

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

Sophocles

Overview In *Oedipus the King*, the headstrong ruler had raged against the plague which was destroying his city. The Delphic oracle had predicted that the plague had been caused by religious pollution and by failure to perform purificatory rites. At the end of the play he discovers that he himself was guilty for the pollution and plague, having as predicted killed his father and married his mother. At this point Oedipus' wife and mother hangs herself, and he himself, blinded, prepares to go off into exile with his two daughters. In that position we find Oedipus at the outset of *Oedipus at Colonus*, where he appears, led by his daughters, at a shrine dedicated to the Furies. It has been prophesied that Oedipus will meet his final destiny in such a spot, and in fact the indigenes, viewing the spot as holy, try to keep the old man from settling down there. Oedipus is rescued by Theseus, ruler of the adjacent deme of Athens, who senses the power of having this toxic but saintly man buried in Athenian territory. The bulk of the play, up to Oedipus' eventual translation, seen only by Theseus, involves Theseus' efforts to protect his unusual guest.

Story

The narrative of Sophocles' Theban plays—*Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone*—deflects attention from the ultimate nature of *Oedipus at Colonus*, which is in some sense the capstone of the entire sequence. It is the moment of transcendence for the hero!

After leaving Thebes, blinded and transformed by the fearful self-knowledge he has revealed, Oedipus makes his way with his two daughters to the neighboring village of Colonus. He is asked to leave, because he has entered an area sacred to the Furies—the Erinyes of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*—yet in his heart he knows that he has come to a fated spot, where he will be a blessing to the land in which he is buried. Though the indigene elders of the place are horrified to learn that Oedipus is the son of Laius, Oedipus justifies his story to them, asserting that he is not guilty of murder, because he killed his father in self-defense. He asks for an interview with Theseus, the king of the town.

At this point Ismene, Oedipus' younger daughter, arrives on horseback, rejoining her father and sister, Antigone, and reporting that Creon will soon be coming to take possession of the body of Oedipus, which will serve Thebes as a sacred power in its current power struggle—between Eteocles and Polyneices. Oedipus is horrified at the thought that his body will be a political football, in this sense, and he pledges his allegiance to the people of Colonus, asking them to protect him against Creon. The villagers agree, but insist that, because Oedipus has trespassed on holy land, he will need to carry through some ritual purifications.

Theseus enters, immediately indicating his sympathy with Oedipus, and gratefully accepting Oedipus' proposal: to offer up his own burial site, a blessing for Thebes, to Theseus and Athens—Colonus being the appendage deme to Athens. The chorus and Oedipus praise Athens, whereupon Creon himself arrives, (hypocritical) praising Oedipus and his children, and urging him to return to Thebes. There follows an extended contention between Creon and Theseus—each seeking the support of the holy but polluted wise man, Oedipus—and in the end, though siding with Theseus, Oedipus concedes that he in indeed still polluted and requires purification. Still, the play refuses to plateau out, at this stage, onto a mellower Oedipus, and instead introduces a suppliant visitor from Thebes, Oedipus's son Polyneices, who argues that Oedipus should return to Thebes, to protect his exiled son from the wrath of Creon. Increasingly pissed off, by the conflicts over his potentially saving body, Oedipus rains curses on his son Polyneices, and drives him away.

Immediately after this bitter argument a loud thunderclap is heard, a sign from Zeus, Oedipus believes, of his coming death. Oedipus tells his daughters and Theseus to follow him, while he walks off stage. A messenger appears, with the announcement of the death of Oedipus, and a brief account: Oedipus bathed himself, poured libations, then sent away his daughters, whose burden of caring was over, while Theseus alone was permitted to see the spot where the transfiguration took place. Though Antigone longs to see her father's burial site, only Theseus is permitted to know that secret, for in so doing he will be able to keep his people free.

Themes

Pollution Oedipus has polluted himself by the acts of parricide and incest, as Oedipus the King. He cannot bring the power of his experience to bear, for its value to others, until he has been cleansed. It is characteristically archaic Greek, however, to claim that tragic experience, like that of Oedipus, is necessary before one reaches the great-souled condition.

Fidelity Antigone's fidelity to her father meets the highest standards of Athenian family loyalty. In her behavior toward her dying father, she shows us the character she will bring to the play to which she gives her name.

Characters

Oedipus is in this play no longer the impetuous inquirer of *Oedipus the King*, though he is still temperamental and irascible. He deeply appreciates the sympathy of Theseus, and has great scorn for his son, Polyneices, who tries to woo him over.

Theseus is the dignified ruler of Athens, who remains faithful to Oedipus, despite the pollution that follows the old man.

Antigone is, as always, the traditionally loyal one, true to her father despite his downfall, and heartbroken that she cannot see the old man's burial site. We see the foreshadowing, in this play, of the insatiably loyal Antigone of the play of her name, which follows in the narrative sequence.

MAIN CHARACTER

OEDIPUS *(transcendent)*

Character Oedipus, who was so beaten by destiny in *Oedipus the King*, and who by the end of the play is blinded—at his own hand—tattered and wiped out, is again a new character in *Oedipus at Colonus*. By the time the former power figure has been shepherded to the nearby deme of Colonus—a small town near Athens—by his young daughters, he has assembled a sense of destiny, but also of heavy withdrawal around himself. Fearful that the locals of Colonus will not allow him to stay, he concentrates on his own prophetic destiny, as a man who has been forcibly driven by fate, and he looks around him anxiously, until the Athenian king Theseus arrives to protect him. Oedipus is dismissive of Polyneices, who comes with his own requests, and hostile to the Theban king, Creon, who is rumored to be doing what he can, to gain control of Oedipus' body, a prize in the current warfare between Athens and Thebes. The messenger's final report, on the 'transcendence' of Oedipus, convinces us that the saintly man was glad to leave earth behind.

Parallels Literature, being a creation of imagination, not infrequently establishes figures who seem to disappear from mortal sight, on some kind of 'quest for the beyond.' While to a Greek of Euripides's time, Dionysus (in the *Bacchae*) might seem a religious figure, he might also be taken as a creature of artistic vision, an extended image of the 'transcendent' passion in human affairs. King Lear, in Shakespeare's great tragedy, is driven beyond his powers by the attitudes of his daughters, raves powerfully across the moor, taking the audience up into his transcendence of mortal preoccupations. Coming to the modern sensibility, in our search for parallels to the Oedipus of *Oedipus at Colonus*, we might think of the devil figure, Woland, in Bulgakov's early twentieth century novel *Master and Margarita*. This sublime showman,

a sinister laughing counterpiece to Goethe's Mephistopheles, can construct and destroy worlds in a split second of willing, just as Bulgakov's Margarita can broomstick-fly through the sky, in a night of immeasurable abandon. Who can top Dostoyevsky's Father Zosima, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, when it comes to embodied saintliness, the deeply embracing ambience of love this riveting figure lives in. Transcendence, in this case, might seem like a byproduct of religion; conversely thought, religion might be taken here as the byproduct, so beyond the average is Zosima.

Illustrative moments

Fated Upon arriving in Colonus, Oedipus is told that he is intruding on sacred territory, that of the Furies. True to his destiny, Oedipus embraces this locational chance; when given his initial prognosis, *kill your father marry your mother*, he was given the knowledge that wherever he settled himself would bring blessings to that land. He takes it as destiny that he has settled in the first grove he reached, on entering his final resting place.

Capable of hatred When Ismene brings Oedipus the news that Creon is coming to get him, and when Polyneices appeals to his dad for support in his civil war, Oedipus is disgusted and angry. He has reached the final stage of his own life, and wants no more local conflict. But he is particular scornful of those people who are trying to make use of his last remains, in order to guarantee themselves a sacred spot.

Profound When Theseus comes to rescue and protect Oedipus, the former King speaks deeply to Theseus about the all destroying tooth of time. Only the gods, claims Oedipus, can never age, while all else 'will be crushed to nothing.' Theseus accepts the implied rebuff, in this powerful statement, which pours contempt on the effort of Theseus to use Oedipus as a token real estate symbol. Oedipus has transcended the condition in which he can be used by others.

Intuitive Oedipus hears a sudden thunderclap, while he is talking with Theseus, and immediately knows that it belongs to his destiny—as he had read all the personal alerts along his way. Hearing the loud roar, Oedipus assures Theseus, at last, that he will receive the gift Oedipus earlier promised him; the inheritance of his purified body, which will bring blessing to the soil that surrounds it.

Fidelity To the end Oedipus remains faithful to his two young daughters, whose behavior he contrasts sharply with that of his jealous and rivalrous sons. Oedipus remains equally faithful, however, to the final contract, that only Theseus is to know where the body is buried. Only in that way could Theseus pass the knowledge on to his heir, in complete secrecy.

Discussion questions

Is *Oedipus at Colonus* an uplifting experience for you (and its audience)? Does it enrich your sense that tragic events can be meaningful? Or does it leave you depressed?

What is the role of Antigone in *Oedipus at Colonus*? Why does she want to be buried with her father? What does she in fact do in the end?

Oedipus tells the elders at Colonus that he is not responsible for the death of his father, Laius. He claims self-defense as his justification. Did we believe, in *Oedipus the King*, that Oedipus was justified in the killing of Laius?