

Teiresias as Magus in *Oedipus Rex*

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HAVING QUESTIONED an obstinate Teiresias with increasing irritation only to be himself accused as the country's plague, Oedipus concludes that the seer has conspired with Creon to overthrow him and denounces them both (OT 385ff):

Κρέων ὁ πιστός, οὐξ ἀρχῆς φίλος
λάθρα μ' ὑπελθὼν ἐκβαλεῖν ἰμείρεται,
ὑφεῖς μάγον τοιόνδε μηχανορράφον,
δόλιον ἀγύρτην, ὅστις ἐν τοῖς κέρδεσιν
μόνον δέδορκε, τὴν τέχνην δ' ἔφν τυφλός.

He goes on to attack Teiresias' supposed prophetic powers, which could not solve the riddle of the sphinx; he, Oedipus, had had the wisdom to do that (and thus become king). Creon is motivated by envy (380ff), Teiresias by the ambition to stand next to Creon's throne (399f).

Why does he call Teiresias a 'Magus'? The traditional view is eloquently stated by Jebb: "The word *μάγος* expresses contempt for the rites of divination practised by Teiresias: *ἀγύρτης* taunts him as a mercenary imposter . . . The passage shows how Asiatic superstitions had already spread among the vulgar, and were scorned by the educated, in Greece . . . So Eur. Or. 1496 (Helen has been spirited away), *ἢ φαρμάκοισιν* (by charms), *ἢ μάγων | τέχναισιν, ἢ θεῶν κλοπαῖς.*"¹

Kamerbeek has commented recently in a somewhat different vein: "The word is very common in Hdt. denoting the well-known Median priestly caste. As a term of abuse its first occurrence is Heraclitus 14 D. (if indeed Clemens *Protr.* 22 quotes his own words); with the sense of 'enchanter' Eur. Or. 1498 (monody of the Phrygian) . . . It is possible that a relation with *μαγγανεύω* etc. was already felt in Sophocles' time.

¹ R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles I* (Cambridge 1887) 62; cf. Louis Roussel, *Sophocle Oedipe* (Paris 1940) 115, "on peut voir ici un reflet du mépris qu'inspiraient aux Grecs les sorciers asiatiques, sorte de fakirs illusionnistes," citing the *Orestes* passage.

At any rate the sense here amounts to ‘imposter’, ‘charlatan’, just as μάγος καὶ γόης Aeschin. III 137.”²

Already the scholiast understood the word to mean a fraudulent sorcerer: μάγους δὲ ἐκάλουν τοὺς ψευδεῖς φαντασίας περιτιθέντας, ἀπὸ τούτου δὲ καὶ τοὺς φαρμακεῖς μάγους ἔλεγον.³ So too is the passage commonly translated, either ‘sorcerer’ or ‘charlatan’. In understanding the word in this passage, however, it is best to exclude from consideration references of Hellenistic date or later, when the Magi had passed into the Greek imagination as possessors of arcane religious knowledge and power. The few earlier allusions to Magi in Greek literature have often been assembled, with greatest clarity by Arthur Darby Nock,⁴ but several of these will bear further examination.

The earliest appearance of the word is inconclusive and suspect (Heraclitus fr.14 Diels): “To whom does Heraclitus make prophesies?” writes Clement, who answers: νυκτιπόλοις, μάγοις, βάκχοις, λήναις, μύσταις. “For these he forebodes the things after death, for these he prophesies the fire. For they are initiated in an unholy manner into the mysteries practised among men.” Elements of this vocabulary are suspiciously late, and Clement’s tendency to interpret and expand his sources is well known.⁵ Magi, moreover, are here associated clearly with the frenzied followers of Dionysus, whose initiation to the mysteries is sacrilegious. Such an association seems without parallel early or late, and its sense must remain uncertain.

Euripides’ use of the word seems in contrast quite definable (*Or.* 1496ff); unable to imagine that Helen might have departed by natural means, the Phrygian slave cites unnatural ones, “by charms, or the arts of Magi, or theft by the gods.” Paley was doubtless right in commenting that this is probably the first use of μάγος to mean γόης,⁶ provided that γόης is understood as someone genuinely possessed of

² J. C. Kamerbeek, *Plays of Sophocles IV* (Leiden 1967) 98.

³ Ed. P. N. Papageorgius (Leipzig 1888) 182.22–25.

⁴ *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, ed. Z. Stewart (Cambridge [Mass.] 1972) 308–30, especially 308–10; J. Bidez and F. Cumont, *Les Mages hellénisés I* (Paris 1938), esp. 93ff and 144 n.3 on early usage.

⁵ Cf. LSJ s.vv: νυκτιπόλος and βάκχος in this sense otherwise appear first in Euripides, who is uniquely fond of the former; λήναι suggests Attica, as does ληναῖζουειν in a subsequent citation by Clement (fr.15 Diels, on which see A. Lesky, *WS 54* [1936] 24–32 [*Gesammelte Schriften* (Bern/Munich 1966) 461–67]); for further arguments see M. Marcovich, ed. *mai. Heraclitus* (Merida 1967) 465–67. On Clement’s quotations, see G. S. Kirk, *Heraclitus, the Cosmic Fragments* (Cambridge 1954) 309.

⁶ F. A. Paley, *Euripides III*^a (1880) 323.

supernatural powers (so Herodotus uses the word) and not as someone who pretends to be so endowed (as the orators and later writers commonly use it).⁷ To the Phrygian, *μάγοι* is not a term of contempt, and their powers are real. This lends force to the supposition that Euripides indeed stands at the beginning of the tradition that attributed these powers to the Magi. For there were several words available to Euripides to convey the meaning of 'sorcerer'. It is from the mouth of a frightened, ignorant Phrygian slave that *μάγοι* issues with this meaning: a member of the lowest order of Persian society looks on the priestly caste that made up the highest order and credits them with mysterious and awesome powers. It is a nice touch of characterization on Euripides' part, and of itself it cannot tell us what his contemporaries thought of Magi.⁸

Naturally it would be altogether out of place for Oedipus to call Teiresias a 'sorcerer' without intending irony. He is not accusing Teiresias of using magic or any sort of arcane knowledge, nor does he imply that he believes such arts have been involved; rather, Teiresias' 'art' has failed him. A contemptuous usage, implying 'charlatan', is demanded by the context, as Oedipus proceeds to rail at Teiresias' reputation for wisdom, making of him what Attic drama might elsewhere call a *ψευδόμαντις*. This is not the common view of Magi in later Greek literature, and it seems out of place in the fifth century: after the Magi had been canonized for their *arcana*, they were dismissed as frauds only by those who rejected magic for express scientific or religious reasons.⁹ Aeschines alone (3.137) seems to join

⁷ Thus certainly the nation of werewolves of Hdt. 4.105; less certainly the nation of diminutive *γόητες* of 2.32–33. *γόης* first appears as a term of abuse in Euripides (*Hipp.* 1038, Theseus on Hippolytus, and *Bacch.* 234, Pentheus on Dionysus). By the fourth century the common associates of the term in diatribe have become *ἀπάτη*, *ἀλαζονεία*, *σοφιστής*, *μιμητής*, and the like (e.g., Dem. 18.276, 19.106ff; for Plato, cf. F. Ast, *Lexicon Platonicum*² I [Berlin 1908] 401f).

⁸ On the character of the Phrygian, see P. Decharme, *Euripide et l'esprit de son théâtre* (Paris 1893) 367ff. But, as Kamerbeek, *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.2), rightly insists, consult Euripides' use of *μαγέω* and *μαγεύματα* (*IT* 1338 and *Supp.* 1110), where the magical power is real and not merely a Phrygian viewpoint. This reality, given too that these are the earliest occurrences of these forms, casts doubt on their relevance to Oedipus' speech.

⁹ Thus, from a scientific point of view, the opening of the Hippocratic *Morb.Sacr.*, denouncing the charlatans who first 'sanctified' this natural disease and comparing them to today's *μάγοι τε καὶ καθάρται καὶ ἀγύρται καὶ ἀλαζόνες*, who pretend to great piety, knowledge and powers, none of which they possess (ed. H. Grensemann [Berlin 1968] 60.22). From a religious point of view, see *Act.Ap.* 13.6 *ἄνδρα τινὰ μάγον ψευδοπροφήτην Ἰουδαῖον* (in which rhetorical tradition is the alleged instigator of Iconoclasm, *φαρμακόμαντις Ἑβραῖος* . .

Oedipus in incorporating the term into the language of diatribe without such metaphysical objections to magic when he denounces Demosthenes as more deceitful and brazen than the legendary scoundrels Phrynonidas and Eurybatus: οὐδεὶς πώποτε τῶν πάλαι πονηρῶν μάγος καὶ γόης ἐγένετο, ὅς κτλ.¹⁰ But Aeschines' pair of terms is anticipated in the rhetorical tradition: Gorgias (*Hel.* 10), speaking of the power of ἐπωδή to enchant and deceive the soul, couples γοητείας δὲ καὶ μαγείας δικαῖα τέχναι, where, as not uncommonly in Plato,¹¹ the focus is on the power of the deception, not on its despicable fraudulence; the tone is not here polemic. It may be that the Sophoclean passage in question provided the breach of entry for this term into diatribe, where it came to mean 'trickster'—whether or not the playwright and the orators attached to it the same connotations.

But one would like to know how Sophocles and his audience might have come to see an archetype of religious fraud in the Magi, whose religious functions have nothing deceptive or even very un-Greek about them in Herodotus.¹² Moreover, in the sentence in question, Oedipus is making a specific charge to which the allegation of charlatanism is only secondary, dwelt on to undercut Teiresias' accusation against him. Oedipus has discovered Teiresias' unwillingness to tell what he knows, beyond his blaming the city's ills on the king himself. This Oedipus interprets neither as theurgy nor as religious fraud, but as treasonous conspiracy and greed, and the words used to convey the charge are 'Magus' and 'beggar'.¹³ We may contrast the language of the parallel scene in the *Antigone* (1033ff), where the priest's greed and (by implication) charlatanism are invoked but not political conspiracy, and he is not called 'Magus'.

Accordingly, I would suggest a narrower interpretation of Teiresias

ψευδόμαντις [Acta of 787, Mansi 13.197]; Ἰουδαῖός τις . . . γόης [Theophanes, *Chronogr.* 401–02 de Boor]).

¹⁰ Echoed by Demosthenes at 18.276 without actually using μάγος: δεινὸν καὶ γόητα καὶ σοφιστὴν καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα ὀνομάζων.

¹¹ e.g., *Symp.* 203A and 203D (γόης); cf. *Resp.* 380D.

¹² They interpreted prodigies, as did Greeks: an eclipse at 7.37; it seems from 1.107 that not all Magi could interpret dreams; their hymns at sacrifice (ἐπαιοιδή, 1.132) were narrative, not magical. So Nock, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 309, "It is therefore with some surprise that we find μάγος used in the fifth century B.C. to mean 'quack'."

¹³ ἀγύρτης, simply derogatory in the fifth century (Eur. *Rhes.* 503, 715, of Odysseus' disguise) has acquired a specifically religious association, a deceitful and mendicant priest, by the fourth: so Pl. *Resp.* 364B, and the Hippocratic passage cited *supra* n.9, and later usage. This development may derive from the Sophoclean passage.

as Magus: that the word meant to Sophocles no more nor less than it did to Herodotus. The Persian kings made no secret of, rather advertised, their distrust of the Magi, whose political ambitions in the last days of Cambyses had put one of their number on the throne itself as an imposter of the king's brother.¹⁴ The defeat of this conspiracy was still celebrated annually in Persia in the fifth century (the *Μαγοφόνια*, Hdt. 3.79), and Herodotus repeatedly refers to the great traitor simply as 'the Magus' (3.64, 88, 118, 150, 153; 4.132). This is the dominant impression which Herodotus leaves his readers; the ritual duties of the Magi appear only in passing, while the example of their bold and treacherous political maneuvering is highly visible. This is the nature of *τῶν μάγων ἡ ἀπάτη* (3.79).

The word still has something of this force for Plato (*Resp.* 9, 572E). The son of the democratic man will be aided and encouraged towards lawlessness by his father and relatives; "when these clever Magi and tyrant-makers hope in no other way to take possession of the youth, they devise to place in him a sort of passion as governor over the drones":

ὅταν δ' ἐλπίζωσιν οἱ δεινοὶ μάγοι τε καὶ τυραννοποιοὶ οὗτοι μὴ
ἄλλως τὸν νέον καθέξειν ἔρωτά τινα αὐτῷ μηχανωμένους¹⁵
ἐμποιῆσαι προστάτην τῶν ἀργῶν κτλ.

There is no question here either of sorcery or of religious fraud, although translators have commonly rendered these Magi thus. Deceit there is, but the language, like the analogy which Plato has in mind, is political. These Magi are neither magicians nor charlatans, but 'king-makers', conspiring to manipulate political power. One may suspect that *μάγος* had the same force for Aeschines when he used it to compare Demosthenes to Phrynondas and Eurybatus. While nothing has been handed down about the former, Ephorus (*FGrH* 70 F 58) says of the latter that he was a trusted agent of Croesus who selfishly betrayed his king to Cyrus. Again, the analogy of the term is to political conspiracy rather than religious fraud.

¹⁴ Cf. Darius in the Behistun inscription (S. Sen, *Old Persian Inscriptions* [Calcutta 1941] 14ff), "There was a Magian," etc.; Hdt. 3.61ff.

¹⁵ The scholiast to Sophocles (*supra* n.3) glossed Oedipus' *μηχανορράφον* with *τὰ φαῦλα μηχανώμενον*; *μηχανώμενοι* is applied to those denounced in the Hippocratic treatise, *op.cit.*, (*supra* n.9) 64.56. Roussel, *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.1), remarked of Oedipus' term "allusion aux intrigues des Razpoutine asiatiques à la cour des despotes," which I hope supports the suggestion made here.

This meaning, 'Magus', the literal, political referent of the word, is precisely what is needed in the *Oedipus* passage.¹⁶ Oedipus, expecting information and advice from the priest, finds, as he thinks, an ambitious and brazen conspirator in religious garb, attempting to overthrow him: in a rage he hurls at him a single noun that encompasses this meaning. In the ears of an Athenian audience perhaps newly familiar with Herodotus,¹⁷ the word is an allusion and a metaphor, graphic, forceful and economical.

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January, 1976

¹⁶ Cf. Wilamowitz's inspired rendering of μάγος as 'Pfaffe' (*Griechische Tragödien* 1^a [Berlin 1899] 34) the nineteenth-century Protestant smear term for Catholic priests, suspected of greed and deceit and perhaps of political disloyalty (cf. J. and W. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* 7 [1889] 1584–85).

¹⁷ I do not mean by this to take a position on the date of the *OT* (see the classic study of B. M. W. Knox, *AJP* 77 [1956] 133ff) or the date or method of publication of Herodotus (see recently C. W. Fornara, *JHS* 91 [1971] 25ff). For the alleged friendship between Herodotus and Sophocles, see F. Jacoby, *RE Suppl.* 2 (1913) 232–37. Obviously my understanding of the word in Sophocles would be facilitated by the priority of Herodotus, but the audience's knowledge of things Persian need not be underestimated.