm (*Ant.* 31) or overt derision (*Ant.* 470), but this can also be explained as focalization prompted by anger at his edict. The same is true of Creon's response to Antigone's rejection of Ismene's attempt to share responsibility: 'I declare that one of these two girls has only now revealed herself to be crazy, while the other has been so from birth' (*Ant.* 561-562). This is a rhetorical exaggeration of the contrast between the sisters, and there is no convincing reason to suppose that Creon is referring to anything in particular prior to her present rebellion.

Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* (1942) illustrates the kind of characterization that Sophocles avoids. His Antigone has already buried Polynices when she enters for the first time, but she conceals this in her dialogues with her nurse, Ismene, and Haemon. These scenes, taking up about a quarter of the play, are essentially devoted to expounding her character and filling in the background to her decision to bury Polynices. This includes accounts of earlier episodes in her life and the portrayal of

⁵⁶ See (e.g.) Foley 1996: 57, with references to earlier views.

⁵⁷ For comparisons between Chrysothemis and Ismene, usually favouring the latter, see Easterling 1977: 124; Winnington-Ingram 1980: 241 n. 80; Blundell 1989: 158 n. 38; Finglass 2007: 194.

⁵⁸ Griffith 1999: 34 n. 103.

typical behaviour, e.g. Ismene's speech 'Je suis l'aînée. Je réfléchis plus que toi. Toi, c'est ce qui te passe par la tête tout de suite, et tant pis si c'est une bêtise. Moi je suis plus pondérée. Je réfléchis'.⁵⁹ The protatic figure of the nurse is designed specifically to keep introductory character portrayal separate from Antigone's key act of rebellion. This character portrayal is [end of p. 350] reinforced by physical descriptions of the kind absent from Sophocles, e.g. 'la maigre jeune fille noire et renfermée que personne ne prenait au sérieux dans la famille'.⁶⁰

Christopher Gill developed his distinction between character and personality to some extent through discussion of Sophocles, and it is worth quoting him at some length: 'The *Antigone* ... is a play that I think one could discuss almost entirely in terms of the character-viewpoint. The protagonists stand before us as "characters", as responsible, choosing agents who luminously explicate their motives for action and invite evaluation on those grounds ... In Sophocles' *Electra*, by contrast, everything seems to take place, virtually from the start, in the light of the intense, brooding consciousness of the central figure. The disputed issues are treated cursorily and no larger moral framework is provided for their resolution (or even for the exploration of their ambiguity). The events (real and feigned) and the secondary figures exist for us essentially as they impinge on the heightened emotions of Electra herself, whose "character" we are never encouraged to evaluate objectively'.⁶¹

So far as *Electra* is concerned, Gill's account does not do justice to how she combines an intense awareness of how her behaviour might be evaluated with persistent attempts to elicit sympathy and understanding for the intolerable position in which she has been placed. She thus responds to the rebukes of the chorus: 'I have been forced by terrible circumstances to do terrible things; I know it well, my passion does not escape me. But even in these terrible circumstances I will not restrain my desperate laments, while life is in me. Who, dear friends, who that thinks rightly, could expect me to listen to any word of consolation? Leave me, leave me, my comforters' (*El.* 221–229; cf. 131, 237–239, 254–257, 307–309, 616–621).

⁵⁹ Anouilh 1961: 140–141.

⁶⁰ Anouilh 1961: 131. On Anouilh's portrayal of Antigone, see Deppman 2012: 526–527.

⁶¹ Gill 1986: 269. The distinction between character and personality is summarized at Gill 1990: 2–3.

Gill's 'character' interpretation of *Antigone* is also rather one-sided, and should be qualified by what he would have called a 'personality' reading which puts more emphasis on external forces of which the agent may not be aware.⁶² This could include the relevance of Antigone's heredity (*Ant.* 471-472), or of *erōs* to Haemon's opposition to Creon (*Ant.* 781-800).⁶³ There is clearly an issue in *Ajax* about internal and external elements in the characterization of Ajax [**end of p. 351**] (*Aj.* 59-60, 243-244; 455-456), and corresponding unclarity about the nature of his normal self, when he is 'in his right mind'.⁶⁴

Gill later adopted a new distinction between 'objective-participant' and 'subjective-individualist' conceptions of the person.⁶⁵ He now argues that Sophocles' heroes do not adopt 'ethical individualism' (as expressed e.g. by Nietzsche or Sartre), but that they 'appeal (in their second-order reasoning) to ethical principles which they regard as basic to their society'.⁶⁶ This seems to amount to saying that we (the audience) understand them better than do the other characters in the plays with their 'pre-reflective ethical principles',⁶⁷ rather than that we do not apply ethical standards to them at all. There is no need to deny that these exceptional characters elude easy moral assessment, but it is not clear that Gill's later distinction is especially useful for the analysis of Sophocles' characters.

Neoptolemus (*Philoctetes*) is the most promising example in Sophocles of character development. His behaviour later in the play may indeed be an expression of his true nature (*Phil.* 902-903, 1310-1313), but his understanding of that nature has changed significantly in the course of the play.⁶⁸ This development may be compared to that of Telemachus in Homer's *Odyssey* (→).⁶⁹ Eurysaces needs to be educated in

⁶² See Easterling 1990: 93.

⁶³ See Winnington-Ingram 1980: 92-98.

⁶⁴ Goldhill 1986: 182 discusses 'the tension between the internal and external in the make-up of man'; cf. Hesk 2003: 136-41; Thumiger 2007: 16.

⁶⁵ Gill 1996: 116-118.

⁶⁶ Gill 1996: 153.

⁶⁷ Gill 1996: 118.

⁶⁸ See (e.g.) Gibert 1995: 143-158; Fulkerson 2006: 52; Rutherford 2012: 289, 309-312; Schein 2013: 23-25.

⁶⁹ See (e.g.) Whitby 1996.

the ways of his father so as to resemble him in *phusis* (*Aj.* 548-549), but Ajax himself thinks it foolish to try to educate his own *ēthos* (*Aj.* 594-595).

E.M. Forster, distinguishing ‘round’ from ‘flat’ characters, argued that ‘[t]he test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way’.⁷⁰ Odysseus’ pity for Ajax (*Aj.* 121-126) is a good example, although it is unexpected because of the mythological tradition rather than because of anything Odysseus has so far done in the actual play. A major question in the play is whether deception is ‘in character’ for Ajax, assuming that his ‘deception speech’ (*Aj.* 646-692) is indeed intended to deceive.⁷¹ The speech is in any case surprising, and the play would be incoherent if the surprise [end of p. 352] were not convincing. Winnington-Ingram offers a subtle account of the ‘ironic and oblique’ preparation for Deianira’s apparently uncharacteristic boldness in sending the anointed robe to Heracles in *Trachiniae*.⁷² He also remarks in this connexion on the ‘common tendency in Greek tragedy for changes of attitude to take place “between the acts”’.⁷³ Ismene’s surprising decision to associate herself with Antigone’s defiance is another example (*Ant.* 536-537). Knox observes that the first two choral odes in *Oedipus Tyrannus* (*OT* 151-215, 463-511) both suggest a lapse of time in which Oedipus arrives at a decision.⁷⁴ In *Oedipus Coloneus*, Oedipus’ character does not change but is gradually revealed in its full depth.

The focus of this chapter on character does not, needless to say, imply that there is no more to Sophocles’ plays than character portrayal. The autonomy of dramatic character is qualified, for example, by structuralist interpretations focusing, as Jonathan Culler puts it, on ‘the interpersonal and conventional systems which traverse the individual, which make him a space in which forces and events meet rather than an individuated essence’.⁷⁵ In Sophocles, this is perhaps most striking in *Trachiniae*, where the character of Heracles as an individual is impossible to separate from thematic issues such as the contrast between civilization and barbarism.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Forster 1927: ch. 4.

⁷¹ See (e.g.) Gibert 1995: 120-135; Hesk 2003: 74-75.

⁷² Winnington-Ingram 1980: 78.

⁷³ Winnington-Ingram 1980: 77.

⁷⁴ Knox 1957: 17-18.

⁷⁵ Culler 1975: 230.

⁷⁶ See (e.g.) Segal 1981: 60-108.

Nevertheless, among Greek authors it is only in the biographers that character is more central than it is in Sophocles. Menander gives it equal prominence, but Aeschylus can subordinate individual character to the family or the gods while Euripides sometimes prioritizes abstract ideas. In Sophocles, as in Shakespeare, ideas and values are mainly of interest in so far as they are embodied in individuals.

In conclusion, the techniques of characterization summarized in the introduction to this volume can undoubtedly be illustrated from Sophocles' plays. They have no overall narrator, but narrative techniques may be attributed at the most general level to the implied author. There is also characterization by individuals within the plays, but it is often partial or misguided. Characterization of mythical figures must take account of the myth schema, which is better established for some characters than others. Drama differs from some other genres in focusing on a single episode, raising questions of how behaviour in often extreme circumstances relates to longer-term character. Many authors [end of p. 353] studied in the present volume define and judge individuals according to definite, often ethical, criteria. This is not the case with Sophocles, whose major characters tend to elude full understanding or definitive assessment.⁷⁷

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⁷⁷ See (e.g.) Budermann 2000: 88-89.

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