

Honors 206R, Ancient Tragedy
Winter 1997

Oedipus at Colonus

Produced posthumously--Sophocles died 406-5 B.C., and the play was produced in spring 401 B.C. Meanwhile the Athenians had been defeated in the Peloponnesian War;

“the peace terms of 404 were harsh: the Athenians were reduced to military impotence by the surrender of their few remaining ships and the destruction of their fortifications; the democratic institutions under which they had lived for almost exactly a century were replaced by a Spartan-backed reactionary dictatorship--the Thirty Tyrants, who ruled by terror. It could, however, have been worse; the Thebans and Corinthians argued for the annihilation of Athens--enslavement of the population, destruction of the city--but the Spartans were unwilling to go so far” (Knox, p. 255).

Colonus was the birthplace of Sophocles, but there was probably also a local tradition that linked Oedipus with Colonus. In Euripides' *Phoenician Women* (post 412, pre 408), Oedipus speaks of going to Colonus to die.

Theseus = THE Athenian hero,

“prototype of Athenian heroic endeavor and civilized living. Sophocles here presents him as a picture of the humane greatness of Athens in its best days, of the compassion that had long since vanished under the harsh pressures of protracted war and revolution. Pericles' ideal Athens of the Funeral Speech is re-created here in all its generosity: ‘We alone do good to our neighbors,’ Pericles said, ‘not upon a calculation of interest, but in the confidence of freedom and in a frank and fearless spirit.’ (Knox, p. 266)

Euripides' *Medea* also travels to Athens as a place of refuge, and the protection promised her by King Aegeas.

OUTLINE OF THE PLAY

- I. Appearance of Oedipus and Antigone; citizen
- II. Chorus of old men try to drive them from the grove
- III. Ismene arrives with news about the brothers
- IV. Theseus arrives, summoned by a message from Oedipus
- V. Creon and his bodyguards arrive to bring Oedipus back to Thebes; seizes the sisters to force Oedipus.
- VI. Theseus rescues Antigone and Ismene
- VII. Polynices comes to return Oedipus to Thebes
- VIII. The “death” of Oedipus

mechanics - how many actors?
function of chorus?

characters: Oedipus
Antigone
Ismene
Polyneices
Eteocles
Creon
Theseus

Classical Civilization 110
Fall Semester 1994

Lecture Notes - *Oedipus at Colonus*

Written 20+ years after the *Oedipus Tyrannus*; Sophocles' was 90 years old; produced after his death in 405 B.C.

SCENE: Grove of the Furies/Eumenides at Colonus, on the outskirts of Athens. Sophocles was born and lived as a child in "white" Colonus (cf. choral ode ending 668, begins line 765 in our translation), "white with its whitewashed houses, standing out against the green countryside, like the houses on Mykonos today, white too in that two hills of light-colored soil contrast with the normal red clay of Attica." Ferguson, p. 221.

Oedipus, the wanderer, the exile--The first four lines establish the identity of both Oedipus and Antigone, his physical condition, and their situation as exiles. By the end of his first speech we know Oedipus has learned patience by suffering.

Sophocles' use of Aeschylus' theme: "Man must suffer to be wise," as well as the Furies as Eumenides, a transformation dramatized in Aeschylus' play of the same name.

Theme of *sight* and *blindness* continues - contrast between the blind who 'see' and the sighted who are 'blind.' Oedipus, who is blind, does not know where they are; Antigone, who can see, seems oddly unfocused on answering his question--instead of telling him they are at Athens, she gives a description of their immediate surroundings.

A stranger arrives, not to welcome the two, but to drive them from the sacred precinct (line 40). When he learns they are in the Grove of the Eumenides, Oedipus is happy (51)--he has had a prophecy from Apollo about the place (cf. lines 100ff.)

The chorus promises Oedipus sanctuary--until they find out who he is, then they wish to drive him out.

► Contrast the two daughters:

Ismene
is well-dressed
has stayed in the luxury of the palace
wears a broad-brimmed hat to keep off the sun
rides a fine horse

Antigone
is dressed in rags
has faced exile, destitution, and hardship
is exposed to the elements
is on foot

although Ismene has gone to some pains to find her father and bring him news ages

► Contrast behavior of Oedipus' two other offspring--Polyneices and Eteocles:
Oedipus' assessment, lines 365ff.

equal to ?
ἀντί = in opposition to
ἐν ἀνταπόδοσιν = in return for
γονεῖς = offspring, race, family

Ismene's information about the brothers, lines 398ff.

1. plan to allow Creon to rule (because of the curse on their own line). In other variations of the Oedipus myth, Laius is warned by Apollo NOT to have children. ▷▷

▷How would that change the perception of the 'curse'?

2. competition--Eteocles has seized the throne and banished his older brother.

3. Polyneices has gone into exile in Argos; has gained an army through his marriage to the princess; aims to take Thebes back from his brother by force.

cf. Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*

Antigone tells Oedipus that Creon is coming for him, that the gods say victory for Thebes lies with Oedipus, c. line 430

change of fortune for Oedipus, once cursed, now blessed

anyone who harms Oedipus will be cursed

but Oedipus cannot be buried at Thebes, only outside the boundaries, because he is blood-guilty; the oracles say the Thebans will have "a heavy weight of sorrow" when they stand on Oedipus' grave and his anger "strikes them"

Oedipus curses his sons; ▷ is his anger justified, or is this still the old, quick-tempered Oedipus of the earlier play? Cf. Theseus words to him (line 675-76, p. 108); Creon, too, accuses him of being ruled by his quick temper (lines 980-82)

▷What is the meaning of lines 480-95? Oedipus was not immediately banished? He wanted to die by stoning but no one would do it; was banished only after he had come to terms with his guilt. He accuses his sons of exiling him (480, 492-3); ▷ is he speaking literally or figuratively? See also his words to Theseus (683)

Oedipus says the worst suffering was because his own sons banished him, not because of the old evils (683ff)

Oedipus asks the chorus for sanctuary at Athens, saying "You will win for your city a mighty service and for enemies, trouble." (lines 512-13) He is instructed to atone to the deities on whose ground he has trespassed, and the Chorus give specific instructions for that propitiation (lines 525-49). Ismene performs the ritual for Oedipus (565)

Chorus asks Oedipus to tell them what happened to him to bring him to this state--they have heard the story, but want his side of it. (579)

Oedipus replies that he suffers for deeds done without conscious choice (584-86). It was the city's fault (590); he was given a gift of marriage for saving the city (610); he is guilty of the murder of his father, but it was done in self-defence (623ff.)

Athens' reputation as a haven: Pericles said "The gates of our city are flung open to the world."

Theseus enters (628),

"the shining hero of Athenian tragedy, as he was of Athenian legend. In Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, when the old, blind, and beggared Oedipus seeks

sanctuary from his oppressors, it is Theseus who takes him in. In Euripides' the *Madness of Heracles*, when the hero cannot face life amid the consequences of his own insanity, it is Theseus who comforts him, reasons with him and persuades him to rejoin the living world. In *Medea*, when the heroine, deprived of home and husband, seeks a refuge, it is Aigeus, father of Theseus, who offers one" Arnott, p. 9)

zenophobia and *chauvinism* of Attic tragedy--"It is in those places [principally Thebes and Argos, both long-standing rivals of Athens] that men marry their mothers, and wives murder their husbands; it is there that incest and cannibalism thrive. Out of the whole surviving canon of Greek tragedy, there is really only one play which shows Athenian worthies in an unflattering light: Euripides' *Hippolytus*, where Theseus, King of Athens, misled by false evidence, curses his own son in a fit of savage rage, and destroys him" (Arnott, p. 9)

Theseus offers his assistance; ►What does Oedipus want from him? (655ff.)

1. He offers himself as a gift to Athens, asks for burial there
2. Says the oracle requires that Thebes be smitten by Athens (sometime)

Theseus agrees to help Oedipus because (1) there is a guest-friendship between them and a spear alliance, (2) he is a suppliant to the Goddesses, (3) and promises benefits to Theseus and Athens.

Theseus offers to take Oedipus to his home, but Oedipus prefers to remain in the Grove, and asks Theseus' protection so that no one can forcibly take him back to Thebes (pp. 110-11)

Creon enters (835)

He has been sent, he says, by Thebes to persuade Oedipus to return.

Oedipus refuses, but Creon intends to take Oedipus back one way or another, has seized Antigone already, then directs his men to seize and carry off Antigone (940); He threatens to take Oedipus forcibly (989).

Oedipus' curse on Creon "May the Sun-God that sees all give you and your seed an old age like this of mine!" (999-1000).

►Is the fulfilment of this curse seen in the *Antigone*?

Theseus, hearing the cries of the Chorus, reappears (1021)

He dispatches people to stop the Thebans from crossing the border with the daughters of Oedipus (1034)

Accuses Creon of violating the sovereignty of Athens (1051ff.), threatens to hold Creon against his will in Athens unless he returns Antigone and Ismene (1072ff.)

Creon's response: (1080ff)

Oedipus claims that he has done nothing which would merit the punishment he has received from the gods (1104ff)

Theseus and Creon go off to rescue the daughters and return them to Oedipus.

►What is the specific function of the chorus on pp. 128-29?

Antigone and Ismene return (1258) The daughters whom Oedipus earlier referred to as his curse, are also his blessing. (1272)

Oedipus thanks Theseus (1284ff.) "Only in this people of yours have I found piety towards the gods, and human feeling and no hypocrisy."

Theseus tells Oedipus that someone kin to him has presented himself as a suppliant at the altar of Poseidon and wishes to speak with Oedipus (1328ff.)

It is Polyneices, come from Argos (1350)--Oedipus does not wish to speak to him.

Antigone pleads with her father to listen to Polyneices (lines 1361ff)--and he agrees (1387) - but refuses his request and curses him

What is Antigone's attitude toward Polyneices
see Polyneices' request lines 1606-09

what curse
does Poly-
refer to
line 1488

Discussion Questions:

► If you were defending Oedipus (as Antigone does) what would be the basis of your argument? What defenses does Oedipus himself use? Cf. 584-623, 1104ff.

► What does the ending of the *Oedipus at Colonus* say about the gods' attitude toward Oedipus?

► Does Sophocles identify with Oedipus, particularly in the *Oedipus at Colonus*? He was almost 90 when he wrote it. Story that his sons sued for control of his affairs, claiming he was incompetent:

"The story is told that Sophocles' son Iophon, anxious to lay hands on the long-delayed inheritance built up from the family shield factory, brought a plea that the old man was no longer competent to handle his business. Sophocles appeared in court, and recited or sang this song [the ode at 765ff.], which he was at the time composing, and his competence was promptly proved" Ferguson, p. 222.

► What is the peripeteia of the Oedipus at Colonus?

► What about the end of O.C.? Compare it to O.T.

► Why do Polyneices and Creon try to persuade Oedipus to return to Thebes?

► What does Oedipus want from Athens and what does he have to offer?

► How well does the *Oedipus at Colonus* fit the Aristotelian definition of tragedy?

► Is Oedipus wholly responsible for his fate?