

ΣΕΜΝΟΣ AND ITS COGNATES IN THE SOPHOCLEAN SCHOLIA

This short note is offered to Bernd Seidensticker with much gratitude for his influential work on dramatic texts and their performance and reception in antiquity.

The ancient scholia on tragedy are studied more thoroughly nowadays, and taken more seriously, than they were a generation ago, and scholars have been paying more attention to the critical language found in some of the notes.¹ The phrasing of a couple of scholia on Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus* has led me to reconsider the implications of σεμνός and its cognates as value terms in the discussion of tragic language and action.

In its most literal sense σεμνός, as applied from the archaic period onwards² to divinities, sacred places and rites, typically meant 'august', 'worthy of reverence', 'awesome', with its derivation from σέβομαι clearly implicit, but when applied to human beings and their behaviour it acquired a wider range of meanings, from 'grand', 'dignified', 'worthy of respect' to 'pompous', 'self-important', 'arrogant', 'pretentious' (as in the comic poets' mockery of people, or their language³). A famous passage in Euripides (*Hipp.* 91–104) illustrates the slipperiness of the term, which along with σεμνῶς and σεμνότης acquired further nuances in later literary and rhetorical discussions.⁴ In what follows, my translations

¹ Wilson 1983, 83–112 (and in a new version, Wilson 2007, 39–70); Meijering 1987; Papadopoulou 1998, 202–232; Jouanna 2001, 9–26; Easterling 2006, 21–36; Nünlist 2009; Radová 2011.

² The word's earliest appearance in extant Greek literature is in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, used in the first verse of the goddess herself, and at 478 of her Mysteries.

³ E. g. Ar. *Nub.* 48, with K. J. Dover's note ad loc. (Dover 1968).

⁴ Hermogenes, *De inv.* 4. 11 discusses with examples the way in which 'solemnity of speech' can discreetly express 'what is shameful in thought'. In Modern Greek σεμνός means 'modest', 'unassuming', 'bashful', 'coy'.

‘solemn’ / ‘solemnly’ / ‘awe-inspiring’ are provisional attempts to find the right words for what the contexts seem to imply.⁵

The scholia that prompted me to explore the question further are on *OC* 1547–1548 and 1606, both relating to the mysterious passing of Oedipus.

OC 1547–1548

Τῇδ', ὦδε, τῇδε βᾶτε· τῇδε γάρ μ' ἄγει
Ἑρμῆς ὁ πομπὸς ἢ τε νερτέρα θεός.

In his final speech before leaving the acting area, Oedipus has announced that he will lead the way to the secret place, to be known only to Theseus, where he must die. Suddenly he feels some power guiding him and with great urgency tells his daughters to follow where he leads: “This way, here, this way! For this way Hermes the Guide is leading me, and the Goddess below”.

The first part of the scholion on 1547 has often been quoted for its remark on the impact of the stage action: οὐ πταίει ὁ ὑποκριτῆς ἀλλ' εὐθὺ ἀπεισιν ὥσπερ ἀγόμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, “The actor does not stumble, but goes straight away as if led by the god”. The note goes on to add πάννυ δὲ σεμνῶς καὶ τοῦτο Ἑρμῇ προσέθηκεν, “And to very solemn effect he (the poet) attributed this too to Hermes”. The phrasing is a little cryptic, but it seems to suggest that the mention of specific divine guidance intensifies the awe-inspiring effect of the blind man’s unerring steps as witnessed by the audience.⁶

OC 1606

κτύπησε μὲν Ζεὺς Χθόνιος

The Messenger describes what happened when Antigone and Ismene had duly bathed their father and dressed him in funerary garments: “Zeus Chthonios thundered / rumbled”. The commentator’s note on this line runs as follows: πάννυ σεμνῶς τὸ χθόνιος. οἶον, μύκημα ἐγένετο

⁵ In an earlier article (Easterling 2006, 35) I translated σεμνῶς as ‘impressively’, and τὸ σεμνόν on *OT* 264, as ‘the dignity proper to tragedy’ (30), or ‘an effect of solemn dignity’ (35), but I am less sure now that these renderings are adequate.

⁶ For the singling out of a particular word for comment on its effect, cf. the note on *Ajax* 831–832, where Ajax in his suicide speech calls on πομπαῖον Ἑρμῆν χθόνιον εἶ με κοιμίσαι, and the scholion runs θαυμαστῶς καὶ γενναίως κοιμίσαι εἶπεν, ὥς ἐπὶ ὕπνου, τὸν θάνατον, “Wonderfully and nobly he said ‘put to sleep’, implying death in sleep”.

καὶ ἐσεῖσθη ἡ γῆ, προδηλοῦντος τοῦ θεοῦ τὸν καιρὸν ἐν ᾧ ἔδει ἀποτάτεσθαι τὸν Οἰδίποδα. “The (use of) *Chthonios* has a very solemn effect. That is to say, there was a rumbling noise and the earth was shaken, with the god revealing in advance the moment at which Oedipus had to take his leave”. Here too the dramatic implication of a single word is given emphasis.

In both these cases πάνυ σεμνῶς seems to suggest a tone or atmosphere – of solemnity or awesomeness – closely associated with divine powers: linked in the first instance with what is seen and heard by the audience, and in the second with what is to be imagined from the Messenger’s report.

I have found only three other instances in the Sophoclean scholia where σεμνός and σεμνῶς are used in a broadly comparable way; approval of the poet’s language or dramatic technique is more typically expressed by καλῶς, θαυμαστῶς, δαιμονίως or πιθανῶς. Two of these three passages relate to, or respond to, divine power in some way; the third is more enigmatic.

OC 712–715

ὦ παῖ Κρόνου, σὺ γάρ νιν εἰς
τόδ’ εἴσας αὖχῃμ’, ἄναξ Ποσειδάν.
ἵπποισιν τὸν ἄκεστῆρα χαλινὸν
πρώταισι ταῖσδε κτίσας ἀγυιαῖς.

For it was you, son of Cronos, lord Poseidon, who enthroned her (the land of Attica) in this glory, having instituted the soothing bridle for horses first in these streets.

This passage from the ‘Colonus Ode’ celebrates one of the great divine gifts to the Athenians: Poseidon’s invention of the bridle for taming horses, with the implication (‘in these streets’) that this very deme of Colonus was specially favoured. The scholion challenges this account, interpreting it as a sign of Sophocles’ wish to glorify his own deme:

αὐτόθι φασὶ Ποσειδῶνα πρῶτον ἵππους ζευξαι καὶ χαλινῶσαι· καὶ ταῦτα δὲ ἐπὶ θεραπείᾳ φησὶ τῆς οἰκείας ὁ Σοφοκλῆς· ὁ γὰρ Κολωνὸς Ἴππεὺς ὠνομάσθη παρ’ ἧς ἐξεθέμην αἰτίας διὰ τὸν Ἄδραστον· ὁ δὲ ἐπὶ τὸ σεμνότατον ἄγει τὸ πρᾶγμα τῇ ποιητικῇ καταχρώμενος ἀδεία.

They (the Chorus) say it was here that Poseidon first yoked and bridled horses. And Sophocles says this, moreover, to do honour to his own (locality). Colonus was actually named Hippeus, for the reasons that I set

out, because of Adrastus.⁷ But he (Sophocles), using poetic licence, makes the story one of greater solemnity.⁸

Again the idea of divine power or favour is central, although the main point of the commentator's discussion is the poet's reformulation of the myth.

Ajax 492–493

καί σ' ἀντιάζω πρὸς τ' ἐφεστίου Διὸς
εὐνῆς τε τῆς σῆς, ἧ συνηλλάχθης ἐμοί

Tecmessa begs Ajax not to commit suicide, reminding him of her claim on him as a member of his household: "I supplicate you by Zeus of the house and by your bed, in which you were united with me". The scholion on 492 begins admiringly: κάλλιστα ἀμφοτέροις τοῖς ὅρκοις ἐχρήσατο, "Most beautifully she used both oaths".

μέγιστον γὰρ δικαίωμα τὸ τῆς αὐτῆς ἐστίας ἐπιτυχεῖν ὅποτε καὶ τῶν πολεμίων διὰ ταῦτα φειδόμεθα. καὶ τὸ σεμνὸν τῆς κοίτης χρήσιμον ὅπου γε καὶ τὸ σεμνότατον τῶν προσώπων περὶ δικαιωμάτων τῶν πρὸς ἄνδρα καὶ γυναῖκα διαλεγόμενον αὐτὸ τοῦτο ὁμνυσιν· σὴ θ' ἱερὴ κεφαλὴ καὶ νωίτερον λέχος αὐτῶν.

For the sharing of the same hearth entails the greatest obligation, considering that we spare even enemies on this account. And the (reference to) the reverence due to the bed is helpful, since even the most august of characters speaking of the obligations of man and wife makes this very oath: "(by) your sacred head and the bed we share" (Hera to Zeus at *Il.* 15. 39).⁹

⁷ This cross-reference (not found in the extant scholia) is to a story about Adrastus, which evidently linked him with Colonus (Pausanias 1. 30 mentions him as one of the heroes who had a shrine there). The first-person reference to the commentator (in ἐξεθέμην) is tantalising: most of these anonymous notes are of course excerpts at several removes from more extensive commentaries by individual scholars, but we can only guess who 'I' might have been. Cf. the sch. on *OC* 388, with Easterling 2006, 32–33.

⁸ Reading σεμνότερον (as in MSS R and M) with De Marco 1952 in preference to L's σεμνότατον. Nünlist 2009, 178–179 translates ἐπὶ τὸ σεμνότερον ἄγει τὸ πρᾶγμα as 'makes the story more noble'; but Radová 2011, 71–72, with 'mache die Angelegenheit grossartiger', implies more stress on the 'loftiness' or sublimity of the passage.

⁹ There are some similarities here with the bT scholia on *Iliad* 15. 39–40 (εἰς ὁμόνοιαν δὲ ἄνδρας καὶ γυναῖκας καλῶν ὁ ποιητὴς σεμνύνει τὴν κοινωνίαν, ὅρκον αὐτὴν μέγιστον ποιῶν and ἡ δὲ (sc. Hera) σεμνοτέραις ταῖς προσηγορίαις χρήται).

(The note goes on to quote *Od.* 23. 296 on the reunion of man and wife.)

OT 264–265

ἀνθ' ὧν ἐγὼ τάδ', ὥσπερ εἰ τοῦ μοῦ πατρός,
ὑπερμαχοῦμαι...

No lemma is given before the scholion, but the reference is clearly to Oedipus' promise that he will "fight the battle" to find Laius' killer "as if he had been my own father", and to what he has said at 260–262 about sharing Laius' wife and childless bed:

αἱ τοιαῦται ἔννοιαι οὐκ ἔχονται μὲν τοῦ σεμνοῦ, κινητικαὶ δὲ εἰσι τοῦ θεάτρον· αἷς καὶ πλεονάζει Εὐριπίδης, ὁ δὲ Σοφοκλῆς πρὸς βραχὺ μόνον αὐτῶν ἄπτεται πρὸς τὸ κινήσαι τὸ θέατρον.

Such notions do not pertain to what is solemn/awe-inspiring, but are designed to arouse the audience's attention.¹⁰ Euripides uses them to excess, but Sophocles makes only brief use of them to arouse the audience.

The question here is what τὸ σεμνόν might imply. The commentator clearly thinks that it is something undermined by excessive use of dramatic irony, and when I discussed this scholion in an earlier article (cf. n. 5 above) I thought of it in primarily stylistic terms as "the dignity proper to tragedy", but it is tempting to see a different possibility here. Perhaps we should be thinking, too, of the awesome atmosphere created, for example, when tragic characters try to express both what they have done and suffered, and their sense of divine involvement in their destinies (as in Oedipus' speech at *OT* 1369–1415). Of course the commentator may just have been making a general statement about the power of tragic language and action, but at any rate it is worth resisting the temptation, under the influence of the long tradition of ancient writing on poetics and rhetoric (e.g. Arist. *Rhet.* 1404 b 8, 1406 b 3–8, 1408 b 32; Hermogen. *Id.* 1. 4–6), to think of σεμνός words as primarily associated with types of style.

¹⁰ Cf. Nünlist 2011, 139 n. 15, discussing this and the sch. on 141 as examples of κίνησις 'setting in motion', which in some cases "does not effect a direct emotional participation, but a more neutral form of intensified attention, for example the κίνησις of the audience caused by Oedipus' announcements, which are full of dramatic irony".

As always when we try to understand the ancient scholia, we are limited by the fact that they are surviving remnants of the work of many different scholars, some more sensible and more learned than others, but at least they sometimes challenge our own assumptions.

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This note explores the possible implications of σεμνός, σεμνῶς and τὸ σεμνόν in scholia on Sophocles (*OC* 1547–1548, 1606, 712–715; *Ajax* 492–493; *OT* 264) which discuss the effects of particular words, allusions or types of phrase.

В статье рассматриваются значения оценочных высказываний типа σεμνός, σεμνῶς и τὸ σεμνόν в схолиях к Софоклу (*OC* 1547–1548, 1606, 712–715; *Ajax* 492–493; *OT* 264), которые используются при обсуждении отдельных слов, аллюзий или выражений.

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