

On the Suppliants' Sprint:  
The Socioreligious Context of θοάζειν in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* 2

In this paper I reexamine the opening lines (1–3) of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, specifically, the meaning of θοάζετε in line 2. The traditional interpretation offered by Plutarch and the compiler of the *Etymologicum Magnum* makes this word equivalent to θ(α)άσσετε 'you sit' or καθέζεσθε 'you sit down' (Plut. *Quomodo adul.* 22e–f), or προσκαθέζεσθε 'you sit down before' (*Etym. Magn.* 460). Thus many modern commentators elect to follow these ancient texts and translate θοάζετε as 'you sit.' Significantly, the majority of these commentators feel compelled to preemptively defend this reading (see esp. Buttman 1837, s.v. θάασσειν; Jebb 1887). Their defense nearly always includes an etymology of θοάζειν, parallels from other authors, and the interpretations of Plutarch and the *Etymologicum Magnum*. Instead I use the socioreligious institution of supplication to reframe the issue and contend that θοάζετε expresses a hurried approach that initiates the subsequent act of supplication depicted in the play's *prologos*.

I begin by examining the defense offered by those who interpret θοάζετε as 'you sit' and find that the defense is almost entirely without substance. Though an etymology is readily summoned for θοάζειν in the sense of 'to hurry,' no such etymology is to be had for the sense of 'to sit.' Whence commentators are led to claim that θοάζειν 'to hurry' was phonologically similar to and thus confused with θάασσειν 'to sit' (so Jebb 1887, 207). Yet this claim rests on the untenable assumption that ζ was always pronounced [z], though through to the latter half of the fourth century ζ was pronounced [zd] (Allen 1987, 56–59). Next I reexamine the two oft-cited parallels usually adduced to support the translation 'you sit,' namely, Aeschylus *Suppl.* 595 and Empedocles Fr. 4.8. I argue that an act of hurrying fits just as well in the former as an act of sitting, while the surrounding lines in Empedocles' fragment, in fact, leave little doubt that an act

of haste is meant. Lastly, though Plutarch (c.45CE–c.120CE) and the *Etymologicum Magnum* (compiled in the 12th century CE), on whose authority modern commentators read  $\theta\omicron\acute{\alpha}\zeta\epsilon\tau\epsilon$  as ‘you sit,’ are indeed *relatively* ‘ancient,’ they offer *interpretations* made many centuries after the play’s production, not incontrovertible declarations of absolute truth. In fact, the indecisiveness of the scholiast on *OT* 2, who explains that  $\theta\omicron\acute{\alpha}\zeta\epsilon\tau\epsilon$  is  $\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\iota$  τοῦ  $\theta\acute{\alpha}\sigma\sigma\epsilon\tau\epsilon$ . ἢ  $\theta\omicron\omega\tilde{\varsigma}$  προκάθησθε (“for ‘you sit.’ or ‘you quickly sit down before’”), suggests that uncertainty regarding the correct reading prevailed in the centuries following the play’s original performance.

None of the elements of this defense are, therefore, satisfactory. Instead, I look to the play’s *prologos* in order to discern the meaning of  $\theta\omicron\acute{\alpha}\zeta\epsilon\iota\nu$  in line 2. I argue that because the *prologos* explicitly depicts an act of supplication in which the group of Thebans are identified as suppliants who have chosen Oedipus to be their *supplicandus* (‘the one to be supplicated’), this supplicatory act holds the key to understanding  $\theta\omicron\acute{\alpha}\zeta\epsilon\iota\nu$ . There are, as identified by F. S. Naiden (2006), four steps to a complete supplication: the suppliant approaches the *supplicandus* (*OT* 2), and makes certain ritualized gestures (*OT* 3); having thus initiated the supplication, the suppliant makes and defends a request (*OT* 14–57), to which the *supplicandus* then responds (*OT* 58–146). I find that  $\theta\omicron\acute{\alpha}\zeta\epsilon\iota\nu$  in line 2 cannot be equivalent to  $\theta(\alpha)\acute{\alpha}\sigma\sigma\epsilon\iota\nu$  *et alia*, for if the chorus simply sat for an opening tableau then there would be no approach, and the supplication, and therefore the subsequent action of the *prologos*, would not, for it could not, exist.

Yet an act of supplication, begun by the suppliants’ approach signaled in line 2, is in fact omnipresent throughout the *prologos*. Whence, I contend, *nolens volens*,  $\theta\omicron\acute{\alpha}\zeta\epsilon\tau\epsilon$  verbalizes the hurried movement of the suppliant group as they approach Oedipus. Indeed the latter of the scholiast’s suggestions must have transpired, for by line 10 the suppliants *are* sitting. But before the suppliants could legitimately sit themselves before Oedipus, the ritual—to say nothing of the

practicability of a social interaction that begins without beginning—demands that they first *approach* him. By introducing the socioreligious context of the supplicatory act initiated in lines 1–3 and by reexamining the evidence supposedly to the contrary, θαύξετε is revealed to be an expression of the suppliants' haste as they approach their intended *supplicandus*.

### Works Cited

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