

5 The language of oaths

5.1 How oaths are expressed

A.H. Sommerstein

In ancient Greek there are three basic forms of expression that constitute swearing: one makes explicit the act of swearing itself, one makes explicit the curse contained in the oath, and one leaves both of these to be understood and instead focuses on the god who is to witness and enforce the oath or on the object named as *Eideshort* (§5.3). These are all found in ordinary discourse and in poetry; in official oaths, however, a fourth form is usual, in which the statement sworn to is first uttered as a simple assertion or promise, and this is followed by words which have the effect of making the statement into an oath.

(1) The simplest, most direct form of swearing is effected by the use of the performative verb *omnumi* or *omnuō* “I swear”, normally governing an infinitive phrase specifying the statement that was being sworn to.¹ Nearly always the name of the witness god is added in the accusative case,² as in this example from Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (713–14):

ὄμνυμι σεμνήν Ἄρτεμιν, Διὸς κόρην,
μηδὲν κακῶν σῶν εἰς φάος δείξειν ποτέ.

I swear by awesome Artemis, daughter of Zeus,
that I will never bring to light anything of your afflictions.

This form of oath is not as frequent in our data as one might expect, occurring less than thirty times, even if we include those cases in which the statement to be sworn to has already been stipulated to the swearer who then merely confirms that (s)he does indeed swear to it. It is found in drama³ and in other authors, of

1 Twice in Xenophon (*Cyr.* 5.1.28, 5.4.31) the statement forms the main sentence and *omnumi* is inserted parenthetically.

2 Possibly this was not in origin a direct object; it is striking that in the Hippocratic oath the accusative is followed, and governed, by ἵστορας ποιούμενος “making my witnesses”, suggesting that a construction like (say) ὄμνυμι τὸν Ποσειδῶνα “I swear (by) Poseidon” may have originated as an abbreviation of ὄμνυμι, τὸν Ποσειδῶνα ἵστορα ποιούμενος “I swear, making Poseidon my witness”.

3 Soph. *Trach.* 1188 (where the content of the oath has already been stipulated by the swearee); Eur. *Med.* 752, *Hipp.* 713–14 (above), 1025–7, *IA* 473–6, fr. 487 (the content of the oath has not survived); Ar. *Birds* 445–7 (content previously stipulated), *Thesm.* 272–4 (ditto).

poetry and prose, who report conversations – Pindar,⁴ Herodotus,⁵ Xenophon⁶ and, once, Plato.⁷ In public oratory it occurs three times, all in Demosthenes (23.5, 32.31, 54.41), the oath always being “by all the gods” (one speaker adds “and all the goddesses”), evidently a particularly solemn and emphatic formula.

The surviving *omnium* oaths are all either volunteered, or exacted by private individuals for private purposes; oaths of an official character, whether administered by the state or by other bodies such as local communities or religious societies, are hardly ever, to our knowledge, expressed in this way. There is only one exception that we know of: the celebrated Hippocratic *Oath* (see ch. 14), which begins thus:

I swear, making my witnesses Apollo the Physician, Asclepius, Hygeia, Panacea, and all the gods and goddesses, that I will fulfil, to the best of my ability and judgement, this oath and this contract ...

the terms of which are then specified.⁸

(2) A moderately common form of oath in conversation, again almost always volunteered, is that in which the speaker, without using a verb of swearing and usually without naming the witness-god, explicitly wishes (with an optative verb, either itself in the first person or with a first-person pronoun as direct or indirect object) for some evil (usually destruction) to befall him/herself⁹ if proposition *p* is false – which by definition amounts to swearing that *p* is true. A simple example is this one from Aristophanes’ *Frogs* (579):

κάκιςτ’ ἀπολοίμην, Ξανθίαν εἰ μὴ φιλῶ.

May I perish most miserably if I do not love Xanthias!

⁴ *Pyth.* 4.165–7, *Nem.* 7.70–3.

⁵ 1.212, 5.106.

⁶ *Anab.* 6.1.31, 6.6.17, 7.6.18–19, 7.7.40; *Oec.* 4.24; *Symp.* 4.11; *Cyr.* 5.1.28, 5.4.31, 8.4.7; *Ages.* 5.5.

⁷ *Phdr.* 236d–e.

⁸ The first, long clause of the oath-statement is in the infinitive; the remaining clauses are in the first-person future indicative, as regularly in oaths of type (4) below.

⁹ The verbs normally used are ὀλοίμην “may I perish” (with its compounds ἀπολοίμην and ἐξολοίμην) and its synonym μὴ (or μηκέτι) ζῶιην “may I not live (any more)”. For further discussion of oaths of this type, and others that include “explicit self-curses”, see ch. 2 above.

This oath, uttered by the god Dionysus, actually fails in its objective (which is to persuade Dionysus' slave Xanthias to take over his Heracles costume),¹⁰ and he has to swear another and much more powerful one (586–8):

ἀλλ' ἦν σε τοῦ λοιποῦ ποτ' ἀφέλωμαι χρόνου,
 πρόρριζος αὐτός, ἢ γυνή, τὰ παιδιά,
 κάκιστ' ἀπολοίμην, κάρχέδημος ὁ γλάμων.

But if I ever take (the costume) away from you from now on,¹¹ then may I and my wife and my children perish most miserably, root and branch – and bleary-eyed Archdemus¹² as well!

In our data this form of oath occurs about twenty times, all but one of them in drama. The majority are in Aristophanes, where they appear on the lips of a wide range of speakers (all male) and accompany a wide range of types of assertion, promise and threat; the most common type is the declaration of love, loyalty and/or sincerity. In one case, in the wrangling-match between two low-life characters that dominates Aristophanes' *Knights*, the self-imprecation undergoes baroque elaborations. The current favourite slave of the personified Athenian People, Paphlagon (who represents the politician Cleon), and the Sausage-seller who is trying to supplant him, both protest their undying loyalty to him. Paphlagon speaks first (*Knights* 763–8), and begins by praying to Athena that if he has been a worthy servant of the Athenian people he may enjoy, as he does now, free maintenance at public expense “for having done nothing” ...

εἰ δέ σε μισῶ καὶ μὴ περὶ σοῦ μάχομαι μόνος ἀντιβεβηκώς,
 ἀπολοίμην καὶ διαπρισθεῖην κατατμηθεῖν τε λέπαδνα.

But if I hate you, if I am not the only man who stands firm and fights for you, then may I perish and be sawn in two and cut up into yoke-straps!

10 A dangerous thing to be wearing in the underworld, where Heracles is a wanted criminal, having stolen the dog Cerberus on his last visit there.

11 Xanthias had been induced to wear the Heracles costume in an earlier scene, only to be abruptly told to hand it over (521–33) when “Heracles” received a dinner invitation from Persephone, the queen of the underworld. Even after this oath he continues to fear that Dionysus will do the same to him again if he sees any advantage in resuming the Heracles role (598–600).

12 A contemporary politician. His inclusion in the oath is, from one point of view, merely an irrelevant comic twist; but, as Tucker (1906) pointed out, the new oath can be seen as carrying the “inducement” that even if Dionysus does break it, Xanthias and the Athenian people will have the consolation of getting rid of Archdemus!

As he does repeatedly throughout the play, the Sausage-seller at once caps Paphlagon's words with more emphatic, more colourful words of his own, here a multiple imprecation (769–72) drawn from his own trade of meat preparation as Paphlagon's was partly drawn from his alleged trade of leather-working:

κᾶγωγ', ὦ Δῆμ', εἰ μὴ σε φιλῶ καὶ μὴ στέργω, κατατμηθεῖς
ἐψοίμην ἐν περικομματίοις· κεί μὴ τούτοις πέποιθας,
ἐπὶ ταυτησὶ κατακνησθεῖν ἐν μυττωτῶι μετὰ τυροῦ
καὶ τῇ κρεάγραι τῶν ὀρχιπέδων ἐλκοίμην εἰς Κεραμεικόν.

And may I, Demos, if I do not love and cherish you, be cut up and boiled with mincemeat!
And if you don't believe that, then may I on this table be grated with cheese into a savoury
mash, and may I be dragged by the balls with my own meathook to Cerameicus!

One oath of this type survives in a fragment of another comic dramatist, the fourth-century author Eubulus (fr. 115.6–7), where a character strongly denies that he wishes to speak evil of women – but presently finds himself doing so just the same, because he begins to list the good and bad women of myth and finds that he can only think of two (Penelope and Alcestis) in the former category!

In the tragic corpus there are six oaths of this form; they have a particularly striking effect because of their rarity in the genre, and on two occasions they are paired. One pair occurs in a satyr-drama, Euripides' *Cyclops*, in the amusing scene (see further §10.2) in which Silenus swears that he did not try to sell the Cyclops' property to Odysseus and his men, and his children the satyrs swear he did, each invoking destruction on ... the other (*Cyclops* 262–72). The second pair is in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (644–5, 660–2) when, in the desperate attempt to convince Oedipus that he is not the target of a political conspiracy, first Creon and then the chorus of elders explicitly invoke destruction on themselves – Creon in support of a declaration that he is innocent of the charge made against him, the chorus to reinforce their denial that by begging Oedipus to take Creon's declaration seriously they are seeking the death or exile of Oedipus himself. Oedipus is not at all convinced,¹³ but it is clear that he ought to have been. Another such imprecation in tragedy, in Euripides' *Hippolytus* (1025–31), also accompanies a declaration of innocence, when Hippolytus denies the charge that he defiled the bed of¹⁴ his stepmother Phaedra. The remaining one, in *Orestes* (1147–8), accom-

¹³ Although he grants the chorus's request to spare Creon, he still thinks that by letting him go he may be condemning himself to death or exile (669–70); and even thirty lines later (701) he is speaking of Creon's alleged plot as an established fact.

¹⁴ I use this expression (a translation of one used by Theseus in *Hipp.* 944) because, while the allegation made in Phaedra's suicide note, and repeated by Theseus in Hippolytus' absence,

panies a threat (to murder Helen); the formula “may I not live” seems to be particularly associated with threats, with which it is coupled in all its three surviving occurrences.¹⁵

The imprecation-type of oath occurs only once outside drama: in Demosthenes’ speech *On the False Embassy* (19.172), where he swears that he would never have gone with Aeschines and others on the embassy to receive the oaths of peace from Philip of Macedon in 346, had he not on his previous visit promised certain prisoners that he would bring back money for their ransom.

(3) The third type of oath, which – to judge by the writings of Plato, Xenophon and the comic dramatists – must have been used by ordinary Greeks many times more frequently than all other forms combined, consists simply of an assertion or promise reinforced by the naming of a god, or sometimes of an *Eideshort*, in a simple syntactic construction which signals that the speaker is swearing by that god or on that object.¹⁶ In classical Attic, and in most other dialects, the construction consists of the name of the god or object in the accusative case,¹⁷ preceded by one or two words which mark the utterance (i) as an oath and (ii) as affirmative or negative as the case may be. In Attic these words are *νῆ* or *ναὶ μὰ* for affirmative oaths, *μὰ* or *οὐ μὰ* for negative ones; in Homer, in most other non-Attic poetry, and presumably in the Ionic and Lesbian dialects, only *ναὶ μὰ* and *οὐ μὰ* appear;¹⁸ in

was one of forcible rape, Hippolytus himself seems to think he is being charged with consensual seduction; see Sommerstein 2006b, 235.

15 The others are at Ar. *Knights* 833–6 and *Clouds* 1255. There is a possible fourth occurrence at *Lysistrata* 530–1 (“Shall I keep silent for you, a woman with a veil over her face? Then may I not live!”), if this is taken to mean “I will not under any circumstances keep silent ...”; but the speaker may also mean “I will be too ashamed to go on living if a woman forces me to keep silent” – and since he *does* in fact fall silent after these words, for a space of twenty-four lines, it is unlikely that he conceives himself as having just sworn not to do so.

16 Very occasionally this type of oath is combined with a more formal expression, as in Xen. *Oec.* 20.29 (“By Zeus, I say to you, Ischomachus, and confirm it by oath [*ἐπομόσας*] that ...”).

17 The name is almost always preceded by the definite article, unless the god is Zeus, in which case the article is optional. Instead of invoking a specific individual god, the swearer may invoke “the gods” in the plural (referring to the entire pantheon) or in the dual (referring to a specific pair of deities honoured in his or her cultural milieu – at Athens, where only women used this particular form of oath, Demeter and Persephone; at Sparta, Castor and Pollux; at Thebes, Amphion and Zethus).

18 Affirmative with *ναὶ μὰ*: *Iliad* 1.234; Ananias fr. 4; Theognis 1045; *iamb. adesp.* 57; Pind. *Nem.* 11.24. (A fifth-century inscriptional text from Paphos written in the Cypriot syllabary – *ICS* 8.6–7 – appears to have the two words in the reverse order, *μὰ ναὶ*.) Negative with *οὐ μὰ*: *Iliad* 1.86, 23.43; *Odyssey* 20.339; Sappho fr. 95.9; Hipponax fr. 155b. Herodotus, strikingly, in his many speeches and conversations never has any character use any oath-formula of this general type. This is

Doric (including the “Doric” of tragic lyrics), and in Arcadian, we find *vaì* (Arcadian *veì*) and *oũ* alone serving the same functions.¹⁹ In Boeotian, however, the construction is a different one, *ἴττω* (“let him/her know”, i.e. be witness to my statement) with the god as its subject;²⁰ and this construction, with the Ionic-Attic form of the same verb (*ἴστω*), is also found in epic (including the *Homeric Hymns*) and Attic tragedy.²¹

In conversation, in prose texts, and in the less elevated types of poetry (comedy, satyr-drama, elegy and iambus), these oaths generally seem to do little more than give emphasis to the statements they accompany; we have given them the label “informal oaths”, and they will be discussed in ch. 13 below. In epic, melic and tragic poetry, in contrast, oaths of this type can be extremely weighty.

There are, for example, only three *μά*-oaths in the *Iliad*; all are uttered by Achilles, and all are particularly solemn asseverations – that he will not allow anyone, even Agamemnon, to lay hands on Calchas (1.86–91); that the Achaeans will regret dishonouring him when, in his absence, they are falling in great numbers at Hector’s hands (1.234–44);²² and that, bloody from battle as he is, he will not wash his face until Patroclus’ funeral has been completed (23.43–7).

probably a stylistic decision: when another writer might have put an informal oath into a character’s mouth, Herodotus merely says that the character said something “with an oath of affirmation/denial” (*ἐπομόσας* or *ἀπομόσας*; 6.63.2, 8.5.2).

19 Affirmative with *vaì/veì*: Epicharmus fr. 70 K-A; *PMG* 960 (probably tragic, see Sommerstein 2010b); Eur. *Ba.* 534; Ar. *Ach.* 730, 742, 774, 779, 798 (Megarian), *Wasps* 1438 (Sybarite), *Peace* 214 (Spartan), *Lys.* 81 and ten other passages (Spartan); Xen. *Hell.* 4.4.10 (Spartan). Negative with *oũ*: Soph. *Ant.* 758–9, *OT* 660, 1088, *El.* 1063 (all but the first of these passages are lyric); Ar. *Lys.* 986, 990, 1171 (Spartan); Xen. *Anab.* 7.6.39, *Ages.* 5.5.6 (both Spartan). Both in the same document: *IG* v(2) 343 = *IPArk* 15 (Orchomenus).

20 e.g. *ἴττω* Δεύς “let Zeus know” (= “I swear by Zeus”) (Ar. *Ach.* 911, Pl. *Phd.* 62a, Pl. *Epist.* 7.345a), *ἴττω* Ἡρακλῆς (Ar. *Ach.* 860). Aristophanes also makes his Boeotian swear in the Attic manner with a Boeotian accent (*veì* τὸν Ἰόλαον, *Ach.* 867; *veì* τὼ σῶ [θῶ Blaydes], *ib.* 905); it is not clear whether both formula-types existed side by side in the dialect, or whether Aristophanes is partly “atticizing” his character’s speech in this respect (as he does in some others: cf. Colvin 1999, 139, 141–3, 150, 155, 158, 168, 197–8, 206, 213, 221–2, 232, 234, 259–60, 297–8).

21 *Iliad* 10.329, 15.36, 19.258; *Odyssey* 5.184, 14.158, 17.155, 19.303, 20.230; *h.Dem.* 259; *h.Ap.* 84; Soph. *Trach.* 399, *Ant.* 184, *OC* 521; Eur. *IT* 1077, *Ion* 1478, *Phoen.* 1677, *IA* 1413.

22 The first of these two oaths comes at the beginning of the debate in which occurs the great quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon; the second near the climax of the quarrel, just after Achilles, on the point of killing Agamemnon, has been restrained by Athene; they are linked by the phrase *ἄριστος* (-ον) *Ἀχαιῶν* “the best of the Achaeans” in the last line of each (in the same metrical position), a title claimed both by Agamemnon (91) and by Achilles (244). On Achilles’ three *μά*-oaths see further Griffin 1986, 52.

Against this background, the one and only *μά*-oath in the *Odyssey* (20.339–42) evidently deserves our attention. It relates to what seems to be a matter of secondary significance: Telemachus is denying that he is doing anything to hinder his mother's remarriage. What gives it weight, though, is its context. It leads directly into the grisly vision and prophecy of Theoclymenus (20.345–57); it is designedly misleading, for Telemachus says (though he does not swear) that his father “is, I suppose, either dead or wandering, far from Ithaca” (20.340) when he knows his father is actually in the same room with him; and, all unknown to him, in a few minutes his mother will in fact be announcing her intention to remarry at once (21.63–79).

In the spoken verse of classical tragedy, as distinct from satyr-drama, there are some thirteen *μά*-oaths,²³ and it is striking that none of them is uttered by a mature male; in ten cases the speaker is a woman, in two a very young man (Menoceus, son of Creon, and Achilles), and for one passage (Soph. fr. 140) we do not know the speaker or the context. Some of these oath-expressions (such as Soph. *El.* 626 or Eur. *Andr.* 934) are only a little stronger than some of the “informal oaths” of comedy or satyr-drama (though the actual phrases used are always such as are not found in these genres), but others can be very powerful indeed, with the *μά*-phrase sometimes being extended to two or three lines. Those in Euripides' *Medea* are discussed elsewhere (§6.1); one may also instance the passage (Aesch. *Ag.* 1431–7) where Clytaemestra, standing sword in hand over the corpses of her husband and his concubine, publicly proclaims her own adultery:

καὶ τήνδ' ἀκούσῃ γ' ὀρκίων ἐμῶν θέμιν·
 μὰ τὴν τέλειον τῆς ἐμῆς παιδὸς Δίκην
 Ἄτην Ἐρινύν θ', αἴσι τόνδ' ἔσφαξ' ἐγώ,
 οὐ μοι φόβου μέλαθρον ἐλπίς ἐμπατεῖ,
 ἕως ἂν αἴθῃ πῦρ ἐφ' ἐστίας ἐμῆς
 Αἴγισθος, ὡς τὸ πρόσθεν εὖ φρονῶν ἐμοί·
 οὗτος γὰρ ἡμῖν ἀσπίς οὐ σμικρὰ θράσους.

You will now also hear this righteous oath I swear: by the fulfilled Justice that was due for my child, by Ruin and by the Fury, through whose aid I slew this man, no fearful apprehen-

²³ Aesch. *Ag.* 1432 (Clytaemestra); Soph. *El.* 626 (Clytaemestra), 881 (Chrysothemis), 1240 (*Electra*, fr. 140; Eur. *Med.* 395, 1059 (both *Medea*), *Hipp.* 307 (Nurse), *Andr.* 934 (Hermione's women friends), *Ion* 1528 (Creusa), *Ph.* 1006* (Menoceus), *IA* 739* (Clytaemestra), 949 (Achilles). In the negative oaths in the two asterisked passages, as often in colloquial Attic, the negative force is carried, in an elliptical sentence, by *μά* alone, there being no (other) negative word either in the oath-utterance itself or anywhere in the context; this usage is not otherwise found in serious poetry.

sion stalks my house, so long as the fire upon my hearth is kindled by Aegisthus and he remains loyal to me as hitherto; for he is an ample shield of confidence for me.

Or young Menoeceus (Eur. *Phoen.* 1003–8), who has deceived his father Creon into believing that he is going to flee the country, when in fact he intends to commit sacrificial suicide in the manner necessary, according to the prophet Teiresias, if Thebes is to be saved:

ἐγὼ δέ, πατέρα καὶ κασίγνητον προδοῦς
 πόλιν τ' ἑμαυτοῦ, δειλὸς ὡς ἔξω χθονὸς
 ἄπειμ', ὅπου δ' ἂν ζῶ, κακὸς φανήσομαι;
 μὰ τὸν μετ' ἄστρον Ζῆν' Ἄρη τε φοίνιον,
 ὃς τοὺς ὑπερτείλαντας ἐκ γαίας ποτὲ
 Σπαρτοὺς ἀνακτας τῆσδε γῆς ἰδρύσατο..

And shall I betray my father, brother [Haemon] and city by leaving the country like a coward, and be base in the eyes of all, wherever I may live? No, by Zeus who dwells among the stars, and by bloody Ares who once upon a time caused the Sown Men²⁴ to rise from the ground and made them lords of this land!

(4) In oaths prescribed by a state (or other collective body with authority over its members) it is a common pattern for the swearer first to make a simple statement and then to convert it linguistically into an oath by specifying the god(s) being invoked as witnesses²⁵ and/or by adding a self-curse in case of the statement being false or the promise broken (sometimes accompanied by a blessing in the contrary case). Several of these are quoted *in extenso* in S&B,²⁶ so we here content ourselves with citing one, the oath of the *tagoi* of the Labyad phratry at Delphi.²⁷ This begins with a promise:

I will serve as *tagos* justly, according to the laws of the city and those of the Labyadae regarding sacrificial victims for the Apellae and regarding cakes. And I will collect and disburse money for the Labyadae justly, and will not steal or do harm, by any means or device,

²⁴ The children of the dragon's teeth, the five survivors of whom joined Cadmus in founding Thebes and became the progenitors of its leading families; Creon and his sons were descended from one of them.

²⁵ Sometimes the swearer follows up the statement by saying "This is true, by [name(s) of god(s)]", as in *IG* ii² 97, 1196, 1237.

²⁶ See S&B 10–11, 13–22 (the Athenian ephebic oath), 70–80 (the Athenian dicastic oath), 141–3 (a reconciliation oath from Dicaea in Chalcidice).

²⁷ *CID* i 9, face A, lines 1–18; between 424 and 350 BC. A few letters are restored in most lines, but the text is nowhere in any serious doubt. A later section of the same inscription (face B, lines 21–50) prescribes penalties for breaches of the undertaking here given.

to the property of the Labyadae. And I will impose the oath on the *tagoi* for next year, as prescribed.

This is followed by the word *hórkos* “oath”, introducing the words which made the promise into a sworn one; these words are:

ἠυπίσχομαι ποί τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ πατρώϊου· εὐορκέοντι μέμ μοι ἀγαθὰ εἶη, αἱ δ' ἐφιορκέοιμι
φεκῶν, τὰ κακὰ ἀντὶ τῶν ἀγαθῶν.

I promise this in the presence of Zeus Patroios. If I keep my oath may I have blessings, but if I break it willingly, may I have evils instead of the blessings.

The same pattern is also found in oaths exacted by private individuals. When Medea in Euripides' play makes Aegeus swear never to banish her or surrender her to her enemies, and he duly does so (invoking Earth, Sun and “all the gods” as witnesses), she then asks him (*Med.* 754) “What do you pray to suffer, if you do not abide by this oath?” to which he replies “The fate that befalls mortals who are impious” (see §§1.1, 2.3). Phaedra may be making a similar demand of Hippolytus in a fragment of Euripides' lost *Hippolytos Kalypomenos* (Eur. fr. 435).²⁸ In comedy, the famous oath of sexual abstinence taken by the women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (209–37) is dictated by Lysistrata, line by line, to one of the women speaking “on behalf of all” (210), while all lay hands on the cup of wine which gives the oath extra sanctity (since Old Comedy assumes that the average woman values drink and sex above all other things whatsoever); the promise to be made is spelled out over ten lines, and then follow the blessing and curse (233–6):²⁹

ταῦτ' ἐμπεδοῦσα μὲν πίοιμ' ἐντευθενί·
εἰ δὲ παραβαίην, ὕδατος ἐμπλήθ' ἢ κύλιζ.

If I fulfil all this, may I drink from this cup; but if I should transgress it, may the cup be filled with water!

Speakers who *volunteer* oaths do not usually spell out the attached curse, but one who does is Ariston, the prosecutor of Conon in Demosthenes 54. He swears (Dem. 54.41) an oath of type (1) above “by all the gods and all the goddesses” that Conon is guilty of the charge against him and that he (Ariston) had been struck,

²⁸ The doubts of Zwierlein 2004, i 71–77 and Hutchinson 2004, 22 as to whether this line does come from the exacting of an oath are answered by Talboy & Sommerstein 2006, 260 n.32.

²⁹ Here reduced for simplicity to two lines; in the actual script, each line is spoken first by Lysistrata and then repeated by the other woman.

had been cut in the lip so as to need stitches, and had been the victim of *hybris*; and he follows it with a double prayer of a kind common in official oaths:

καὶ εἰ μὲν εὐορκῶ, πολλὰ μοι ἀγαθὰ γένοιτο καὶ μηδέποτ' αὐθις τοιοῦτο μηδὲν πάθοιμι, εἰ δ' ἐπιορκῶ, ἐξώλης ἀπολοίμην αὐτὸς καὶ εἴ τί μοι ἔστιν ἢ μέλλει ἔσεσθαι.

And if I am swearing truthfully, may I have many blessings, and may nothing of the same kind ever happen to me again; but if I am swearing falsely, then may I perish in utter destruction, I and all that I have now or will have in the future.

(5) The regular formulae for swearing tend to be varied considerably in serious poetry, and Bacchylides and Pindar in particular, when they make sworn statements in their own names (as they not infrequently do),³⁰ can resort to some rather baroque devices to avoid using straightforward expressions that might sound prosaic. Thus we find in Pindar expressions like αὐδάσομαι ἐνόρκιον λόγον ἀλαθεῖ νόμῳ “I shall utter a word on oath with truthful heart” (*Olymp.* 2.92), μέγαν ὄρκον ὁμόσσαις τοῦτό γε οἱ σαφέως μαρτυρήσω “I shall swear a great oath and testify this much clearly for him” (*Olymp.* 6.21), or ἀλαθὴς τέ μοι ἐξορκὸς ἐπέσσεται ... ἀδύγλωστος βοά “and my truthful, sworn, sweet-tongued cry will be added” (*Olymp.* 13.98–100); sometimes even the personality of the swearer (the “poetic I”) is suppressed, as in *Olymp.* 11.4–6:

εἰ δὲ σὺν πόνῳ τις εὖ πράσσοι, μελιγάρυες ὕμνοι
ὕστέρων ἀρχὰ λόγων
τέλλεται καὶ πιστὸν ὄρκιον μεγάλαις ἀρεταῖς.

If toil should bring a man success, then his great achievements make sweet-voiced songs and sworn pledges arise, on which to found his future reputation.

Bacchylides has what seems to be a formula of his own for this purpose: twice (5.42, 8.19) he makes a statement about his honorand into an oath by saying that he utters it “resting (my hand) on the earth” (cf. *Iliad* 14.272).

Oaths of all these forms can invoke any god, goddess or (less often) hero, or any sacred or cherished object (or even abstraction, like “the sufferings of my father” in *Odyssey* 20.339); for details, see especially §5.3 and ch.13.

³⁰ See MacLachlan 2007. Most of the statements concerned are laudatory ones about the honorand of the ode or his family.

5.2 The “Sophoclean” oath

I.C. Torrance

Referring to a serious statement as something sworn when it has not been may not seem particularly odd to the modern ear, but to the ancient Greeks, as we have seen, an oath was a binding and divinely sanctioned contract and the ritual language used to take an oath was markedly different from that used in a mere assertion, vow, or promise. Within our corpus of sources there are only a handful of cases in which an unsworn statement is treated as an oath, and these occur almost exclusively in Sophocles. For that reason the term “Sophoclean oath” has suggested itself to designate this particular use of oath-language, but this does not mean that oaths in their traditional form are not also important in Sophocles. We will look briefly at oaths in Sophocles in a general sense in order to contextualize his very particular use of “Sophoclean” oaths in five of his extant plays, each of which will then be discussed in turn. In conclusion we will examine the only two other examples of “Sophoclean” oath-language I have found in later authors, one in Aristophanes, which I argue is a parody of Sophocles’ technique, and one in Isocrates where “Sophoclean” oath-language is exploited for rhetorical purposes.³¹

Referring retroactively to an unsworn agreement or statement as an oath adds the implications of a religious contract, with divine penalties for perjury, to a previously non-binding agreement. Doing so, then, would not seem particularly desirable for someone referring to their own previous statement. Nevertheless, this happens in three Sophoclean plays (*Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus at Colonus*). Moreover in two Sophoclean dramas (*Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*), it is explicitly mentioned that an oath is *not* required and that a pledge will suffice, and yet after the pledge has been made, the agreement is nevertheless referred to as an oath. Finally, none of the characters accused by others of swearing an oath when none had been sworn (as happens in *Ajax*, *Philoctetes* and *Women of Trachis*) denies the erroneous accusation. I will argue that “Sophoclean” oaths engage the audience in a process of critical assessment similar to other ambiguo-

³¹ One passage in the *Iliad* (2.339) where Nestor refers to “oaths” without any clear antecedent is the only possible example I have found of a “Sophoclean” oath that would pre-date Sophocles. In the next chapter (pp. 145–6) I discuss how Nestor might be recasting a “promise” mentioned by Odysseus in the previous speech as an oath, in a pattern which would foreshadow the “Sophoclean” oath. However, I conclude that the mention of libations in connection with these “oaths” strongly suggests a specific reference to the oath of Helen’s suitors, so the passage will not feature in our current discussion.

ous or riddling language in Sophocles. “Sophoclean” oaths work within the fabric of the broader language of oaths in each tragedy and contribute to our understanding of the characters and the relationships between them.

As elsewhere in Greek literature, characters in Sophocles tend to be careful to avoid perjury (the exception, Lichas in *Women of Trachis*, will be discussed below).³² In Sophocles’ *Electra*, Orestes instructs the *paidagōgos* to offer an oath in reporting his fictitious death in a chariot accident at the Pythian games (*El.* 47–50), but in spite of narrating an elaborate tale of Orestes’ alleged death the *paidagōgos* never offers his oath. Hirzel suggested that the *paidagōgos* does not swear the oath because Clytaemestra readily believes him, and that he might even be imagined as swearing the oath off-stage after he has gone into the palace with Clytaemestra.³³ But these suggestions ignore the fact that it is in the *paidagōgos*’ own interests *not* to perjure himself. Moreover oaths are important elsewhere in *Electra* and seem especially marked in their language. All sworn oaths in *Electra* are informal, and the play contains the highest number of informal oaths in Greek tragedy.³⁴ Clytaemestra swears by Artemis (μὰ τὴν δέσποιναν Ἄρτεμιν) that Electra will not escape punishment for her insolence when Aegisthus returns (*El.* 626–7). Chrysothemis swears by the ancestral hearth (μὰ τὴν πατρώϊαν ἐστίαν) that she is not mocking when she says that Orestes has returned (*El.* 881–2). Electra swears by the ever-unwedded goddess, i.e. Artemis, (μὰ τὰν θεὰν τὰν αἰεὶ ἀδμήταν) that she is not afraid of those in the house (*El.* 1239–42). The informal oath formula οὐ + accusative, used only by Sophocles among the tragedians, also occurs in *Electra* when the chorus swear by the lightning of Zeus and heavenly Themis (*El.* 1063–4: οὐ τὰν Διὸς ἀστραπὴν | καὶ τὰν οὐρανίαν Θέμιν). However, it is the concentration of examples of the μὰ formula that suggests that the language is especially marked in this play.³⁵ Electra’s oath by Artemis mirrors her mother’s earlier oath

³² A fragment of Sophocles’ *Colchian Women*, a play of unknown date, contains one character asking another if he swears to do a favour in return (fr. 339). This could have been Medea asking Jason for an oath of guarantee, an oath which Jason is repeatedly said to have broken in Euripides’ *Medea*. It is impossible to say, however, whether perjury of any kind featured in *Colchian Women*. On clever manipulation of oath-language used to avoid perjury in Greek culture see ch. 10, and see ch. 12 for examples of perjury and associated punishments.

³³ Hirzel 1902, 72 n.3.

³⁴ Informal oaths are oaths which do not contain a verb of swearing or an explicit imprecation but which are nevertheless oath statements, normally introduced by μὰ or νῆ. See Sommerstein 2007b, 125, and ch. 1 and 13 in this volume.

³⁵ The only other example of the μὰ formula in Sophoclean tragedy comes from *Atræus* (fr. 140). The μὰ formula features elsewhere in tragedy but never in this concentration (see §5.1, pp. 82–3).

invoking the same goddess, as she becomes more and more like Clytaemestra.³⁶ Overall, there may be an evocation of Homer. Griffin noted that the *μά* formula is used only three times in the *Iliad*, and always by Achilles, marking “the unique intensity of his temperament and his speech”, and that Telemachus’ one use of the formula in the *Odyssey* is modelled on the language and gestures of Achilles.³⁷ The *μά* formula in *Electra* may have been used to suggest a similar intensity of purpose in these female characters and certainly demonstrates that there is no need for us to imagine characters swearing oaths off-stage.

The meaning of an oath-statement made in Sophocles can sometimes be ambiguous, but it tends not to be duplicitous. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus swears on oath that he endured the worst things willingly (*ἐκὼν μὲν*) but not by his own choice (*τούτων δ’ αὐθαίρετον οὐδέν*; *OC* 521–3).³⁸ The implication of this apparently paradoxical statement seems to be that by not committing suicide he “endured” his crimes “willingly”, but that none of those crimes were of his own choosing (since he committed them in ignorance). It is conceivable that a female character used duplicitous language in an oath and was later discovered to have done so in an unidentified Sophoclean play, from which a fragment survives stating “I write the oaths of a woman in water” (fr. 811), but this is ultimately impossible to ascertain. Perhaps the speaker is rejecting a woman’s offer of an oath. In any case it is clearly a misogynistic sentiment. The line was remembered and parodied by the fourth-century comic poet Xenarchus, exploiting the stereotypical comic association of women and wine, with the version “I write the oath of a woman in wine” (Xenarchus fr. 6).³⁹

Oaths in Sophocles can also function as a means of reassuring a *philos* who has become potentially hostile. This is particularly apparent in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where most of the oath references in the play relate to characters attempting to appease Oedipus as he grows ever more paranoid. Creon swears (by means of self-imprecation) that he has not been plotting against Oedipus (*OT* 644–5), and Jocasta and the chorus beg Oedipus to take heed of the oath (*OT* 647, 653).

³⁶ See Goldhill 2012, 74–8 on repetition of character from Clytaemestra to Electra in this play.

³⁷ Griffin 1986, 52 (see also §5.1, p. 82).

³⁸ Jebb 2004 [1900] 90 objected to Bothe’s emendation of *ἐκὼν* “willingly” for the metrically incorrect *ἄκων* “unwillingly”, but the complex expression is at home in Sophoclean language and *ἐκὼν* is adopted by Lloyd-Jones and Wilson 1990, 379.

³⁹ Cf. also Philonides fr. 7, discussed in ch. 11 (pp. 288–9), and Catullus 70.3–4. Women’s oaths are untrustworthy in a different context at Sophocles fr. 932. There a woman is said to flee the bitter pain of childbirth through oaths, but gets caught in the same net again, vanquished by desire. Presumably this means that the pain of childbirth makes a woman swear off sexual intercourse, but she subsequently breaks this oath once the pains have been forgotten.

The chorus members also swear by self-imprecation that they are not seeking the death of Oedipus or his exile from the land (*OT* 660–2).⁴⁰ We will have more to say concerning oaths and relationships between friends and enemies when we discuss “Sophoclean” oaths in *Philoctetes*. Certainly it is more common to find oaths taken between enemies or disputing parties.⁴¹ Such is the case for the oath of Helen’s suitors, which (as we saw in ch. 3) can be categorized as a “mythological” or “aetiological” oath. Achilles, as we discussed, was one of the leaders in the Trojan War who had not sworn the oath and the issue of Achilles’ position outside the group of suitors seems to have been important in Sophocles’ *Gathering of the Achaeans* (*Achaïon Syllogos*), where someone conducts a roll-call from an inscribed tablet of whoever “swore together” (ξυνώμοσεν) but is not present (fr. 144). Sommerstein, who identifies this play with *Syndeipnoi*, shows that this tablet in all likelihood contained a list of suitors, and that the purpose of using this for the roll-call was to avoid a public shaming of Achilles, who had not yet arrived. Since his name was not on the list, it would not have been called.⁴² Aristotle finds it worthy of particular praise that Achilles took part in the Trojan expedition although he was very young and not bound by oath (*Rhetoric* 1396b17). After his death, Achilles is replaced by his son Neoptolemus, who is similarly free from compulsion to remain with the expedition. This fact is exploited by Odysseus in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* when he uses Neoptolemus to persuade Philoctetes that he has left Troy and can bring him home. “You sailed under oath to no one, nor under compulsion, nor were you part of the first fleet”, says Odysseus to Neoptolemus (*Phil.* 72–3). The oath of Helen’s suitors is also referenced in *Ajax* where Teucer balks at Menelaus, stressing that Ajax went to Troy not for the sake of Menelaus or his wife but “because of the oaths by which he was solemnly bound” (1113). Oaths in Sophocles, as we can see, are taken very seriously. The chorus in *Antigone* praise the excellence of the man who upholds “the sworn justice of the gods” (*Ant.* 369: θεῶν τ’ ἔνορκον δίκαν), and a character in Sophocles’ *Oenomaus* is careful because an oath has been added to a promise (fr. *472).⁴³ It is striking,

40 The only other oath in the *OT* is the oath sworn by Oedipus early in the play (249–51), stating that the killer of Laius is not living in the house with his knowledge, similar to the plaintiff’s exculpatory oath in Athenian homicide trials. For a defence of the text and a sensitive analysis of its implications and ambiguities, see Carawan 1999. As Carawan points out (206–7), the qualification of knowledge releases Oedipus from the danger of perjury, since the killer of Laius is living in his house. Edmunds 2012 highlights the importance of curse language in Oedipus’ speech here and demonstrates that it is central to the Oedipus myth.

41 See further ch. 4 in this volume and S&B ch. 10 and 11.

42 See Sommerstein 2006a, 120–2.

43 Sommerstein and Talbot 2012, 105 argue that these lines are spoken by Hippodameia to Myr-

then, that Sophocles repeatedly uses oath-language to refer to unsworn statements in a manner unparalleled in any other author.

“Sophoclean” oaths generally occur in tragedies where oaths form an important network of language. These oaths therefore function within the broader patterns of oath-language in the relevant plays. We begin our discussion with *Women of Trachis*, since this contains the widest variety of oath-language, including a perjury, a probable lie about an oath, and a blind oath, as well as a “Sophoclean” oath. Oath-language in *Women of Trachis* clusters around the figures of Lichas and Iole and is directly linked to the deceptions and miscommunications of the tragedy. Next we address *Philoctetes*, another play in which oath-language is connected with deception and miscommunication. In this case the “Sophoclean” oath is part of a series of oaths reflecting the shifting relationships of friendship and enmity in the drama. The power dynamics between Oedipus and Theseus in *Oedipus at Colonus* are also expressed in part through “Sophoclean” oath-language. It is remarkable that both these plays (*Phil.* and *OC*) refer to unsworn statements as oaths *in spite of the fact* that the person to whom the unsworn pledge was made had explicitly stated that an oath is not required. Most peculiar, however, is the “Sophoclean” oath of the Guard in *Antigone* in which he effectively casts himself as a perjurer by referring to an unsworn statement as an oath which he has broken. Since oaths in *Antigone* are all sworn by Creon, however, I argue that the Guard’s use of oath-language is designed to make the audience reflect on Creon’s. In the final tragedy to be discussed, *Ajax*, “Sophoclean” oaths feature at significant moments rather than being part of a larger nexus of oath-language. Within each play, “Sophoclean” oaths help to guide audience response to important thematic issues.

Oath-language in *Women of Trachis* revolves to a great extent around the figure of Heracles’ herald Lichas, the one actual perjurer in Sophocles. His perjury is committed when he swears by Zeus (*Trach.* 399: ἵστω μέγας Ζεύς) that he will tell Deianeira the truth, but then claims that he is unable to say who are the parents of the young captive woman (Iole), when their identity is, in fact, well known to him. It would just about be possible to argue that “I cannot say” (401: οὐκ ἔχω λέγειν) is not strictly speaking a lie if, for example, Heracles had asked Lichas not to tell Deianeira about Iole. Lichas does not say “I do not know”, but when his lies are exposed by the Messenger, Lichas admits (with an *extra metrum* ναί) that he did announce to the citizens in the middle of the *agora* that the girl was Iole, daughter of Eurytus (419–24). He tries to make the argument that his state-

tilus, explaining why she is asking him to swear to carry out the plan of sabotaging Oenomaus’ chariot and/or to keep it secret.

ment was based on hearsay, which is not the same as giving a definite account (425–6). However, when the Messenger asks him whether or not he stated on oath (ἐπώμοτος λέγων) that he was bringing the girl as a wife for Heracles (427–8), Lichas becomes flustered. “I said *wife*?” (429) he exclaims in outrage,⁴⁴ but he does not deny that he did so.⁴⁵ It seems to be the case that Lichas did swear on oath that he was bringing Iole as Heracles’ wife, further evidence that he knows exactly who she is and who her parents are. More damning still, in relation to Lichas’ perjury, is the revelation that Heracles had *not* asked Lichas to conceal or deny his passion for the girl (479–80). Clearly, then, Lichas’ claim on oath, that he “cannot say” who the girl’s parents are, is entirely false.

The Messenger also reveals that Lichas stated, in the same speech, that the city of Eurytus was subdued because of Heracles’ desire for the girl (431–2). This casts doubt on Lichas’ earlier report that Heracles attacked the city of Eurytus because “he swore solemnly, putting himself under oath” (255: ὅρκον αὐτῷ προσβαλὼν διώμοσεν) that he would enslave the man who caused his slavery, as well as his wife and child, holding Eurytus responsible (254–61).⁴⁶ The reported oath is especially strong since it uses the compound verb διώμνυμι “to swear solemnly”, normally used in homicide courts such as the Areopagus, as well as the noun ὅρκος “oath”.⁴⁷ Bruce Heiden, in his careful analysis of this scene, demonstrates that, if Heracles did swear this oath (and Heiden assumes he did), he actually fails to fulfill it, since he does not enslave Eurytus but kills him and attacks his entire city.⁴⁸ Heiden also shows, however, that Lichas’ speech is full of ambiguous language intended to mask Heracles’ true motivation of capturing Iole, for whom he has conceived a desperate passion.⁴⁹ Given that perjurers are always punished with death or the extinction of their family line in Greek tragedy, as discussed above, it is unlikely that Heracles swore this oath reported by Lichas, since the

⁴⁴ The term is the same used to describe Deianeira as wife of Heracles (406, 650), cf. Segal 1981, 75.

⁴⁵ Lichas also uses corrupted marriage language interwoven with language of corrupted sacrifice when he addresses Deianeira, see Segal 1981, 66.

⁴⁶ Heiden 1989, 54–5 notes that when Lichas says Heracles swore to enslave Eurytus ζῶν παιδὶ καὶ γυναίκῃ (257), this might refer only to Iole, i.e. “with his child, indeed a woman” rather than “with his child and his wife”, depending on whether καὶ is taken as a conjunction or as an adverb. Cf. Winnington-Ingram 1980, 82, who discusses how Lichas lies about the motive for Heracles’ attack on Eurytus, noting that his lust for Iole is the sole cause of the war.

⁴⁷ On the *diōmosiai*, oaths taken by speakers in homicide trials, see S&B, 111–15. Fletcher 2012, 82 n.38 observes that Sophocles is the only tragedian to use the verb διώμνυμι.

⁴⁸ Heiden 1989, 55.

⁴⁹ Heiden 1989, 54–7.

known apotheosis of Heracles after his death is incompatible with divine punishment for perjury.⁵⁰ Rather, it seems to be part of Lichas' manipulation of the facts in presenting them to Deianeira. If Heracles had indeed put himself under oath, then the campaign against Oechalia is an obligation he must fulfil. If there is no oath, however, then Heracles freely chooses to engage in the campaign. The latter scenario would wound Deianeira more deeply once she has discovered that Heracles' passion for Iole was the true reason for the campaign, which had contributed to Heracles' prolonged absence. Lichas says that he feigned ignorance of the girl's identity in order to spare Deianeira's feelings (*Trach.* 481–3). It seems that the oath story, too, was fabricated for the same purpose since Lichas' use of oath-language is remarkably lax throughout, and he later admits that a terrible desire for Iole came upon Heracles “one day” (476) and that he conquered the city “for her sake” (477). This truth seems incompatible with the oath version of compulsion. Fletcher suggests that Lichas only lies about the *reasons* for Heracles' oath, but the language used by Lichas when he finally reveals the truth does not mention an oath at all, which implies that he lied about the oath itself. Fletcher is right, however, to stress that lying *about* an oath is not perjury.⁵¹ Nevertheless, Lichas is shown first of all to be a liar, and then to be a perjurer in at least one instance. In the one unequivocal example of perjury, Lichas had invoked great Zeus as his witness (399). He will meet his end fittingly at the sacred grove of Zeus at Mount Ceneae, killed by the son of Zeus, Heracles, who hurls him off the cliff face by the ankle after he delivers the poisoned robe from Deianeira (750–82). His brain pours out from his hair and his head is shattered (781–2).⁵² Lichas is one of the small number of tragic perjurers whose fates can be read as a consequence of their perjury.⁵³

⁵⁰ See §12.1 on divine responses to perjury.

⁵¹ Fletcher 2012, 82.

⁵² Fletcher 2012, 84 notes the parallel between the description of Lichas' brain spilling out and the fate specified for those who would break the truce between the Trojans and the Greeks in the *Iliad*, namely that their brains be spilled on the ground and those of their sons, and that their wives should be the spoil of others (3.300–1). Heiden 1989, 72 is wrong, I think, to dismiss the oath by Zeus as being of “purely rhetorical utility”.

⁵³ Pace Hall 2009, 72 who suggests that Lichas, like Iphitus who suffers a similar death at the hands of Heracles, is “guilty of no crimes”, though she is right to stress the parallels between the deaths of the two men. The fate of Jason in Euripides' *Medea* can similarly be read as resulting from his perjury (see pp. 133–4); see also §12.2, p. 307, on the deaths of Parthenopaeus in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, Capaneus in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, and Eteocles in *Phoenician Women*.

Charles Segal observed that “Lichas’ lie, the initial source of infection in the realm of *logos*, introduces also the infection in the realm of trust, *pistis*”,⁵⁴ and that this corruption of *pistis* “is not entirely made good in the exchange between father and son”, because “the boy is taken aback by the need for a formal oath”.⁵⁵ In fact he is taken aback by what he perceives to be an “excessive pledge” (*Trach.* 1182), even before Heracles demands a blind oath.⁵⁶ Like Hippolytus in Euripides, Hyllus is here tricked into agreeing to unknown courses of action. The oath will compel him to follow Heracles’ orders of building a funeral pyre for his father’s living body and marrying Iole against his will (1185–1258). Heracles extracts a blind oath because he knows that Hyllus would refuse these requests under any other conditions. In spite of his oath, Hyllus is so opposed to his father’s instructions that Heracles reminds him of the curse that awaits him should he disobey (1201–2, 1239–40) and reasserts his order concerning Iole with an oath of his own (1248).⁵⁷

We now come to the one oath left out of the discussion so far, the “Sophoclean” oath. This too is connected with Lichas’ knowledge of Iole’s identity and takes place before his perjury. The identity of the captive women is a concern for Deianeira from their first appearance. She asks Lichas who they are (*Trach.* 242) but he does not answer the question. Deianeira then notices Iole, guessing that she is noble, and asks Lichas directly who she is and who her parents are (307–11). Lichas replies with a question: “How should I know?” (314). Deianeira persists, asking Lichas if she comes from the royal house and whether Eurytus had any children (316). Again Lichas claims he does not know. Had Lichas not learned her name from one of her fellow-travellers, asks Deianeira (318). Lichas says he had not.

⁵⁴ Segal 1981, 95.

⁵⁵ Segal 1981, 102.

⁵⁶ Earlier in the play, the term *pistis* clusters around Deianeira’s decision to send Heracles the anointed robe. She wonders whether it is a good idea and the chorus advise her to go ahead “if there is trust (*pistis*) in actions” (*Trach.* 588), to which she responds that she has trust to the extent that she believes it (590). As Hall 2009, 70–1 stresses, the exchange indicates that Deianeira has no certain knowledge of how the potion will work. Lichas then gives his “assurance” (*pistin*) that he will bring the robe to Heracles (623). So *pistis* is very much infected in this drama, as Segal suggests.

⁵⁷ Winnington-Ingram 1980, 84 discusses Heracles’ self-centred and ruthless attitude in his relationships, suggesting that he insists on Hyllus marrying Iole because “he can regard Hyllus in no other light than as an extension of his own individuality.” Cf. also Segal 1981, 103 and Heiden 1989, 70.

It is clear that Deianeira makes a concerted effort to discover Iole's identity from Lichas, to no avail. When the Messenger arrives, revealing that Lichas' report is full of falsehoods, Deianeira realizes that her intuition of Iole's noble blood was correct. In a tone which is "bitterly ironical",⁵⁸ she asks (*Trach.* 378–9): "Nameless, then, is she, as the one who brought her solemnly swore (διώμνυτο), she who is so dazzling in face and form?" The question is rhetorical, but the Messenger answers nonetheless, revealing that she is the daughter of Eurytus, called Iole, adding a sarcastic remark about Lichas' failure to mention her origins "because he had made no inquiries" (382). As Easterling comments, the Messenger's point is that no one would have needed to inquire since everyone must have known who Iole was.⁵⁹ Deianeira's language, however, is an example of a "Sophoclean" oath, since Lichas had not sworn anything on oath in the earlier scene although he had vehemently denied any knowledge of the girl's identity. Fletcher suggests that "Deianeira selects her vocabulary as a rhetorical ploy to extract the truth",⁶⁰ but Lichas is not present at this point and Deianeira hardly has any need to extract the truth from the Messenger, who has already been telling her the truth and revealing Lichas' lies over the course of some forty lines. Rather, the oath-language emphasizes the seriousness of Lichas' deception in Deianeira's eyes. As far as she is concerned, it is *as if* Lichas had lied on oath. Moreover, the suggestion of perjury prefigures Lichas' actual perjury just twenty lines later,⁶¹ when Lichas proves himself willing to lie on oath regarding Iole's identity, thus validating Deianeira's assessment of his deception.

Oaths and deception are inextricably linked in the first part of the tragedy, not only through Lichas' own statements but also through his questionable report concerning Heracles' oath to enslave Eurytus and his family. The atmosphere of confusion created as a result plays on Deianeira's mind. She becomes more and more concerned that she has lost the love of Heracles until she decides to send him the robe laced with a "love" potion, as she believes, realizing only too late that it is a potion of death.⁶² Indeed Iole remains a figure at the centre of oath-language even at the end of the tragedy, since the blind oath demanded by the dying Heracles from Hyllus binds Hyllus to take Iole as his wife against his own wishes,

⁵⁸ Easterling 1982, *ad* 375–9.

⁵⁹ Easterling 1982, *ad* 381–2.

⁶⁰ Fletcher 2012, 82.

⁶¹ Also noticed by Fletcher 2012, 83.

⁶² Hall 2009, 70–1 shows that Deianeira's deliberation concerning use of the potion is interrupted by the arrival of Lichas, right at the very moment when the chorus members have advised her to test it out before using it.

and the “Sophoclean” oath about Iole’s identity helps to manipulate audience sympathy in favour of Deianeira.

Another tragedy in which different and often conflicting layers of communication are central to the development of events is *Philoctetes*, and again oaths play an important role in the language of the drama. The tragedy’s setting at a “cave with two mouths” (*Phil.* 16) is emblematic of the dual versions of events which transpire during the play,⁶³ where it is unclear, in varying degrees, which version of a communication is true.⁶⁴ A further motif that is central to this play is the dichotomy between force and deception in relation to securing the assistance of Philoctetes and his bow. Neoptolemus originally wants to take Philoctetes by force, not by trickery (*Phil.* 90–1). In this respect he is very much his father’s son, a point that is emphasized not only with frequent references to him by his patronymic as the son of Achilles,⁶⁵ but also through the report that the Greek army had been so overwhelmed by his likeness to the dead Achilles that they “swore” they were seeing him alive again (357–8).⁶⁶ Odysseus insists, however, that Philoctetes must be taken by deception (101). When Neoptolemus protests that persuading Philoctetes would be better than deceiving him (102), Odysseus stands firm: “He will not be persuaded; and you cannot take him by force” (103). The difficulty in taking him by force is that he has unerring arrows (104–5). Neoptolemus strongly resists using deception, concerned that it is shameful (106–20), but ultimately relents and agrees to Odysseus’ plan (121–2).

Early in the play, then, Neoptolemus is associated with force and open persuasion, and Odysseus with deception and underhanded persuasion. It seems Odysseus had told Neoptolemus that completing this mission would make him Troy’s conqueror (*Phil.* 114). Neoptolemus questions him about this after Odysseus’ statement that only the arrows from the bow of Philoctetes can take Troy. Odysseus argues that Neoptolemus and the arrows are inseparable from each other (115) and that by undertaking the task Neoptolemus will win two “prizes”, namely being called both wise and noble (119). Neoptolemus thus succumbs to

⁶³ Cf. Ringer 1998, 104.

⁶⁴ Cf. Winnington-Ingram 1980, 281: “Information is withheld and released...There are false starts and, above all, false endings, so that the audience is kept in a state of uncertainty, never quite sure what the characters will do or even in some cases what they are trying to do.” Segal 1981, 328–61 discusses the problems of communication in this play, and see also Ringer 1998, 101–25 on the tensions between illusion and reality in *Philoctetes*.

⁶⁵ Neoptolemus is called the son of Achilles at *Phil.* 4, 50, 57, 240–1, 260, 364, 542, 940, 1066, 1220–1, 1237, 1298, 1312, 1433.

⁶⁶ The statement is metaphorically true in the sense that a dead man lives on through his children.

Odysseus' manipulation. This contrast between Odysseus the deceiver and the forceful Neoptolemus becomes confused, however, as the drama progresses. Neoptolemus, for example, refers to Odysseus in his exchange with Philoctetes with the Homeric phrase Ὀδυσσέως βία "the force of Odysseus" (314, 321), as does the False Merchant (592). Moreover, Neoptolemus proves to be rather skilled in deceptive rhetoric. On his own initiative, he claims that he has been wounded, or more literally "maimed" (330: ἐξελωβήθη), by Odysseus and the Atreidae, thus appealing to Philoctetes not only as a fellow enemy of Odysseus but also as a fellow cripple, with language which Philoctetes later uses to describe himself (1103: λωβατός).⁶⁷

The issue becomes muddled further in the report of the False Merchant. He is sent by Odysseus, since Neoptolemus seemed to be tarrying (*Phil.* 126–31), but his account does not quite tally with what Odysseus had previously instructed. The False Merchant claims that Odysseus and Diomedes solemnly swore (διώμοστοι) to bring Philoctetes back to Troy *by persuasion or by brute force* and that all the Achaeans heard Odysseus saying this clearly (592–6). Odysseus thought he could take Philoctetes as a willing accessory (617), but that if Philoctetes refused to come with him, he would take him against his will (618). According to the False Merchant, he added a self-imprecation, saying that, if he failed, he would allow anyone who desired it to cut off his head (618–21). This self-imprecation is not an oath since the punishment invited is human and not divine, but it is nevertheless interesting to compare *Od.* 16.99–104, where Odysseus makes a similar, though more serious, self-imprecation, which does count as an oath. Disguised as the Cretan he states that his head should be cut from his shoulders (by an unspecified power) if he does not become a plague on the suitors. That is a moment in which Odysseus unwittingly betrays his true identity and lets the disguise as the Cretan slip. Did Sophocles have this passage in mind?⁶⁸ Is the False Merchant reporting Odysseus' true sentiments and expressions, or is this another deceptive fabrication? According to the False Merchant's account of Helenus' prophecy, this stated only that Philoctetes should be *persuaded by speech* to come to Troy (*Phil.* 612).⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Heath 1999, 147 points to a different but connected challenge to the consistency of Odysseus' characterization in this play when he demonstrates that the language Odysseus uses undermines his moral position, thus diluting the nature of Odysseus' skills of persuasion.

⁶⁸ Segal 1972, 169 compares the two passages, suggesting that "[b]oth situations are of great emotional agitation and dramatic power".

⁶⁹ Cf. Winnington-Ingram 1980, 280 "What *did* the prophet say?", and 292 "the 'Merchant' tells lies", but "the lines sound like a genuine prophecy and stick in the mind....It is preposterous to suppose that it is not authentic, being confirmed by Heracles".

If the prophecy stated that Philoctetes should be persuaded, then why do Odysseus and Diomedes allegedly swear an oath to take him by persuasion *or by force*? Did Odysseus really think he could take Philoctetes as a willing accessory? More significantly, why does Odysseus, at the beginning of the play, propose deceit as the only option, adamantly rejecting persuasion and force as means to get Philoctetes back to Troy, if these were the very strategies he had sworn to implement? There are no easy answers to these questions, but it is quite possible, indeed probable, that we should understand the False Merchant to be lying about the oaths sworn by Odysseus in order to throw Philoctetes off the scent of deceit. It would be strange for Odysseus and Diomedes to swear an oath that did not conform to the specific terms of the prophecy. We saw in our discussion above how Lichas probably lied about an oath sworn by Heracles in *Women of Trachis*. At the same time, it is also possible that Odysseus fears the deceit has failed and sends the False Merchant to plant new suggestions for Neoptolemus to pursue his original intentions of overcoming Philoctetes by force or by open persuasion. The message essentially becomes to subdue him by *any* means. In the end, Neoptolemus will come clean about the deception (*Phil.* 896–926) and will try unsuccessfully to persuade Philoctetes to come to Troy, ultimately agreeing to take him home instead (1222–1407). It will take the appearance of Heracles and a divine command to change Philoctetes’ mind about going to Troy (1409–51), but one thing we can say for sure about the False Merchant speech is that it raises questions about oaths and reported oaths. What was sworn and by whom? Was there an oath at all, or is the report of one merely a fabrication? Moreover, the speech as a whole is purposely designed to add an additional layer of ambiguity to events.⁷⁰

Oliver Taplin observed that this “is a play of relationships and communication, not of great deeds”,⁷¹ and it is in the context of communication and the developing relationship between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus that we should understand the “Sophoclean” oath in this tragedy, namely the presentation of an unsworn pledge as an oath. Philoctetes, convinced that Neoptolemus is his friend and an enemy of Odysseus and the Atreidae, believes early on in their exchange that Neoptolemus is offering to bring him home, since he agrees to take him on his ship (*Phil.* 527) and has said he is sailing for Scyros (381). Neoptolemus prays ambiguously that their voyage may be prosperous and rapid to wherever god thinks right and their mission lies (779–81), but before they can leave, Philoctetes

⁷⁰ Easterling 1983, 218 neatly summarizes the various ambiguities of characters’ motivations in this play.

⁷¹ Taplin 1971, 26. For Podlecki 1966, 233, the play is “a case study in the failure of communication”.

is overcome by a fit of pain. Afraid that Neoptolemus will leave him on the island, Philoctetes asks for his word that he will remain. “I do not think it worthy to put you under oath”, he says (811); “give me your hand as a pledge” (813). By specifically not requesting an oath in spite of his vulnerable position, Philoctetes demonstrates that he trusts Neoptolemus. Simon Goldhill discusses the intricacies of this scene.⁷² He notes that the particles μήν and γε indicate that Philoctetes would prefer an oath but feels it is inappropriate to ask. Goldhill also draws attention to the process of Neoptolemus’ change of heart, marked by the word πάλαι “long since”, which “invites an audience to think back over time and re-play Neoptolemus’ reactions”.⁷³

Scholars have noted that the hand-clasp between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, a symbol of trust and friendship, comes at the very moment when Philoctetes is most deceived.⁷⁴ Goldhill observes how the dialogue in the play then “immediately collapses into a broken pattern of half and third lines, and incoherent miscomprehension and demand (814–18)”.⁷⁵ Shortly thereafter, Neoptolemus decides he is acting against his nature by deceiving Philoctetes and decides to come clean (897ff.) The oathless pledge requested by Philoctetes, and Philoctetes trusting Neoptolemus with his bow, are actions that must weigh on Neoptolemus’ conscience in the process of his decision to reject deception. Once the truth has been revealed, and Neoptolemus refuses to restore his bow, Philoctetes is enraged. He appeals to the wilderness around him lamenting his treatment at the hands of the son of Achilles who “swore” (ὅμοσας) to bring him home (941) and offered his right hand as pledge (942). It is remarkable that Philoctetes charges Neoptolemus with having *sworn* the pledge when the absence of an oath was underlined, just 130 lines previously.⁷⁶ It is also noteworthy that Neoptolemus does not defend himself against this unfounded accusation.

The language of oaths has been manipulated in this sequence in order to underline Philoctetes’ retrospective reconfiguration of his relationship with Neoptolemus. Now that Philoctetes has realized Neoptolemus is his enemy, he treats the oathless pledge he received from a friend as the sworn statement he would

⁷² Goldhill 2012, 68–71.

⁷³ Goldhill 2012, 69.

⁷⁴ Segal 1981, 332, Kaimio 1988, 31, Goldhill 2012, 69, cf. Taplin 1971, 33–4 and Kosak 1999, 119–20.

⁷⁵ Goldhill 2012, 69.

⁷⁶ Oddly, Segal 1981, 348 misses this, when he refers to Neoptolemus’ oath to return Philoctetes to Malis. In fact, Neoptolemus has made no such oath, nor had he stated that he would bring Philoctetes to Malis.

have exacted from an enemy.⁷⁷ Neoptolemus’ silence on the issue demonstrates his tacit acknowledgement of the implications of Philoctetes’ claim. Moreover, as Neoptolemus tries desperately to regain Philoctetes’ trust, he does so by using oaths. He offers Philoctetes back his bow and swears “by the highest reverence of holy Zeus” (ἀπώμοσ’ ἀγνοῦ Ζηνὸς ὕψιστον σέβας) that Philoctetes is not being tricked again (*Phil.* 1289). At this point of exchange Odysseus also offers an oath of his own, calling the gods to witness (ὡς θεοὶ ξυνίστορες) that he forbids the handing over of the bow (1293), but the oath is meaningless since it is attached to the performative utterance of forbidding which is made true by the very fact of being uttered. It demonstrates Odysseus’ loss of control over manipulative speech. Neoptolemus again swears by Zeus guarantor of oaths (Zeus Horkios) that Philoctetes will only be released from his affliction by going to Troy with his bow and joining Neoptolemus in capturing the city (1324–35). Philoctetes remains unmoved, however, and repeats his reproach that Neoptolemus had sworn a pact with him (μοι ξυνώμοσας) to bring him home (1367–8). Once more, Neoptolemus does not object, but rather urges Philoctetes to trust in the gods and in his words, and stresses that he is Philoctetes’ friend (1373–5, cf. 1383, 1385). Although Neoptolemus fails to persuade Philoctetes to go to Troy, it is clear that he eventually convinces Philoctetes that he really is his friend. In the final reference to the agreement, Philoctetes asks Neoptolemus to do what he had *agreed* (ἃ δ’ ἔνεσας) when he clasped his right hand (1398). This redresses the anomaly of his previous references to the pledge as an oath, and demonstrates that he now considers Neoptolemus a friend once more.

The use of oath-language in this play runs parallel to the theme of friendship vs. enmity. Recalling the pledge as an oath coincides with Philoctetes’ discovery that Neoptolemus has been acting as his enemy. It is partly then through actual oaths that Neoptolemus persuades his enemy to trust him once again. The manipulation of oath-language also goes hand in hand with this play’s manipulation of expectation regarding Odysseus and Neoptolemus. Although it sets up a

⁷⁷ Fletcher 2012, 95 suggests, in relation to this problematic passage, that “oaths can formalize friendship”, but the example she gives of Theseus and Perithous simply mentions πίστ’ ἀεὶ ξυνθήματα “ever-pledged agreements” (*OC* 1594), and as Fletcher correctly observes (94), a pledge is “different from an oath since it invokes no gods”. In some cases *pistis* does refer to a sworn statement, but this is made clear by additional oath-language (e.g. *Hdt.* 7.145–8, *Dem.* 29.26, and see further ch. 6, pp. 165–7). Plutarch later treats the pledge between Theseus and Peirithous as ἔσπονδον ‘sworn’ (*Thes.* 30), but Sophocles does not. In *Philoctetes*, the point rather seems to be, as I am arguing, that Philoctetes now treats the pledge as sworn because he has come to see Neoptolemus as an *enemy*. On the importance of the friendship vs. enmity theme in this play, and in Sophocles, see M.W. Blundell 1989, 184–225 and *passim*.

very clear contrast between the two, the contrast becomes confused and is complicated by the fact that Odysseus is eager to use force against Philoctetes once Neoptolemus has possession of his bow, and that Neoptolemus proves himself skilled in deceptive persuasion although he is ultimately unwilling to go through with the deception. Indeed his only real means of winning over a hostile man to his side *without* deception is by swearing oaths to convince Philoctetes of the truth of his statements. As Pat Easterling has observed, central to the *Philoctetes* is “the stress given to the power of persuasion”,⁷⁸ with Heracles ultimately persuading Philoctetes to go to Troy where he will be healed.⁷⁹ Podlecki has pointed to the “critical importance...of speech” in the play,⁸⁰ an aspect of the tragedy that is intimately connected with the theme of persuasion. Oaths and oath-language are contributing elements to the drama’s network of speech and persuasion, and the “Sophoclean” oath focuses audience attention on the shifting dynamics of the relationship between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes.

A similar pattern of language is developed around oaths in *Oedipus at Colonus*, although the relationship between the two characters is very different in this case.⁸¹ Again here, as in *Philoctetes*, it is emphasized that an oath is not required but later the agreement is treated as a sworn statement. Theseus, king of Athens, welcomes Oedipus to Colonus as a suppliant and assures him that he will never betray him. “I will not bind you under oath, as if you were base” says Oedipus (*OC* 650). Theseus replies “You would win nothing more than by my word” (651). It is clear that there is no need for an oath because Oedipus trusts Theseus, and it is notable that Oedipus and Theseus act here as equals in spite of Oedipus’ apparent supplicatory status.⁸² Theseus is true to his word. When Creon

⁷⁸ Easterling 1983, 224.

⁷⁹ Easterling 1983, 223, noting that the Greek *peithomai* encompasses both obedience and persuasion. On the theme of persuasion in *Philoctetes* see also Buxton 1982, 118–31.

⁸⁰ Podlecki 1996, 246 and *passim*.

⁸¹ Markantonatos 2007, 167–93 discusses oath-language in *Oedipus at Colonus* in relation to the fragile nature of Athenian society at the end of the Peloponnesian War. He suggests that Theseus’ reliable oaths embody traditional Athenian piety (171), as a “reconciliation thesis constantly advanced in the Sophoclean tragedy” (183), but his discussion makes no clear distinction between oaths, promises and pledges, terms that he uses interchangeably. This is problematic since promises and pledges have no religiously binding force. This slippage in language leads to confusion as, for example, when he claims (175) that Oedipus “places each and every one of the Athenian rulers under oath (1530–1532)”. In fact, the passage referenced is simply a command with an imperative and contains no language of oath, promise or pledge.

⁸² Burian 1974, 409 argued that the dramatic form of the play is “an adaptation of the pattern of suppliant drama”; cf. Fletcher 2012, 118. Wilson 1997, 29–61 discusses how Oedipus is not a true suppliant in this drama since he repeatedly offers benefits to his host.

arrives and forces Antigone and Ismene to come away with him, Theseus comes to the rescue and retrieves them. When he returns, however, Theseus claims to have fulfilled the things which *he had sworn* to Oedipus (1145). Theseus recasts his own oathless promise as a sworn agreement. I suggest that here also, as in *Philoctetes*, an implicit reconfiguration of the relationship between the two characters is occurring. In this case there is no shift between friendship and enmity. Rather, Oedipus’ status in relation to Theseus changes over the course of the play from suppliant to equal to more powerful, as some scholars have observed.⁸³ The shift comes through Oedipus’ anticipated posthumous power to bless the land, the reciprocal gift which he has offered Theseus in exchange for his protection (576–82).⁸⁴ I argue below that the reference to an unsworn pledge as an oath reflects this new balance of power.

The oath-language develops as Oedipus’ death draws near and as he becomes more like a divine figure. To Oedipus as a fellow mortal, and a pitiable one at that, it would be unusual for Theseus to offer an oath. As the play progresses, however, reference is repeatedly made to the anticipated power of Oedipus’ posthumous presence to bless Athens and Attica through his death. The prophecy has already been revealed in the opening scene (88–95) where Oedipus referred to himself as “this wretched phantom of the man Oedipus” (109–10), on the cusp of death. Easterling notes Oedipus’ prediction that his cold corpse will drink the hot blood of the Thebans when they invade the land (621–2),⁸⁵ an image which aligns him with the Erinyes.⁸⁶ It is in this context of Oedipus’ gradual transformation into a

83 E.g. Taplin 1971, 36, Kaimio 1988, 27, cf. Knox 1964, 161 who notes that Theseus “recognizes [Oedipus] as a true prophet”.

84 Scholars disagree over whether there is an apotheosis of Oedipus at the end of the play. Markantonatos 2002, 134 and 137 refers to apotheosis, and Fletcher 2012, 121–2 also speaks of apotheosis, but others stress the vague and enigmatic nature of Oedipus’ death as a burial in the earth, e.g. Buxton 1982, 144, Easterling 2006, 138. Calame 1998, 345 argues that Oedipus’ fate shares features of both an apotheosis and a burial, and cf. Kamerbeek 1984 *ad* 1653–5 who points out that Theseus salutes both Chthonian and Olympian powers at Oedipus’ disappearance, also referenced by Bernard 2001, 156–7. At the very least, the final scenes are “suggestive of a miracle” (Easterling 2006, 140).

85 Easterling 2006, 138. Knox 1964, 153 comments that these lines stem “from the growth of some new force and knowledge within himself”, and that Oedipus’ anger towards Polyneices is “superhuman” (160). Cf. Segal 1981, 375 “Oedipus becomes increasingly sure of his power and his destiny during the middle portion of the play”. Knox 1964, 149 observes that Oedipus’ humility as a beggar vanishes very early in the play when he refuses to move (*OC* 45).

86 Numerous scholars have noted the parallels between the polluted avenging Oedipus becoming a benefit to Athens and the transformation of the Furies into Eumenides who will bless Athens at the end of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, and at whose sacred grove the action of *Oedipus at Colonus*

divine force that the agreement becomes retrospectively reconfigured as an oath. The oath reference thus helps to confirm the transition of Oedipus from pitiable mortal wretch to powerful divine force.

In *Women of Trachis*, the imminent apotheosis of Heracles is underlined with oath-language, when Heracles asks his son to swear an oath invoking the “head of Zeus” in a formula otherwise restricted to oaths uttered by divinities.⁸⁷ Hyllus ultimately invokes Zeus, but does not use the formula suggested by his soon-to-be-divine father. In *Oedipus at Colonus* oath-language is also manipulated (though in a different way) to underline Oedipus’ transformation into a godlike power. The end of the drama emphasizes this transformation as the thunder and storm of Zeus are heard (1460, 1500–4, 1514–15). Antigone treats Oedipus as a prophet (1428: ἐθέσπισεν), as does Theseus (1516–17: πολλὰ γὰρ σε θεσπίζονθ’ ὀρῶ), and Oedipus himself acts like a *deus ex machina* in prescribing the future (1518–55) with the opening phrase “I will explain”, or more literally “I will teach” (ἐγὼ διδάξω).⁸⁸ Oedipus asks Theseus not to reveal to any human being where his burial place is (*OC* 1522–3). Later, we are told by the Messenger that Oedipus asks Theseus to give the pledge of a handclasp to his daughters promising not to betray them (1631–2). The manuscripts read ὦ φίλον κάρα, | δός μοι χερὸς σῆς πίστιν ἀρχαίαν τέκνοις “O dear friend, give the time-honoured pledge of your hand to my children”. Jebb follows the emendation ὀρκίαν “oath” (Papageorgiou), i.e. “oath-pledge”, for ἀρχαίαν “time-honoured”, but it is unlikely that Oedipus should ask Theseus for an oath when his word had sufficed earlier in the play, and it was made clear that to ask for an oath would have been an insult. Theseus has already proven that he will be true to his word, and is here referred to by Oedipus as a dear friend, all factors which suggest that Oedipus did not request an oath. Indeed the emendation probably suggested itself from the subsequent report, a few lines later, that Theseus *agreed on oath* to accomplish these things for his guest-friend (1637: κατήνυσεν τὰδ’ ὄρκιος δράσειν ξένῳ).

takes place. See e.g. Méautis 1940, 41–2, Winnington-Ingram 1980, 215–16, 266–9, Segal 1981, 375–6, Seaford 1994, 132–4, Edmunds 1996, 138–42, Tilg 2004, 407–15, Kelly 2009, 71–5, Fletcher 2012, 120.

⁸⁷ Torrance 2009, 4 and *passim*.

⁸⁸ See further Easterling 2006 on the accumulation of portents and signs of divine intervention from this point until the end of the play. Parker 1999, 12 observes that the signs “create just as palpable a sense of divine presence as if a god had appeared on stage.” See also Budelmann 2000, 42–5 on the kind of manipulation of language that helps to develop our understanding of Oedipus’ mysterious posthumous powers. Kelly 2009, 122–3 discusses the development of the teaching theme in relation to Oedipus’ latent power over the course of the play, and cf. Easterling 1999, 105 who treats Oedipus’ earlier speech at *OC* 607–28 as a “didactic speech”.

Lloyd-Jones and Wilson retain ἀρχαίον “time-honoured”, and the manuscript reading mirrors the previous pattern where an oathless pledge is later referred to as a sworn agreement. The report makes it difficult to tell exactly what happened, but it seems that although he is not asked to give an oath Theseus gives one all the same. This confirms the developing imbalance in status between the two men. The divine voice which addresses Oedipus and urges him towards his fate (OC 1627–8) is marked by an unusually polite register for a divine power addressing a mortal, denoting Oedipus’ special status.⁸⁹ It is in a similar vein, then, that Theseus offers an oath in recognition of their unequal relationship. Theseus is referred to as a “noble man” (1636: ἀνὴρ γενναῖος) in making the “promise on oath”, implicitly drawing a contrast between the mortal man and the divine force of Oedipus. Ultimately, Theseus’ oath serves an additional dramatic function as he is able to defer to it in order to prevent Oedipus’ daughters from seeing the location of their father’s burial place when he states that Horkos (Oath personified), the servant of Zeus, heard his agreement (1767). The complex development of oath-language between Oedipus and Theseus thus reflects the changing nature of the relationship between the two figures, and demonstrates Theseus’ conscious awareness of that relationship.

Oath-language in *Antigone* clusters around Creon. He swears the first oath of the play, and it is an oath which marks the position he will maintain throughout the drama. He calls “Zeus who sees all things ever” to witness that he would never be silent if he saw ruin coming upon his citizens, nor would he make a friend out of the enemy of his land (*Ant.* 184–8). This oath determines the fact that Creon will be unwavering in his decision to leave Polyneices, whom he counts as an enemy, unburied, and anticipates that he will also regard Antigone as an enemy for attempting to bury him. When the guards discover that the corpse has been covered with dust, they suspect that one of their number has committed the deed (259–63), but they were all ready to hold red-hot iron in their hands and go through fire and swear by the gods that they had neither committed the deed nor knew who had planned or executed it (*Ant.* 264–7). So they were none the wiser concerning the identity of the transgressor, and drew lots to determine who would bring Creon the news, this falling to the Guard (268–77). Creon is enraged by the report and swears a second oath (ὄρκιος δέ σοι λέγω), also invoking Zeus, telling the Guard that if he does not find the perpetrator of the burial rite and bring him before Creon, all the guards will be hung up alive (304–12). The oath again marks Creon’s implacability. Similarly the last oath of the play is sworn by

⁸⁹ See M. Lloyd 2006, 225–8; cf. Knox 1964, 161, and Parker 1999, 12 who remarks that the divine voice “ennobles Oedipus by associating him with itself in a first person plural”.

Creon as a threat against his son, where he swears by Olympus⁹⁰ that Haemon will not continue to insult him with impunity (758–9). The oath formula used in this case is the Doric or Arcadian οὐ + accusative, not normally used in Attic. In tragedy the formula is found only in Sophocles and normally in lyrics (cf. *OT* 660–1, 1088, *El.* 1063–5). Creon's oath is the only example of this formula used in iambics, which may reflect the extremity of his anger.⁹¹

Creon is the only character to swear oaths in *Antigone*. The guards were reportedly “ready” to swear (*Ant.* 264), but there is no evidence that they actually did so. Moreover Creon does not “interweave the laws of the land with the sworn justice of the gods” as should the man of civic excellence described by the chorus in the Ode to Man (368–70).⁹² Teiresias will later name Creon as the cause of the city's disease (1015), urging him to bury Polyneices, while Creon will respond that Polyneices will *not* be buried, not even if the eagles of Zeus carry his body aloft to their master (1039–44). As Fletcher remarks, this “outrageous impiety casts a shadow on Creon's attempts to guarantee his power in the name of Zeus”,⁹³ whom he invokes in two out of his three oaths. Creon ignores the sworn justice of the gods and suffers great grief as a consequence. Oaths function to underline Creon's extremism throughout the play.

It is in the context of catching the perpetrator of the burial act that the “Sophoclean” oath occurs in this play. The Guard returns having caught Antigone in the act and addresses Creon with the opening words “Lord, as far as mortals are concerned, nothing can be denied on oath” (*Ant.* 388: ἄναξ, βροτοῖσιν οὐδέν ἐστ’ ἀπώμοτον). There is a gnomic sentiment in this expression, but there is also a very specific context here. The Guard explains that he hardly thought he would have returned because he feared Creon's (sworn) threats, but he has come nevertheless (389–94), he says, “although I solemnly denied through oaths that I

⁹⁰ Literally “this Olympus” (τὸνδ’ Ὀλυμπόν) at 758, i.e. “by Heaven” (see Griffith 1999 *ad* 758–9), *pace* Fletcher 2012, 109 who renders ‘the “Olympi[a]n” (i.e. Zeus)’.

⁹¹ So Sommerstein, Bayliss and Torrance (2007) in the remarks for this entry (#1978). Sourvinou-Inwood 1989 argued in an influential article that the Athenians would have sympathized with Creon, and not with Antigone, making the case that Creon is not presented as a despotic tyrant. However, Harris 2004 has demonstrated persuasively that, for the Athenians, the written laws of the *polis* were designed to *support* rather than oppose the unwritten laws of the gods, so that Creon's order would not have had the force of law, and the sympathies of the Athenians must have been mostly with Antigone.

⁹² Cf. Segal 1981, 169 “Creon's *dike*...becomes...increasingly distant from the “oath-bound justice of the gods” praised in the Ode on Man (369).”

⁹³ Fletcher 2012, 110. Segal 1981, 174–5 also comments on the “staggering hybris” of this sentiment, although he mistakenly refers to Creon's threat to punish Antigone at *Ant.* 486–7 as an oath.

would” (394: δι’ ὅρκων καίπερ ὦν ἀπώμοτος). The Guard had earlier claimed that he would never come back to the palace of Creon, whether or not the criminal was found (327–9), but he never swore this on oath. Why is it then, that just 65 lines later, the Guard treats his earlier unsworn statement as an oath he has broken, effectively casting himself as a perjurer? This is a remarkable “Sophoclean” oath. Hirzel implied that we are to imagine that the Guard had sworn the oath, but this is hardly satisfactory.⁹⁴ Mikalson similarly argues that “the guard had sworn, surely to himself”, making him ‘tragedy’s one character who swears a false oath and gets off unscathed’. But such “casual taking and breaking of the oath” suggested by Mikalson is without parallel in tragedy.⁹⁵ Nor would it sit well with the serious development of oath-language surrounding Creon in the play. Fletcher disagrees with Mikalson suggesting that this is “yet another degradation of the authority of *horkos*” in the play.⁹⁶ She quite rightly points out that Creon “is ... given to using oaths to validate his own power”,⁹⁷ and that his sworn threat of punishment for the guard is “vicious”,⁹⁸ but it is not clear that the authority of oaths is “degraded” in *Antigone*. It is not at all unusual for a person to attempt to assert their will through oaths. In Sophocles alone, there are several relevant examples. Heracles uses oaths to force his will upon Hyllus in *Women of Trachis*, as we have seen. Clytaemestra in *Electra* swears that Electra will not escape punishment for her insolence (626–7). In *Philoctetes*, Odysseus swears (fruitlessly) that he forbids Neoptolemus from handing back the bow to Philoctetes (1293).

It is evident that scholars have struggled to make sense of the Guard’s use of oath-language, but it is unreasonable to suppose that the audience should imagine characters swearing oaths out of earshot or to themselves, when they have clearly delivered the relevant lines on stage and without an oath. In other cases where a character refers to his own previous and unsworn statement as an oath, the oath-language gives meaning to the character’s situation. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Theseus’ reference to an unsworn pledge as an oath coincided with a shift in his status in relation to Oedipus who was on the point of becoming divine, as was argued above. In *Ajax*, as we shall see below, the suggestion of overcoming an oath, an essentially impossible task, implies that Ajax plans to commit suicide in spite of his deceptive speech. One of the main functions of the Guard in *Antigone* is to act as a foil for Creon’s actions and behaviour. As Mark Griffith

⁹⁴ Hirzel 1902, 72–3 n.3.

⁹⁵ All quotations from Mikalson 1991, 85.

⁹⁶ Fletcher 2012, 109.

⁹⁷ Fletcher 2012, 108.

⁹⁸ Fletcher 2012, 109.

comments, “the Guard’s self-protective verbal smoke-screens amount almost to a parody of Kreon’s own autocratic mannerisms”.⁹⁹ The Guard’s “Sophoclean” oath in *Antigone* can also be read in this light. It seems to function as a reflection on the character of Creon and his aggressive use of oaths.

Had the Guard actually sworn that he would not return, he would indeed have become a perjurer, but the audience will recognize that the oath-language he uses is a gross exaggeration of his recent statement. Creon, by contrast, has already sworn two oaths expressing extremely obstinate sentiments. He will not need to fulfil his threat against the guards, since the criminal has been found, but Creon’s first oath can be read as encapsulating the root of his problem. His absolute determination to regard Polyneices as an enemy of the land, and to deny his burial as a result, causes the pollution on the city which brings with it the gods’ displeasure, as Teiresias explains. Creon’s oath is part of what causes his downfall. This can be compared with the Guard’s use of oath-language. He reports that the guards are ready to swear defensive oaths to prove their innocence, an implicit but marked contrast to Creon’s aggressive oaths. The Guard’s “Sophoclean” oath will prompt an audience to realize the serious nature of oath-language and of the oath bond. Indeed it comes shortly after the chorus’ praise of a man who upholds the laws of the land *and* the sworn justice of the gods (*Ant.* 368–70), a justice which Creon ignores until it is too late. Creon’s oaths are thus cast into sharp relief as exceptionally aggressive and unwise in the context of the Guard’s observations concerning the inability of mortals to deny anything on oath. Creon’s subsequent oath threatening Haemon (758–9) demonstrates that he still has not learned to quell his exploitation of oaths as a language of attack nor recognized the danger of swearing over-zealous oaths.

The situation in *Ajax* is somewhat different, but as with the other Sophoclean plays, paying attention to the exploitation of oath-language reveals that it is used carefully and with dramatic purpose. There are two examples of non-oaths being referred to as oaths in this play. The first comes after Tecmessa has apparently persuaded Ajax against going to the death he had been determined to seek earlier in the play. He begins his deception speech with the following generalization: “All obscure things long and immeasurable time brings forth and hides them again when they have been revealed; nothing is beyond expectation, but dread oath and obstinate minds are conquered” (*Ajax* 646–9). Ajax goes on to explain that he has been softened by Tecmessa’s words and that he pities the plight she would have as a widow amongst his enemies and his son as an orphan (650–3).

⁹⁹ Griffith 1999, 37.

He claims that he will go and bury Hector’s sword in the ground (657–60). There is much room for interpretation in Ajax’s words throughout his speech, and scholars have debated whether Ajax has actually changed his mind or not, but several persuasive analyses have shown that Ajax deliberately uses ambiguous language to suggest that he will not commit suicide but without actually saying so.¹⁰⁰ Goldhill has also discussed how the “image of a critical observer”, developed in the previous scene, “offers a model for the audience in the theater, faced as they will be by Ajax’ deception speech”.¹⁰¹ I would further suggest that the mention of “dread oath” (δεινὸς ὄρκος) provides a clue for the critical observers in the audience to expect Ajax’s suicide.

The generalization with which Ajax opened his speech stressed the universality of change,¹⁰² and the reference to obstinate minds being conquered creates a transition to his specific situation.¹⁰³ Malcolm Heath observes that both the oath and obstinate minds “are things that one might expect to be unchanging”, and disagrees with Knox’s suggestion that we are meant to think here of the oath of Helen’s suitors.¹⁰⁴ Knox argues that the oath has been broken by Ajax’s attempted murder of the Atreidae.¹⁰⁵ I agree with Heath that this is unlikely in the context.¹⁰⁶ It is only much later that the oath of Helen’s suitors is mentioned (*Ajax* 1113). Moreover Athena’s intervention has prevented Ajax from actually perpetrating the crimes so the oath is technically unbroken. However, the reference to “dread oath” easily functions as an example of a “Sophoclean” oath, with Ajax treating his previous determination to find death, although unsworn, as an oath which has now allegedly been conquered along with his obstinate mind.¹⁰⁷ Finglass comments that “Ajax has taken no oath, but his attitude was so determined that it is scarcely an exaggeration to speak in such terms.”¹⁰⁸ Certainly this is an exag-

100 Garvie 1998, 185–6 and Hesk 2003, 74–95 give overviews of various scholarly positions. The ambiguity of the language in Ajax’ deception speech is stressed by e.g. Heath 1987, 186–7, Garvie 1998, 186, Lardinois 2006, Finglass 2011 *ad* 646–92. Segal 1981, 114 sums up the fact that “he does not utter a word of literal falsehood.”

101 Goldhill 2009, 31.

102 Change rather than time is emphasized by the word order, see Heath 1987, 186 and cf. Finglass 2011 *ad* 646–7.

103 Kamerbeek 1953 *ad* 648, 649.

104 Heath 1987, 186.

105 Knox 1979, 138.

106 Cf. also Garvie 1998 *ad* 648–9 “Ajax is thinking of oaths in general, not a specific oath sworn by himself to the sons of Atreus or (1113) to Tyndareos”.

107 See Lardinois 2006, 217 on how Ajax’s language at *Ajax* 650–1 shows that he applies the generalization of the oath to himself.

108 Finglass 2011 *ad* 648–9.

geration, but it is also a misapplication of ritual language whose function is to raise doubt in the minds of the audience regarding Ajax's true intentions. If he considers his earlier decision to be a dread oath, then he presents his change of mind as a breach of that "oath". It implies that Ajax has not really changed his mind, since tragic characters so infrequently break their oaths. Recasting his earlier determination as a "dread oath" binds Ajax to his original decision, just as other language in the deception speech suggests that Ajax has strengthened his resolve.¹⁰⁹ Tecmessa will later realize that Ajax had not changed his mind (807–8, 891).

The reference to conquering an oath thus functions within the specific context of the play and also on a general gnomic level. The expression recalls Archilochus fr. 122.1,¹¹⁰ χρημάτων ἀελπτον οὐδὲν ἔστιν οὐδ' ἀπώμοτον | οὐδὲ θαυμάσιον "No event is unexpected nor can be declared false on oath nor is miraculous". There Zeus had made day into night (fr. 122.2–3) during the solar eclipse of 648 BC, but as Ajax continues his deception speech, he lists night yielding to day as one of the images describing his "submission" to the Atreidae (*Ajax* 672–3).¹¹¹ This weakens the parallel with the Archilochus poem. Theognis too warns in general terms against swearing that something will never happen because humans cannot predict divine intervention (Thgn. 659–60), and Pindar also warns that the power of the gods can easily bring to pass what one would swear impossible (*Olymp.* 13.83–4),¹¹² but these parallels ultimately stress the "Sophoclean" nature of Ajax's oath reference since there has been no oath sworn.

The second "Sophoclean" oath in *Ajax* occurs when Agamemnon accuses Teucer, saying "You solemnly swore (διωμόςω) that we (i.e. Agamemnon and Menelaus) did not come as generals and admirals of the Achaeans, but that Ajax sailed as his own commander, as you claim" (1233–4). Agamemnon refers to Teucer's argument with Menelaus, where Menelaus had forbidden the burial of Ajax (1089–90). Teucer certainly argued that Ajax sailed as his own commander and that Menelaus has no authority over Ajax's men, reminding Menelaus that

109 Lardinois 2006, 218 discusses the image of Ajax bathing himself in the sea (*Ajax* 654–5) as a metaphor for a heated sword being hardened in cold water.

110 Kamerbeek 1953 *ad* 648, 649.

111 "Submission" because each of the images evoked, winter yielding to summer, night to day, storm to calm, sleep to waking, requires the extinction of the "yielding" element, so that Ajax's plan to take his own life as "submission" before the Atreidae is implicitly suggested. See Heath 1987, 187–8, Finglass 2011 *ad* 646–92.

112 An inverse parallel is Eupolis fr. 234 where a character asks τί δ' ἔστ' Ἀθηναίοισι πράγμ' ἀπώμοτον; "What deed is sworn impossible for Athenians?", a suggestion that there is no deed the Athenians cannot accomplish.

Ajax was as much commander of his own men as Menelaus is over his Spartans (1097–1104). Teucer also reminds him that Ajax embarked on the expedition because of the oaths by which he was solemnly bound, and not for Menelaus’ sake (1113–14). So reference to an oath was made, but Teucer never swore what Agamemnon claims he did. Moreover, he never claimed that the Atreidae did not have command over the Greek army. Agamemnon associates Teucer’s allegedly slanderous oath with his status as the son of a war captive (1228–31), calling him a slave (*Ajax* 1235) and imagining that he would have been speaking loftily (ὕψῳ) had he been reared by a noble woman (1229). The emptiness of Agamemnon’s invective against Teucer is underlined by the fact that we know his allegation concerning the oath to be false. Teucer will rebut the charge of being a low-born barbarian (cf. 1063) by reminding Agamemnon that his mother was, in fact, a princess (1301–2) while Agamemnon’s ancestry includes Atreus who served his brother’s children to him at a banquet, Atreus’ adulterous Cretan wife, and his father the Phrygian barbarian Pelops (1291–8).

In this instance, then, the “Sophoclean” oath-reference is an attempt to abase the character against whom it is alleged. It could not reasonably be sworn on oath that Agamemnon and Menelaus are not generals over the Achaeans, so Agamemnon essentially accuses Teucer of having sworn a falsehood, and of being a perjurer. Since the audience knows this to be a lie, however, the rhetoric only succeeds in revealing the weakness of Agamemnon’s argument. The two examples of “Sophoclean” oaths in *Ajax* perform very different functions, but they also create a parallel between the brothers Ajax and Teucer, both of whom are associated with having sworn a “Sophoclean” oath.

The presence of what we have called the “Sophoclean” oath in so many of Sophocles’ extant plays, and virtually nowhere else in contemporary Greek literature, demonstrates that Sophocles developed a new and distinctive trope for allowing oaths to contain an ambiguous or riddling quality. Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, produced shortly after Sophocles’ death, contains one of only two other “Sophoclean” oaths which I have found in subsequent classical Greek literature, the other being a passage in Isocrates where a “Sophoclean” oath is used as a rhetorical ploy.¹¹³ By way of conclusion, I will look at the “Sophoclean” oath

113 In *Panathenaicus* (12.103–4), Isocrates describes how the Spartans had promised (ὕπαρχονόμεινοι) to liberate Athens’ allies if they revolted, and then states that they reduced to slavery those whom they had sworn (ὥμοσαν) to set free. The summary of events contains many inaccuracies and it is probable that Sparta’s alleged promise to liberate Athens’ allies, subsequently treated as an oath, is another point of misinformation. It is also likely that the implication of Spartan perjury was a rhetorical technique aimed at criticizing Sparta, since the goal of this work by Isocrates is to glorify Athens by contrasting her past actions with those of Sparta (12.35–41). Even

in Aristophanes, and I will argue that it can be read as a deliberate parody of a recognizable aspect of Sophocles' style, thus lending further justification to the term "Sophoclean" oath.

At the end of the *Frogs*, Euripides urges Dionysus to remember the gods by whom he swore (ῥησας) to bring him back to Athens (1469–71). In fact, Dionysus had never sworn to bring Euripides back, although he had expressed a strong desire to do so early in the play (59–70). Euripides could not logically have known this, but the audience might well recall that no oath was used since Dionysus' desire for Euripides was expressed with an emphatic joke about a craving for pea soup. As Matthew Wright has shown, "pea soup" was probably a metaliterary comic metaphor for a boring old joke.¹¹⁴ Wright also observes that the word for "pea-soup" (ἔτνος) "appears *three times* in this short exchange",¹¹⁵ marking the joke as particularly pointed. The joke directly precedes Heracles' reference to Sophocles' son Iophon and his suggestion that Dionysus should rather retrieve Sophocles from Hades, since he is a better poet than Euripides (73–9). The absence of Sophocles from *Frogs* has long been noted by scholars. He is referred to only briefly in passages which may well have been added after the original script had been completed (76–82, 786–94, 1515–19), and it seems likely that Sophocles died shortly before *Frogs* was produced forcing Aristophanes somewhat awkwardly to acknowledge his presence in Hades.¹¹⁶ It is noteworthy, then, that both parts of the "Sophoclean" oath occur within a few lines of two of the passages referencing Sophocles.

The point of this "Sophoclean" oath soon becomes clear. By accusing Dionysus of having sworn to bring him back to Athens, Euripides unwittingly sets himself up to be defeated by one of his own infamous lines. As Dionysus announces his decision to choose Aeschylus, he responds to Euripides, saying "'twas but my tongue that swore" (*Frogs* 1471: ἡ γλῶττ' ὁμῶμος) in a parody of *Hippolytus* 612 (on which see further § 11.2). Having previously called Euripides "Palamedes" (1451), Dionysus now delivers the verbal blow which destroys Euripides with his own creation, just as his Palamedes had been destroyed through

the Spartan sympathizer in the epilogue (12.200–70) is shown making incorrect judgments so that "[t]he conclusion points to the error of the sympathizer and the innocent fools he misled" (Gray 1994, 267). In spite of the stereotype of Spartans as perjurers, they were in fact very careful about keeping their oaths, as discussed by Bayliss 2009 and in S&B 212–34, 249–55, 266–79. The "Sophoclean" oath in Isocrates, then, is a rhetorical ploy based on an Athenian stereotype about Spartans.

¹¹⁴ M.E. Wright 2012, 93–7.

¹¹⁵ M.E. Wright 2012, 93, Wright's italics.

¹¹⁶ See Dover 1993, 8–9, Sommerstein 1996, 20 with n.92, and *ad* 71–88.

his own invention (writing) in Euripides’ *Palamedes*.¹¹⁷ Once Aeschylus has been chosen, he hands over the Chair of Tragedy to Sophocles for safe-keeping in the play’s final reference to Sophocles. Given the complexity of allusion in this scene, and indeed in *Frogs* more generally, it seems possible, at least, that Aristophanes is parodying the trope of the “Sophoclean” oath in addition to the famous line from *Hippolytus*. The poets of old comedy were capable of developing extraordinarily complex networks of allusion which included elaborate metaphors and quotations from other poets, but also references to and parodies of perceived poetic styles. If we confine ourselves to Aristophanes, we see that the poetry of Theognis is “cold” (*Th.* 138–40, cf. *Ach.* 136–40), the dithyrambs of Cinesias are “airy” (*Birds* 1375–91), the comedy of Cratinus is a flood (*Knights* 526–8), Euripides’ poetry is “tangle-fleeced” (fr. 682). The weighing of poetic lines in *Frogs* presents the poetry of Aeschylus as weighty and that of Euripides as lightweight, and, of course, the Euripidean recognition scene is parodied extensively in *Women at the Thesmophoria*.¹¹⁸ In extant Aristophanes, Aeschylus (mostly thanks to the *Frogs*) and especially Euripides feature more prominently as targets of allusion than does Sophocles, but references to the poetry of Sophocles do occur in Aristophanic comedy,¹¹⁹ and it has recently been argued that Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* was an important model for Aristophanes’ *Wealth*.¹²⁰ The Aristophanic parody of a “Sophoclean” oath would thus help to confirm that it was recognized as a distinctive stylistic device.

5.3 “Of cabbages and kings”: the *Eideshort* phenomenon

I.C. Torrance

The defining feature of an oath is the invocation of one or more superhuman powers, normally gods or cult-heroes, to witness the oath statement in order to guarantee its validity and to punish the would-be perjurer.¹²¹ It is noteworthy,

¹¹⁷ See Torrance 2013, 142–6.

¹¹⁸ See M.E. Wright 2012 for an insightful discussion of all these issues, esp. 103–40 on parodies and metaphors of style, and 156–62 on the parody of Euripidean style in *Women at the Thesmophoria*. On Euripidean poetry as “tangle-fleeced”, see also Torrance 2013, 299–301.

¹¹⁹ Rau (1967) 185–212 lists the following quotations and references to the plays of Sophocles: *Ach.* 27?, 75, *Eq.* 83, 498–500?, 1099, *Nu.* 257, 583, 1154–5, *Av.* 100–1, 275, 851–2, 857, 1240, 1337–9, *Lys.* 139, 450?, *Th.* 21, 870, *Ra.* 357, 664–5, *Ec.* 80–1, *Pl.* 541, 635–6, 806, 1151, *Gerytades* fr. [175 K-A], *Kokalos*, *Holkades* fr. [427 K-A].

¹²⁰ Compton-Engle (2013).

¹²¹ See Ch. 1 in this volume, S&B § 1.1, and cf. Sommerstein 2007a, 2.

then, that a significant group of oaths exists in Greek literature where ostensibly non-divine entities are invoked as sanctifying witnesses. Such entities have normally been referred to in scholarly discussions as sacred oath-objects, sometimes designated by the German term *Eideshorte*.¹²² This notion of an *object* clearly stems from the Homeric paradigm of Achilles' oath in *Iliad* 1 (233–46) which invokes only Agamemnon's sceptre, a significant symbol of kingly power (studded with golden nails, 246) yet also an inert and lifeless object as emphasized by Achilles' description of the sceptre never again bearing leaf nor blossoming (234–7). The fact that Achilles flings the sceptre to the ground after swearing his oath, a promissory threat that the day will come when the Achaeans will long for him, has been seen as a gesture of “dramatic confirmation of his oath”,¹²³ and we might well read the gesture alongside several other oaths which are accompanied by contact with the earth.¹²⁴ However, Aristotle describes monarchs in the heroic age as swearing oaths with the raising *up* of the sceptre (*Pol.* 1285b12: τοῦ σκήπτρου ἐπάνστασις), a situation illustrated twice in the *Iliad* accompanying an oath by Zeus.¹²⁵ This highlights the unusual nature of Achilles' oath by the sceptre alone as oath-object and of the gesture of hurling it to the ground.¹²⁶

Taken as a whole, however, our sources show a remarkably more diverse range of apparently non-divine oath entities than the term “object” suggests, for which reason I have tended to avoid the expression “oath-object” in the discussion which follows. As my title indicates, the line from Lewis Carroll's famous poem *The Walrus and the Carpenter* captures the two extremes of this range with an uncanny precision. On the apparently more bizarre end of the spectrum is a group of comic and iambic oaths invoking cabbages and other plants, while at the more traditional end we find a variety of oaths invoking kings or inanimate symbols of power such as the aforementioned oath of Achilles. Non-divine entities are sometimes added to lists of recognizable deities or invoked in response to oaths by actual gods. Abstract concepts can be treated as oath-witnesses. In other

¹²² Fletcher 2012, 5, S&B 4 n.3.

¹²³ Kirk 1985 *ad* 245–6; Griffin 1980, 11–12 discusses the gesture as a rejection of the community.

¹²⁴ *Iliad* 14.272, Bacchylides 5.41–5, 8.19–21, *h.Ap.* 331–9.

¹²⁵ In *Iliad* 7.408–13 Agamemnon swears an oath by Zeus to Idæus and raises his sceptre in agreement to allow the Trojans to collect and burn the corpses of their dead. Similarly in *Iliad* 10.321–32 Hector responds to a request from Dolon to raise his sceptre and swear to give him the horses, invoking Zeus as his oath witness.

¹²⁶ Nagy 1979, 179–80 reads the sceptre as symbolizing the transformation of nature into culture; Kitts 2005, 104 connects the lifelessness of the sceptre to the threat of death against the Achaeans, and also posits that it fulfills the same symbolic function as that of the oath-sacrifice. See further ch. 6, pp. 143–7, on significant gestures in oath-taking.

cases inanimate objects or entities not normally considered divine by the ancient Greeks become appropriate symbols of divinity in alternative comic universes. The presence of non-divine entities in Greek oaths is thus rather complex, and it is not always easy to decide whether a particular oath-witness could be conceived of as divine or not. I will argue that many unusual and apparently non-divine forces invoked in oaths *could*, in fact, be imagined as divine and that, in most cases, even unequivocally non-divine entities could, at the very least, be understood as being imbued with an autonomous power appropriate to the context in which they were invoked.

5.3.1 Recognizable gods, abstract concepts, and non-divine entities

The Athenian ephebic oath includes one of the most impressive lists of oath-witnesses of any recorded Greek oath. These range from Olympian gods, cult heroes, and abstractions to territorial boundaries and common plants. Since it combines non-divine entities with abstract concepts and recognizable gods in its formulation, this oath will provide a useful framework for discussing the nature and function of non-divine oath-guarantors. The oath was one of military service sworn by young Athenian males (ephebes), essentially amounting to a citizenship oath. In summary, the ephebes swore not to bring shame upon their sacred weapons, not to desert the man beside them, to fight for the defence and increased prosperity of the fatherland, to obey those who exercise power reasonably, to obey and defend the laws, and to honour the ancestral religion.¹²⁷ Swearers invoked Aglaurus, Hestia, Enyo, Enyalios, Ares, Athena Areia, Zeus, Thallo, Auxo, Hegemone, Heracles, the boundaries of their fatherland, Wheat, Barley, Vines, Olives, and Figs. Andrew Bayliss has shown how the divinities invoked are directly associated with the specific nature of the ephebic oath.¹²⁸ The mythical Athenian maiden Aglaurus, the daughter of Erechtheus who voluntarily sacrificed her life to save the city when Athens was under attack, is named first as an inspiration for the young men, and several sources state that the oath was sworn in her sanctuary.¹²⁹ The invocation of Hestia, goddess of the hearth, suggests the stability of the homeland. Enyo, Enyalios, Ares, and Athena Areia are all war divinities. Zeus is the most powerful of the gods and the official overseer of oaths. Thallo, Auxo and

¹²⁷ See S&B § 2.3 for a detailed discussion of the nature and function of the ephebic oath.

¹²⁸ S&B 16–21.

¹²⁹ Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 28 n.14 lists RO 88.5–20, Dem. 19.303, Philoch. *FGrH* 328 F 105, Plut. *Alc.* 15.7–8, and Poll. 8. 105–6 s.v. *περίτολοι*.

Hegemone are rather obscure female forces. The first two are essentially abstractions, meaning “Sprouting” and “Growth”, while the third means “Leader”, but there is some evidence that these were recognized as divinities in Athens.¹³⁰ Certainly they have an obvious relevance to the ideas of increasing the prosperity of Athens and obeying leadership. Heracles too is an appropriate figure to invoke as an example of heroic male physical prowess for young men of military age. Parker suggests that, since Heracles is the last divinity named in the list, Aglaurus functions “as a feminine influence, in counterpoise to the aggressively masculine ideal set before the ephebes by Heracles.”¹³¹ Aglaurus is named by Parker as “an oath goddess for women only”,¹³² presumably based on Aristophanes’ *Women at the Thesmophoria* 533 where a female character (Mica) invokes Aglaurus and the accompanying scholium suggests that this was a gendered oath.¹³³ However, as Sourvinou-Inwood observes Aglaurus’ “involvement with the ephebes was correlative with a role as *kourotrophos*, ‘rearer of young *men/women*’.”¹³⁴ Moreover, the passage from *Women at the Thesmophoria* is our only other example of an oath by Aglaurus from the archaic or classical period, so that the suggestion that she was primarily a deity invoked in women’s oaths cannot be demonstrated. Regardless of her gender Aglaurus was the main oath-witness to the ephebic oath.

Before turning to the final non-divine section of the list, we should consider the place of abstract concepts in oath-taking, since any abstraction could be personified and treated as an instant deity in Greek thought.¹³⁵ In Plato’s *Philebus* the personification of pleasure, Hedone, is invoked indirectly by Philebus in an oath calling to witness “the very goddess” (αὐτὴν τὴν θεόν) whom they are discussing. We see that it is beyond question here that the swearer, Philebus, considers the abstraction to be a divinity since he specifically uses the term “goddess” in suggesting that Hedone is the proper name for Aphrodite (12b1–2), although Socrates is not convinced. In other cases too a divine aspect to the abstraction can be clearly demonstrated, although in each of our following examples the abstraction is qualified with a personal or context-specific criterion. In *Odyssey*

130 See Siewert 1977, 109, S&B 20. Burkert 1985, 251 reads Thallo and Auxo as “protecting powers over adolescents.”

131 Parker 2005a, 434. Mikalson 2010, 142 suggests a different reason for the presence of Heracles, namely that he “is relevant both as one who wards off evil and because these young men had, at their Apatouria, each made an offering of wine to him before the cutting of their hair.”

132 Parker 2005a, 434.

133 See further Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 28 with n.12.

134 Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 29, emphasis added.

135 On personification in Greek religion see Stafford 2000 and collected essays in Stafford and Herrin 2005.

20.339–42, Telemachus swears an oath invoking Zeus and the sufferings of his father (ἄλγεα πατρός), stating that he is not delaying his mother’s marriage but urges her to marry whomever she wishes and offers them countless gifts. This oath combines the powerful Olympian Zeus with an abstract divine force.¹³⁶ The fact that Telemachus invokes the sufferings of his father at this point in the narrative reminds the listener or reader that Telemachus is aware of his father’s experiences and disguised presence. Richard Rutherford finds the oath-statement oddly insincere,¹³⁷ but the oath is clearly serious invoking both Zeus and *Algea*, and we should rather read it as a manipulation of oath-language. Telemachus urges his mother to marry “whomever she wishes” (20.341: ὃ κ’ ἐθέλη) knowing both that the only husband Penelope desires is Odysseus and that Odysseus is present. So although Telemachus appears to be encouraging Penelope to choose one of the suitors, this is not what he actually says. He is careful also, as Eustathius saw,¹³⁸ in using the indefinite enclitic σου, meaning effectively “I do not know if this statement is true”,¹³⁹ when he describes his father as one “who has either perished or wanders somewhere far from Ithaca” (20.340). Finally, Jasper Griffin has shown that Telemachus’ use of the μὰ oath formula in this passage, which occurs only here in the *Odyssey*, is designed to give Telemachus a more heroic posture by recalling Achilles’ use of the same formula in the *Iliad* (1.86, 1.234, 23.43).¹⁴⁰ So the oath by Zeus and his father’s sufferings amounts to a powerful and mature exploitation of the oath ritual, drawing a dramatic contrast between Telemachus’ knowledge, prudence and effective use of language and the witlessness of the suitors who respond to the oath by laughing at Telemachus in a divinely-induced mania.

When the ghost of Miltiades swears an oath “by my battle of Marathon” in Eupolis’ *Demes* (fr. 106.1 K-A: οὐ γὰρ μὰ τὴν Μαραθῶνι τὴν ἐμὴν μάχην), we have the same pattern we have just seen in the *Odyssey*. An abstraction is personalized for the purpose of the oath.¹⁴¹ Miltiades’ oath states that no one will rejoice at grieving his heart (fr. 106.2 K-A), and invoking the battle of Marathon lends a severity to his threat since those who grieved his heart in that case (the Persians) were thoroughly defeated under his command. Similarly, in Aristotle’s *Constitu-*

136 Tearful Sufferings (Ἄλγεα δακρυόεντα) are named among the children of Eris (Strife) in Hesiod’s *Theogony* (227), who also engenders Oath (*Thg.* 231).

137 R.B. Rutherford 1992, *ad* 341–2.

138 *Comm. ad Od.* 2.240.

139 Compare the practice of *exōmosia* in Athenian litigation, where witnesses were required to swear that they did not know a particular statement to be true; see S&B 91–100.

140 Griffin 1986, 52. See also §5.1, pp. 81–2.

141 Battles (Μάχαι), like Sufferings, are the children of Eris according to Hesiod (*Thg.* 229).

tion of the Samians (fr. 593.1 Gigon) darkness (*skotos*) is personified,¹⁴² adding a layer of solemnity to an oath through its association with a terrible battle which had taken place in Priene at a place called Oak (Drys) in the time of Bias, one of the Seven Sages. Many Prienians were killed by Milesians and Prienian women are said to swear by the darkness of the Oak (τὸ περὶ Δρυῶν σκότος). The death of the men in battle is thus symbolized by the darkness invoked as an oath-curse. A brighter personification occurs in Aristophanes' *Women at the Assembly*, where Praxagora swears "by the approaching day" (νῆ τὴν ἐπιούσαν ἡμέραν) that the women are undertaking the great venture of infiltrating the assembly in order to see if they can succeed in taking over the city and in doing some good (105–8). The oath formula is unique and it stresses the contextual significance of the following day in implementing the plan.¹⁴³ Our final two examples are abstract nouns. *Philia*, "Love" or "Friendship" is invoked in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. Once more, the force is qualified by a significant personal criterion. The royal couple from Susa, Abradatas and Pantheia, have been reunited in the camp of Cyrus when Pantheia swears to her husband by their mutual *philia* (6.4.6. ἐπομνύω σοι τὴν ἐμὴν καὶ σὴν φιλίαν) that she would rather die with him proven noble than live with him disgraced. Lastly, cowardice (*deilia*) is personified in a fragment of Sophocles' *Atreus* (fr. 140) where a character swears by the cowardice that feeds a certain man who is feminine, but has male enemies (μὰ τὴν ἐκείνου δειλίαν, ἧ βόσκεται, | θῆλυς μὲν αὐτός, ἄρσενας δ' ἔχθρους ἔχων). Unfortunately we have no firm context for the fragment, but it is likely that the tragedy dealt with the quarrel between Atreus and Thyestes, and it is tempting to see the speaker as Atreus enraged by the discovery that his brother Thyestes has had sexual relations with his wife. The cowardice and effeminacy associated with Thyestes would reflect the qualities which Aeschylus attributed to Thyestes' only surviving son Aegisthus in *Agamemnon*, where he has committed adultery with the wife of his cousin and is called a "strengthless lion" (Ag. 1224) and a "woman" (Ag. 1625).¹⁴⁴

These cases show how uncommon divine personifications are made specifically relevant to the swearer through the introduction of non-divine but meaningful qualifications. Telemachus invokes the sufferings of his father, Miltiades names a personal battle-victory, the women of Priene recall a specific battle,

¹⁴² *Skotos* is named as father of the Eumenides in Sophocles (*OC* 40).

¹⁴³ Sommerstein 1998, *ad* 105, notes that the oath is unusual, and that Day (ἡμέρη) is the daughter of Night in Hesiod (*Thg.* 124).

¹⁴⁴ Adulterers were associated with effeminacy in Greek thought. In *Libation Bearers* (304), Orestes says that Argos is subject to 'two women'. Garvie 1989 noted, *ad loc.*, that θῆλυς μὲν αὐτός in S. fr. 140 'may possibly refer to Aegisthus' father Thyestes.' See also S. *El.* 302 where Aegisthus 'makes his battles among women'.

Praxagora calls to witness the particular day on which her plan will be set in motion, Pantheia uses the powerful love-bond she has with her husband as oath-guarantor, and the character in *Atreus* insults an enemy by invoking his cowardice. The degree of personal and contextual qualifications present in oaths by abstractions demonstrates that these are certainly more serious than they might appear at first glance. Indeed I would argue that these are more solemn than general invocations of Zeus by virtue of the swearer’s intimate relationship with the personification, since although Zeus is overseer of oaths, his name is used so often in sworn statements (particularly in Old Comedy) that it does not have the subjective force of the abstractions discussed here.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, Zeus can even be invoked by individuals who do not believe in him, from Socrates in *Clouds* (331, 693) to Josephus in *Against Apion* 1.254–5.¹⁴⁶

We can now turn our attention to the final group of forces invoked in the ephebic oath: the boundaries of the fatherland, Wheat, Barley, Vines, Olives and Figs. It is clear that these are all non-divine entities, but scholars disagree as to how they should be interpreted. Mikalson suggests that they “are invoked, not as gods, but, in this context, as revered objects these young men are obliged to defend and protect.”¹⁴⁷ However, this does not really explain their presence as apparent oath-witnesses alongside actual deities. Bayliss proposes a link between the symbolism of these elements as representative of the fruitful earth¹⁴⁸ and the oath-gesture of placing the hand on the ground as a means of invoking the gods of the Underworld (as at *Iliad* 14.272),¹⁴⁹ but the crucial gesture itself is missing from the equation here and there is no obvious connection between the plants mentioned and the divinities who dwell in Hades. I would suggest that the main point to consider is the function of oath-witnesses. These are the forces that will pursue and punish the would-be perjurer, in which case the non-divine entities listed in the ephebic oath constitute a formidable threat. By implication, the ephebe who perjured himself would be excluded from the territory of Athens and would experience crop failure (cf. Ar. *Clouds* 1121–5). Although these elements are not divine, they are imagined as autonomous for the purposes of the oath so that their presence in the list adds a specific rejection from Athenian land and prosperity on the would-be perjurer.

145 Of the 3700+ oath references in Sommerstein, Bayliss and Torrance 2007, 1430 contain invocations of Zeus. The relative weakness of oaths which invoke Zeus alone is discussed in §13.2.

146 Cf. ch. 9, pp. 237–8, on oaths in oratory and rhetoric.

147 Mikalson 2010, 143.

148 Noted by Burkert 1985, 251.

149 S&B 21 and see further §5.1, p. 85.

A humorous parallel presents itself in an oath sworn by Silenus in Euripides' *Cyclops* (262–9). He swears to the Cyclops that he is not selling the Cyclops' property to the strangers. He invokes Poseidon, as Polyphemos' father, great Triton, Nereus, Calypso, Nereus' daughters, the sacred waves and the whole race of fish (μὰ θαίερα κύματ' ἰχθύων τε πᾶν γένος). All the named figures in the list are recognizable sea-deities. The waves are called sacred (cf. Aesch. fr. 192.1–2, Eur. *Hipp.* 1206–7), adding an aspect of solemnity to a force that could be considered divine, but is less obviously so than the forces previously named. The fish, however, represent a staple of the Athenian diet in much the same way as does the produce invoked in the ephebic oath. As Fletcher notes, “the whole race of fish” is “a humorous revision of the standard ‘all the gods together.’”¹⁵⁰ In this case, the image of Silenus being pursued by the whole race of fish in addition to being battered by the waves and hounded by the sea-deities mentioned has a comic purpose in a satyr-drama which, as a genre, deals with the sufferings of the satyrs. Indeed there is some ambiguity in this scene as to whether or not Silenus is lying under oath, which might provoke an audience to imagine the consequences of his perjury all the more.¹⁵¹ The Cyclops believes Silenus, although his sons counter his oath with an oath of their own accusing him of lying (*Cyc.* 270–2), and the joke is further developed when it is revealed that this Cyclops cares not a jot for the worship or power of his father Poseidon, or any of the other gods, but worships wealth instead and sacrifices only to his own belly as the greatest of divinities (316–46). The Cyclops in Euripides is thus presented as blasphemous and shameless.¹⁵²

Humorous shamelessness is also the central issue in a scene from Aristophanes' *Knights*, where non-divine entities are invoked in an oath as a direct response to (rather than in addition to) an oath by a recognizable divinity. Paphlagon and the Sausage-seller engage in a contest of shamelessness to determine who is more suitable, as the greater rogue and villain, to be leader of Athens. In a moment of frustration, Paphlagon swears by Poseidon that the Sausage-seller will not surpass him in shamelessness with exclusion from future public speaking specified as punishment for breach of the oath (*Knights* 409–10).

¹⁵⁰ Fletcher 2012, 150.

¹⁵¹ Fletcher 2005 argues that Silenus is lying and that he is raped by the Cyclops as punishment (cf. Fletcher 2012, 146–57), but see §10.2 for further discussion.

¹⁵² Several scholars have seen specific parallels between Polyphemos' world-view and that of Callicles, a wealthy aristocrat with oligarchic connections (and hostile to the democracy) who features in Plato's *Gorgias*. See e.g. Duchemin 1945, 118, Seaford 1984, 52–5, Kovacs 1994, 56. O'Sullivan 2005 argues that it is tyranny that links the philosophical positions of Callicles and Polyphemos.

It seems that Paphlagon’s invocation of Poseidon here is an attempt to take a particularly determined stand. Sommerstein has shown how the Sausage-seller wins an exchange of oaths with Paphlagon shortly before this by substituting Poseidon for Zeus in his determination not to yield (336–9).¹⁵³ However, the Sausage-seller wins again in our passage, since the oath-witnesses invoked in his counter-oath once again cap the oath witness of Paphlagon’s statement. He swears that he thinks *he* will surpass Paphlagon in the contest (411–13), invoking the knuckles whose blows he has often endured since childhood (τοὺς κονδύλους, οὓς πολλὰ δὴ ’πὶ πολλοῖς | ἤνεσχόμην ἐκ παιδίου), and the slashes of butchers’ cleavers (μαχαίριδων τε πληγὰς). These non-divine oath witnesses are meaningful to the persona of the Sausage-seller, and the prospect of being subjected to attacks with a butcher’s cleaver seems appropriately frightening as an oath guarantee. The Sausage-seller has previously boasted on oath, invoking Hermes, that he is a thief who can steal in front of witnesses and then perjure himself to deny the theft (297–8, cf. 1239), and he reminds us of this shortly after his oath invoking fists and cleavers (418–28). It could be argued that the non-divine oath-witnesses indicate shamelessness in oath-taking by a self-avowed perjurer, but, as Sommerstein shows, there is no evidence in the play that the Sausage-seller actually is a perjurer.¹⁵⁴ It is uniquely in his interests to make such a claim as he attempts to prove himself more villainous than Paphlagon. It is perhaps most significant that the Sausage-seller invokes forces germane to his own situation. When he swears on oath that he is a thief, he invokes Hermes, patron of thieves and arch-manipulator of oath-language.¹⁵⁵ When he swears to his belief that he is more shameful than Paphlagon, he invokes blows of which he has long experience and cleavers which are the tools of his trade and which he has in his possession. The knuckles and cleavers are specific to the Sausage-seller in much the same way as the Athenian crops listed in the ephebic oath are specific to Athenian citizens. We should not conclude, then, that the forces invoked by the Sausage-seller are in themselves an indicator of shamelessness. Rather, they conform to the pattern evident throughout this discussion. Non-divine oath witnesses tend to be extremely specific to their contexts.

153 Sommerstein 2007b, 127–8.

154 Sommerstein 2007, 136.

155 On Hermes’ powers of manipulating oath-language, see Fletcher 2008.

5.3.2 Alternative “gods”

Crops and cleavers cannot be considered divine in the aforementioned cases. However, there are examples from Old Comedy in which the establishment of alternative world-views enables entities not normally considered divine to take on divine force. For example, in Aristophanes’ *Birds* Tereus, in the form of a hoopoe, swears “by earth, by traps, by snares, by nets” (194: μὰ γῆν μὰ παγίδας μὰ νεφέλας μὰ δίκτυα) that he has never heard a better idea than getting tribute from the gods for allowing the aroma of sacrificial meat to pass through the realm of the birds on its way to Olympus. Earth is a genuine divine power, but the rest are clearly inanimate objects with no ostensible divine connection. For birds, however, nets, traps and snares, like earth, represent danger and potential death,¹⁵⁶ as is spelled out later in the play (525–38). They are, therefore, awe-inspiring symbols. Commentators note that the oath is probably a parody of the metrically equivalent oath “by earth, by springs, by rivers, by streams” (μὰ γῆν μὰ κρήνας μὰ ποταμούς μὰ νάματα).¹⁵⁷ This is a compelling suggestion, but we should also note that earth and snares must represent for the birds the equivalent of dangerous chthonic and underworld powers in human oaths.

There is a disturbing aspect to invoking intrinsically destructive forces in oaths. In Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Clytaemestra, after murdering Agamemnon, swears an oath by the Justice accomplished for her daughter, by *Atē*, and by Erinys that she will not be afraid while Aegisthus lights her hearth (1431–6). *Atē*, the divine delusion that leads men to ruin, and Erinys, the avenging Fury, are formidably destructive forces. Indeed this is the only example of the goddess *Atē* (Ruin) being invoked in an oath in archaic and classical Greek literature.¹⁵⁸ Clytaemestra may believe her oath when she swears it, but the negative forces of delusion and vengeance will turn against her in *Libation Bearers* where her dreams frighten her and her son avenges his father’s death. In Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes* (42–8), the attackers against Thebes swear an oath by Ares, Enyo and blood-loving Terror (Phobos) to sack Thebes or die in the attempt. The exclusive appeal to these terrifying divinities, uniquely invoked here together in an oath, similarly seems to foreshadow the doom of the attackers. These oaths, like that of Tereus, are attempts by the swearers to coopt to their side, and against an enemy, forces which could well prove destructive to them. The plan which

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Dunbar 1995, *ad* 194.

¹⁵⁷ Sommerstein 1991, *ad* 194; Dunbar 1995, *ad* 194. *Birds* also contains a parody of a peace treaty oath at 630–5, on which see Sommerstein 1991, *ad* 631, 632 and Dunbar 1995, *ad* 631, 632.

¹⁵⁸ See Sommerstein 2013, 8 for further discussion of this use of *Atē*.

delights Tereus involves tricking (or trapping) the gods into payment of a tribute. In a tragic context the invocation of destructive divine forces can be linked to the destruction of the tragic characters who appeal to them, but comedy can present the gods as ridiculous and suffering defeat and this is precisely what happens in *Birds* where the birds wrest power from the gods.

Oaths by birds are part of the new world system and discussions of oaths by birds feature twice in the play. The first instance occurs when Peisetaerus is attempting to convince the birds to found their own city. He claims that in the olden days humans would not swear by a god, but they all swore by birds, his point being that birds once held power in the universe but had lost it by allowing the gods to usurp their position. He throws in an example naming Lampon, a contemporary diviner (*mantis*), as someone who swears by “goose” when he is being deceitful (*Birds* 520–1). The oath by “goose” (τὸν χῆνα) was a deformation of the common oath by Zeus (τὸν Ζῆνα). In a real-life Athenian context oaths by the goose, like oaths by the dog (τὸν κύνα), are not seriously binding religious oaths, as will be discussed below, but Aristophanes here exploits a known expression for the sake of his comic argument, namely that birds once held religious power. In the second discussion of oaths by birds, Peisetaerus suggests to Poseidon that leaving birds in power will be beneficial to the gods for catching perjurers. So, he claims, when humans have taken oaths by the Raven and by Zeus, the raven will swoop down and peck out the perjurer’s eye (1608–13). This is part of Peisetaerus’ deceptive offer that the birds should share power with the gods, and he fools dim-witted Poseidon who responds enthusiastically with a ridiculous oath by Poseidon (himself!) exclaiming that this is a marvellous idea (1614). In keeping with “the new divine order”¹⁵⁹ Peisetaerus swears an oath by the kestrels (μὰ τὰς κερχνῆδας) in the final third of the play. He states that he will not check himself from abusing Manes for his slowness (1335–6), and kestrels are appropriate to the context as birds of prey. Oaths by Zeus and other deities continue to be made throughout the play, but the insertion of unusual oaths and discussions of oaths specifically related to birds underlines the novelty of this alternative comic universe.

A similar situation arises in *Clouds*. New gods Air, Aether, Clouds, Chaos and Tongue are recognized by Socrates and later by Strepsiades (264–5, 424). Socrates swears one oath by Breath, Chaos and Air (627–9) while Strepsiades swears one oath by Air (667) and one by Mist (814) after his conversion. Although these forces could be understood as divine by a Greek audience,¹⁶⁰ rejecting the Olympian

¹⁵⁹ Dunbar 1995, *ad* 1335–6.

¹⁶⁰ Aether is the daughter of Night (*Thg.* 124); Chaos is the great void of Hesiod’s primordial

gods in their favour is problematic. In *Women at the Thesmophoria*, for example, the character Euripides first of all swears an oath “by the Aether, the dwelling-place of Zeus” (272), but the Inlaw feels that this is not a serious enough invocation and Euripides then swears “by all the gods, the whole lot!” (274). A line from Euripides’ *Melanippe the Wise* (fr. 487), usually attributed to Melanippe, also contains an oath by “sacred Aether, the dwelling of Zeus”, which seems to confirm Melanippe’s character as someone who questions traditional divine cosmology (e.g. fr. 506), and whose attitude seems to display the influence of new philosophical teachings. The expression is parodied in *Frogs* as “aether, the bedroom (δωμάτιον) of Zeus” (100, 311). In *Clouds* as in *Birds*, it is true that the proponents of the new divine order swear oaths far more frequently by traditional gods than by the new gods,¹⁶¹ since informal oaths of this kind are an intrinsic part of the language of comedy.¹⁶² Nevertheless, the oaths by the new gods are striking intrusions which mark the revolutionary nature of the new order, and swearing oaths by the new gods seems to be the one lesson that the rather unintelligent Strepsiades comprehends.¹⁶³ Indeed, Sommerstein has argued that Strepsiades’ dim overall understanding of the *phrontistērion*’s new concepts is underlined by his continued invocations of traditional gods “at a time when he should logically not have been invoking them at all.”¹⁶⁴

It is remarkable that Aristophanes never makes Socrates swear “by the dog”, since the Platonic dialogues show this to be an idiosyncratic Socratic expression.¹⁶⁵ Altogether the Platonic corpus contains thirteen examples of Socrates invoking “the dog” in informal oath statements.¹⁶⁶ If invoking “the dog” constituted an instance of impiety, it would surely be inconceivable for Plato to incorporate it, as he does, in Socrates’ defence-speech against that very charge (*Apol.* 22a). Patzer argues that Socrates’ oath by the dog has a serious religious dimension,

world (*Thg.* 116); Tongue might be linked to the Hesiodic *Logoi* (*Thg.* 229) since both embody the notion of persuasive speech; Air, Clouds and Mist are all natural phenomena which might be associated with Aether and Sky (Ouranos); Breath is a life-giving force. Dillon 1995, 151 n.41 observes that the opening of Pythagoras’ *On Nature* as recorded by Diogenes Laertius (8.6) is an oath invoking “the air that I breathe”.

161 Socrates in three out of four cases, Strepsiades in twenty-three out of twenty-five cases both before and after his indoctrination; cf. Sommerstein 2007b, 127.

162 On informal oaths in comedy see Dillon 1995, Sommerstein 2007b, and ch. 13 below.

163 Fletcher 2012, 166.

164 Sommerstein 2007b, 127. Fletcher 2012, 172 calls the oath “an irrepressible force” in *Clouds*.

165 Socrates also swears by Hera far more commonly than any other speaker in our sources; see Sommerstein 2008b and Appendix to ch. 13 below.

166 *Apol.* 22a, *Charm.* 172d–e, *Crat.* 411b3–4, *Gorg.* 461a7–b2, 466c3–5, 482b4–6, *Hipp. Maj.* 287e5–6, 298b5–9, *Lys.* 211e6–8, *Phd.* 98e–99a, *Rep.* 399e5, 567d–e, 592a.

both because it occurs in addition to oaths by other gods and because a passage from Plato’s *Gorgias* (482b5) identifies the dog as the Egyptian deity Anubis.¹⁶⁷ A fragment from Cratinus’ *Cheirons* (fr. 249), however, explicitly contrasts oaths by dog and by goose with oaths by gods, explaining that those who swore by dog and goose were silent concerning the gods (θεοὺς δ’ ἐσίγων). This is apparently a reference to the “oath of Rhadamanthys”, the famously righteous mythical ruler of Crete, who allegedly forbade all swearing by gods and ordered the substitution of these alternative expressions.¹⁶⁸ Patzer suggests that Socrates’ use of both gods and dogs in his oaths demonstrates that the original intention of the Rhadamanthine oath is no longer known or recognized.¹⁶⁹ It does not necessarily follow, however, that Socrates’ oaths by dogs have religious solemnity simply because he swears by gods on other occasions. Dillon is surely right in following Dodds who reads the oath by the dog Anubis as a playful allusion without serious religious significance.¹⁷⁰ The harmless expression would be equivalent to the English “By Gum!” as a substitute for “By God!”¹⁷¹ As we saw above, the oath by goose was attributed to Lampon (appropriately in *Birds*) as an underhanded charlatan, presumably since perjury would only incur, at worst, the wrath of a goose!

The fact that Aristophanes nowhere presents Socrates swearing by the dog, although Socrates is frequently parodied in his comedies for having untraditional and novel views, further points to the conclusion that the oath by dog is not particularly controversial.¹⁷² Indeed Socrates’ oath by the dog is rather different from

167 Patzer 2003, 98–9.

168 As reported in the scholia on Pl. *Rep.* 399e and *Phdr.* 228b, where Socrates swears “by the dog”; for a detailed discussion of the legendary role of Rhadamanthys in oaths, see Hirzel 1902, 90–108.

169 Patzer 2003, 98.

170 Dillon 1995, 147 and Dodds 1959 *ad Gorg.* 482b5. Dodds compares the “light-hearted” oath by Zethus at *Gorg.* 489e2. This is the only oath by Zethus in archaic and classical sources, and Socrates invokes him specifically as the very person whom Callicles has just used to speak ironically against him. Still the fact remains that Zethus is a hero and so has an undeniable divine aspect. Patzer 2003, 94, compares the oath by the plane tree in *Phaedrus*, but this is also rather different as discussed below.

171 A small selection of other examples found in (various forms of) English: *crikey*, *Christmas*, *crumbs*, *dash it*, *gee*, *golly*, *gosh*, *great Scott*, *heck*, *holy cow*, *holy smoke*, *jeebus*, *what the deuce*. An American friend of Alan Sommerstein’s was fond of *holy Toledo*, and a British one of *Hamlet*.

172 *Pace* Patzer 2003, 102, whose thesis concerning the divinity of the dog leads him to suggest that Aristophanes omits oaths by the dog in *Clouds* in order to characterize Socrates as an atheist. This argument is problematic not least because Socrates is *not* presented as an atheist. Rather he believes in the Cloud-goddesses (who acknowledge the realm of Zeus) and in other natural (divine) phenomena.

the rest of the oaths in our discussion since it is used repeatedly by the same person and does not appear to have any context-specific relevance, though it is possible that the expression marks moments of particular importance in the Platonic dialogues.¹⁷³ This contrasts with the only other example of an oath “by the dog”, which occurs in Aristophanes’ *Wasps*. The expression is used by the slave Sosias in the opening scene (*Wasps* 83). It might seem random at first glance, but since dogs become such an important feature in the drama, with the Athenian politician Cleon represented on stage in a debased state as a dog, the invocation of a dog has (at the very least) a loose thematic significance, comparable to the report of Lampon swearing by the goose in *Birds*. In *Wasps*, the unusual oath by the dog occurs while Sosias is attempting to guess what malady afflicts the master of the house. It turns out that the illness is a compulsion to perform jury-duty and that the man’s name is “Cleon-lover” (Philocleon). An early connection is thus created between the image of a dog and the person of Cleon, and is ready to be developed later in the play. Moreover, we know that the comparison between Cleon and a dog had already been made in *Knights* by the Cleon figure himself (Paphlagon, *Knights* 1014–24), and it seems to have been based on an actual self-characterization by Cleon as “the People’s watchdog”.¹⁷⁴

5.3.3 Kings, ancestors, and symbols of power or status

From the absurd we return to the serious in our next group of oaths where mortal ancestors and kings are invoked as witnesses. We have seen throughout how difficult it is to posit a complete lack of divine association with many of the unusual oath witnesses invoked. This is also the case here because the Greeks believed the dead to have certain supernatural powers, particularly if they received worship as heroes.¹⁷⁵ In Euripides’ *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, Menelaus invokes the mythological kings Pelops and Atreus as shared ancestors in his oath to Agamemnon where he swears that he will tell him clearly what is in his heart (*IA* 473–6). Pelops, who was worshipped at Olympia, is a recognizable quasi-divine force and is also the grandfather of Agamemnon and Menelaus. Their father Atreus is not known to

173 For example: the argument that psychology cannot be reduced to physiology (*Phd.* 98e–99a), that one must not leave a flawed or inconsistent proposition untested (*Hipp. Maj.* 298b, *Gorg.* 482b), or (at the climax of the main discussion of the *Republic*) that the philosopher will be willing to practise politics only in “his own city”, meaning the ideal city (*Rep.* 592a).

174 See Sommerstein 1981, *ad* 1017.

175 See e.g. Johnston 1999.

have been worshipped, but he nevertheless functions as an appropriate oath-witness here alongside Pelops at a moment when Menelaus is expressing solidarity with his brother’s position (or so he thinks).

More general is Demosthenes’ invocation in *On the Crown* (18.208) of the Athenians’ ancestors who faced danger at Marathon, those who stood in the battle-line at Plataea, those who fought at Salamis and Artemisium and those who lie in public tombs, meaning those who fell in Athens’ other wars. These oath-witnesses are listed as guarantors of his statement that the Athenians cannot have been wrong when they took upon themselves the peril of war for the freedom and salvation of all. Commentators observe the surprising and memorable nature of these oath-witnesses. Usher suggests that “[t]he very ghosts of these past heroes, thus invoked, seem to come to [Demosthenes] aid.”¹⁷⁶ Once again, we see a unique set of forces named for its special connection to the circumstance, here the content of the oath. The issue of the divinity of the war-dead is addressed by Demosthenes himself in his *Funeral Speech* (Dem. 60.33–34), where he argues that one could reasonably consider the war-dead to be sitting beside (*paredroi*) the gods below. Moreover Robert Parker notes that the honours conferred on the war-dead in Athens were “indistinguishable from those of heroes, since no sharp divide separated funerary from heroic cult.”¹⁷⁷ It may be noteworthy that the Athenian general Lamachus, who was killed in battle in Sicily, is called a hero in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* (1039), and it seems clear that the ancestral war-dead could be understood as having the kind of divine aspect normally required in a sanctifying oath-witness.

Weapons of war feature occasionally in our sources as non-divine oath guarantors. For Parthenopaeus in Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes*, the invocation of his spear, which he is said to value more than a god and more than his eyes (i.e. his life), signals only his doom, since he does not sack the city of Thebes as he swears to do here (*Seven* 529–32) but rather dies in the attempt. In Euripides’ *Phoenician Women* (1677) Antigone names as oath-witness the iron of Polyneices’ sword when she swears that her marriage night will make her one of the Danaids (i.e. she will murder her husband) if Creon forces her to marry his son.¹⁷⁸ The oath

¹⁷⁶ Usher 1993, *ad* 208, and compare Johnston 1999, vii, on the relationship between the living and the dead: “The living ... can expect the dead’s cooperation, so long as they keep the dead happy.” Yunis 2001, *ad* 208 also notes that the oath is unexpected and unusual, and MacDowell 2009, 392 observes that the oath is “remarkably elaborate” and gives “extraordinary emphasis” to the assertion.

¹⁷⁷ Parker 1996, 137.

¹⁷⁸ I follow Mastronarde 1994, *ad* 1677, in presuming that Antigone is still bent over the body of Polyneices at this point, and that the expression σίδηρος ὄρκιόν τέ μοι ξίφος is an example

is forceful enough to persuade Creon to relent on this issue. In these two cases the weapon invoked as oath-guarantor is directly related to the context. Parthenopaeus will do battle with his spear and Antigone threatens to commit murder. The contextual relevance of the invocation in Apollo's oath to Hermes in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* is a little different but ultimately comparable. Apollo swears by "this cornel-wood javelin" (460: τόδε κρανείνον ἀκόντιον) that Hermes will enjoy prosperity among the gods, and that he will never be deceived by Apollo (461–2). This latter part of the oath creates a pointed contrast between Apollo and the deceitful trickster Hermes. Moreover, as noted by Judith Fletcher, it is Apollo who binds himself with the first completed oath in the narrative.¹⁷⁹ Hermes, meanwhile, has been manipulating oath-language to achieve his deceitful aims. He volunteered to swear (using the future tense ὁμοῦμαι) that he was not responsible for stealing Apollo's cattle (although this was untrue) and invoked the head of Zeus as witness, but he carefully uses the verb "promise" (ὑπίσχομαι) rather than swear when he makes the actual statement, thus avoiding perjury (274–6). He had then sworn that he would not pay compensation for the theft (383–5), but without ever admitting that he had stolen the cattle. There is no threat of violence involved in the exchange between Apollo and Hermes so that the unusual oath-witness invoked by Apollo seems linked to the solidity of his sworn statement and to his divine skill as an archer. The term ἀκόντιον is normally translated as "javelin"¹⁸⁰ or "spear"¹⁸¹. However, as a diminutive of ἄκων, which *LSJ* describe as a javelin or dart "smaller and lighter than ἔγχος", it seems to refer here to an arrow, particularly since the wood of the cornelian cherry is associated with the bow in Euripides (fr. 785).¹⁸² The demonstrative τόδε "this" also implies that the weapon is in Apollo's possession so that an arrow again seems most likely. The arrow thus represents a particularly personal guarantee from Apollo, while its material substance lends further weight to the oath since the density of the wood from the cornelian cherry tree (*Cornus mas*) was recognized in antiquity as ideal

of hendiadys, so that iron is "not invoked in the abstract, but its malevolent magical qualities... are suggested."

¹⁷⁹ Fletcher 2008, 25.

¹⁸⁰ M.L. West 2003, 149, Richardson 2010, *ad* 460, Vergados 2012, *ad* 460.

¹⁸¹ Fletcher 2008, 25.

¹⁸² = *Phaethon* fr. 4 Diggle; see Diggle 1970 *ad loc.* Vergados 2012, *ad* 460 states that there is no diminutive sense to the term ἀκόντιον here, and that it refers to the cowherd's staff, but it is entirely unclear how Vergados comes to this conclusion. He cites examples from Herodotus (1.34) and Thucydides (4.32) where ἀκόντια are "javelins" in each case, and a javelin can easily be understood as a lighter (and thus diminutive) version of a spear.

for constructing weapons.¹⁸³ To capture the playfulness of the term, however, we might also translate “mini-spear”.

Related to such symbols of power are symbols of status in oaths invoking non-divine entities. These too have a specific connection to the swearer or oath content. So in Aristophanes’ *Knights*, Paphlagon swears by the *proedria* that Pylos won for him (702) that he will destroy the Sausage-seller. The honour of privileged seating (*proedria*) in the theatre and at other public spectacles had been conferred on Cleon (caricatured here through the figure of Paphlagon) after the victory of Sphacteria in 425 BC.¹⁸⁴ Invoking *proedria* as oath-witness demonstrates how dear such public recognition is to Paphlagon, while the Sausage-seller gleefully looks forward to Paphlagon’s loss of status (*Knights* 703–4). More common in our sources, however, are symbols of hospitality and friendship. In a fragment attacking Lycambes, Archilochus accuses him of having forsaken his great oath “by salt and table” (fr.173.2: ἄλας τε καὶ τράπεζαν), ostensibly referring to Lycambes reneging on the marriage arranged between his daughter and Archilochus. This provoked Archilochus’ savage invective against the family which allegedly caused their suicide. Renaud Gagné has shown how the oath is of crucial structural and thematic importance to the various fragments dealing with this episode, where the fate of Lycambes’ family should be associated directly with the consequences of perjury.¹⁸⁵ There is no doubt that the oath and its breach should be regarded as extremely serious even though no identifiable deities are mentioned as witnessing the oath. Salt and table cannot be seen as divine in themselves, but in these circumstances they must represent the divinely protected ritual of Greek reciprocal friendship (*xenia*). They function to emphasize the shocking nature of Lycambes’ treachery since they imply that Archilochus and Lycambes had shared meals together and had cultivated a friendship.¹⁸⁶

183 Markle 1977, 324.

184 Sommerstein 1981, *ad* 575.

185 Gagné 2009.

186 Aeschines claims (3.224) that Demosthenes caused an outcry in the Assembly by saying that he valued the city’s salt above the shared table of hospitality when charged with putting to death a man who had previously been his guest. In another of Aeschines’ speeches (2.22) salt and table are simultaneous symbols of hospitality where he mocks Demosthenes’ concern with these by alleging that Demosthenes is a foreigner (and so should not be bothered with issues of hospitality at Athens). This suggests that the distinction apparently made by Demosthenes (at 3.224) was shocking, in part at least, because it is rhetorically deceptive. If the city’s salt and the table of hospitality are both equally valid symbols of hospitality then claiming to value one above the other is an entirely vacuous proposition. Aeschines continues by alleging further deceptions on Demosthenes’ part, namely that he forged letters and tortured individuals on the basis of fictitious charges (3.225).

That the shared experience of feasting or drinking is symbolic of a binding friendship is further evidenced by the oath of sexual abstinence sworn by all the women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. There Lysistrata calls upon the goddess Persuasion and the wine-cup of friendship (κύλιξ φιλοτησία) to receive their sacrifice (203–4), the “sacrifice” being a “slaughtered” wineskin. The appeal to the wine-cup of friendship is clearly meant to create solidarity among the women,¹⁸⁷ although the ritual itself is unrelated to the kind of guest-host friendship implied by the salt and table of Archilochus and the “table of *xenia*” in Homer. The latter is explicitly named as witness in three oaths from the *Odyssey* as part of the trio “Zeus, first among the gods, the table of *xenia*, and the hearth of blameless Odysseus” (Ζεὺς πρῶτα θεῶν ξενίη τε τράπεζα | ἰστίη τ’ Ὀδυσῆος ἀμύμονος). The disguised Odysseus twice swears oaths invoking these forces when predicting that Odysseus will return to Ithaca. The first passage (*Od.* 14.151–73) coincides with Odysseus’ attempts to receive hospitality from Eumaeus, particularly in the form of clothing, so that the invocation of the table of *xenia* is entirely appropriate to the context. The same oath formula is used later by the disguised Odysseus to encourage the loyal herdsman Philoetius (20.227–34). The similarity in language thus creates a parallel between Odysseus’ exchanges with both loyal herdsmen. The final example occurs in book 17. The same oath-witnesses are invoked and the oath-statement relates once more to the predicted return of Odysseus, here said to be already in Ithaca (17.155–9). The speaker is the wandering prophet Theoclymenus who had come back to Ithaca with Telemachus as he returned from searching for news of his father. A minor figure in the *Odyssey*, whose function has been debated, Theoclymenus may well have been introduced from an alternative version of the saga in which Odysseus himself returns to Ithaca with Telemachus disguised as a prophet. This would help to explain why Theoclymenus’ situation and speech patterns so closely resemble those of Odysseus.¹⁸⁸ It is the first passage, then, in which the table of *xenia* is most obviously relevant to the immediate context, while its invocation in subsequent passages serves to underline the trustworthiness of the information being relayed.

5.3.4 Cabbages and other plants

Finally we turn to cabbages and other plants: four oaths by cabbages, one by the almond tree, one by a plane tree, and one by the poppy leaf, most of which

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Sommerstein 1990, *ad* 203.

¹⁸⁸ See further Reece 1994 and Steiner 2010, *ad* 53.

come from comic or iambic fragments. The fragmentary nature of the works in which these oaths feature makes it extremely difficult to analyze their potential thematic relevance, but the fact that a whole group of oaths by cabbages survives implies that these oaths, at least, were probably not context-specific. A fragment from the sixth century iambic poet Ananius (fr. 4) contains a person asserting by the cabbage (ναὶ μὰ τὴν κράμβην) that they love the addressee by far the most of all humankind. The early Sicilian comic poet Epicharmus also has a character swearing an affirmative oath by the cabbage in his drama *Land and Sea* (fr. 22 K-A: ναὶ μὰ τὰν κράμβαν).¹⁸⁹ It is possible, in this case, that an oath by cabbages was specifically linked to the subject matter of the drama since the fragments suggest that food was a primary concern.¹⁹⁰ The fact that the earliest instances of this oath are singular may point to it being a comic deformation of ναὶ μὰ τὰν Κόραν “yes by Persephone” (as at Ar. *Wasps* 1438–40). That would suggest that this oath was originally confined to women,¹⁹¹ and our passages neither prove nor refute this. Such a restriction might have lapsed when the expression migrated to Athens and became plural.

We have no clear context for the passage from Telecleides’ *Prytaneis* (fr. 29) which reads ναὶ μὰ τὰς κράμβας “yes by the cabbages” (in the plural). A character’s use of exactly the same oath in Eupolis’ *Baptai* (fr. 84.2) accompanies a statement that the addressee’s suffering is just, and may be related to a caricature of Alcibiades, but this is not certain,¹⁹² nor is there any indication of why cabbages would be an appropriate invocation here other than for the creation of humour. Oaths by cabbages, then, would seem to exemplify a low comic register,¹⁹³ without much seriousness or significance attached to them. Unusually, the sanctifying oath witness is entirely consumable and that the severest punishment one might expect for committing perjury would be a comically appropriate stomach-ache!

Eupolis’ *Baptai* also contains an oath by the almond tree, where a character swears to another “you’ll be the death of me, yes by the almond tree” (*Baptai* fr.

¹⁸⁹ In fact, all the oaths by cabbage or cabbages in the plural are affirmative and follow the same formula.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Rusten et al. 2011, 63. The fragments mention porridge (fr. 20), vines (fr. 21), flat-cake (fr. 23), parsnip (fr. 24), sea-fish (fr. 25), gruntfish and whitebait (fr. 26), lobster (fr. 27) and star-gazer fish (fr. 29).

¹⁹¹ On the oath by Kore (Persephone) as a woman’s oath see MacDowell 1971 *ad* 1438, and see also §7.1 below for further discussion of gendered oaths.

¹⁹² See Storey 2003, 104–5.

¹⁹³ The cabbage is associated with a low-class character in Hipponax (fr. 104), as observed by M.L. West 1974, 145, where someone invokes the seven-leafed cabbage given to Pandora at the Thargelia.

79 K-A ἀλλ' ἐξαπολεῖς με ναὶ μὰ τὴν ἀμυγδαλὴν). This invocation is unique in our sources, and is certainly to be treated more seriously than the oath by cabbages. *Baptai* probably involved the transfer to Athens of Thracian orgiastic rites associated with the worship of the goddess Kotyto,¹⁹⁴ and the almond tree was sacred to another foreign deity, the Phrygian god of vegetation Attis.¹⁹⁵ We cannot doubt the serious nature of the oath invoking the plane tree in Plato's *Phaedrus* (236e-237a), the very tree at which the dialogue takes place in a location sacred to the Nymphs (230b). *Phaedrus* swears that he will never again report a speech by any author unless Socrates delivers his speech in the presence of the plane tree, and the oath persuades Socrates to comply. Our final oath by a plant, like our first example, comes from an iambic fragment and also suggests a lack of seriousness. Someone swears "yes yes by the poppy leaf" (*adesp. iamb.* 57 West: ναὶ ναὶ μὰ μήκωνος χλόην). The *Suda*, which cites the expression twice (μ125, ν100), says it is an oath uttered in mockery, and the invocation of the opium poppy certainly corroborates a scenario in which the swearer has lost control of their wits, although once again we are hampered in our understanding of the passage by a lack of context.

5.3.5 Conclusions

Scholars engaging with isolated instances of oaths invoking non-divine entities have returned various verdicts regarding their nature and function. Achilles' oath by the sceptre in the *Iliad* is unanimously treated with seriousness. Socrates' oath by the dog is deemed light-hearted by some, sacred by others. The list of plants in the ephebic oath has caused some confusion. Abstractions have been taken as signs of impiety in Aristophanic comedy. Our analysis of the whole corpus of oaths by non-divine entities has demonstrated a far more regular pattern of use than can be revealed by individual cases. Notwithstanding the fact that some oaths include both non-divine and major divine powers while others contain only invocations of apparently non-divine entities, we find that a divine, or at least serious, aspect can be attributed to the seemingly non-divine forces in an overwhelming number of cases. Moreover unusual oath-witnesses almost invariably function to add solemnity to an oath either because they give it a deeply personal tie to the swearer, or because they are specifically relevant to the context

¹⁹⁴ Storey 2003, 98–9, with 99 n.10 who suggests that the Thracian rites would have been known to the Athenian audience from Aeschylus' *Lykourgeia* which may have been re-performed in the early 410s.

¹⁹⁵ Paus. 7.17.11, noted by Storey 2003, 99 n.11.

or content of the oath, or because the swearer believes them to be divine. Only two groups of oaths do not properly conform to this pattern: Socrates’ oath by the dog and the oaths by cabbages. The very fact that there are groups of these oaths demonstrates that they are not context-specific. Oaths by cabbages do not seem to be serious, and it is telling that they appear in comedy or invective. Socrates’ oath by the dog, on the other hand, seems to be a formula of “swearing without swearing” so to speak, giving the semblance of the force and emphasis conveyed by the oath but without running the risk of divine punishment for falsehood.