Sophocles: Oedipus at Colonus (Οἰδίπος ἐπὶ Κολώνως)

Cast of characters:
Oedipus – ex-king of Thebes
Antigone – Oedipus’ daughter
Athenian Stranger (see also Unnamed Characters)
Chorus of old men from Colonus (see also Age: Old and Young; Choruses)
Ismene – Oedipus’ other daughter
Theseus – king of Athens
Creon – ex-king of Thebes
Polyneices – Oedipus’ son
Messenger
Non-speaking characters: Creon’s attendants; Theseus’ attendants (see also Silent Characters)

Distribution of parts Unless we assume a fourth actor (Jebb 1900: 7), several roles need to be split, though allocation seems relatively clear until the exodos: first actor – Oedipus; second actor – Antigone (1–846, 1099–1555), Theseus (887–1043); third actor – Stranger, Ismene, Creon, Theseus (549–667, 1099–1210, 1500–55), Polyneices. In the exodos, the Messenger/Theseus could be played by the first actor, Antigone and Ismene once more by the second and third, but this splits Theseus between the three, and it may be simpler to have the first actor play Ismene, the second Antigone, and the third the Messenger/Theseus (Avezzù and Guidorizzi 2008: lxxxiv; see also Features of Greek Tragedy; Performance; Role Doubling).

First production According to the play’s second hypothesis, Oedipus at Colonus was produced at the City Dionysia of 401 BCE, well after Sophocles’ death in 406/5 BCE.

Plot Prologue (1–116): Oedipus and Antigone enter and describe the locale, before an Athenian Stranger accosts them to demand they leave the sacred grove of the Eumenides, into which they have strayed. Recognizing that this is the place where he will find rest, Oedipus refuses and instead, with an indeterminate promise of aid, persuades the Stranger to defer the decision to others. On his departure, Oedipus prays to the Eumenides.

Parodos (117–253): the Chorus enters, searching for the one who has transgressed the grove. Oedipus reveals himself and his name, whereon the Chorus demand he leave, until Antigone’s supplication urges pity rather than horror.

First Episode (254–667): Oedipus responds with the play’s first apology (of three) for his life and deeds, after which the Chorus defers the decision to Theseus. Ismene arrives with news of renewed strife between Polyneices and Eteocles over their inheritance, and the mission of Creon to try to bring Oedipus back to Thebes because of an oracle foretelling victory to the side to which he is attached. Oedipus curses his sons and promises aid to Athens, after which he is instructed by the Chorus in the rites to propitiate the Eumenides, though Ismene leaves the stage to perform them (see also Fratricide). A short lyric exchange (510–48) with the Chorus follows, in which they ask Oedipus for details of his deeds, and he delivers his second apology. Theseus then arrives and, after hearing of his promised benefit to Athens, accepts Oedipus under his protection before leaving and entrusting him to the Colonans.

First Stasimon (“Ode to Colonus” 668–719): The Chorus eulogizes Colonus, the deme mirroring the virtues and wonders of Athens and Attica, protected most prominently by Athena and Poseidon, and gifted mastery over the sea and equestrianism.

Second Episode (720–1043): Creon now enters and begins by attempting to persuade Oedipus to return to Thebes. Another Oedipal refusal leads swiftly to degeneration,
Scene and staging  The play takes place in front of, and around, the grove of the Eumenides at Colonus, quite some time after the events of the Oedipus Tyrannus. The exodos on the (audience’s) left leads to Thebes, that on the right to Athens. More detail than this is inevitably speculative. The skêne (stage building) may have been painted (see also Scene Painting) to depict the grove of the Eumenides at Colonus, into which characters exit, especially Ismene at the end of the first episode’s first half (509) and (perhaps) Oedipus himself at the end of the fourth episode (1555), and from which they enter (e.g., the Messenger to announce Oedipus’ death at 1579ff.). There may have been a statue of the cult hero Colonus on the stage (59–60), and there is at least one stone seat (19, 192–6: Budelmann 2000b) to which Oedipus is drawn during the parodos (192–202).

The most consistent dramaturgical element is Oedipus himself; after his initial refusal to be moved, he remains on stage – or, once, perhaps in the skêne itself (111–16) – until the end of the fourth episode and, despite being technically a suppliant, all the people to whom he makes supplication, and Polyneices of course, are forced to come to him. This well reflects Oedipus’ obvious importance to the drama, but also the intransigence of his character (see Structures and themes and Characters below).

Entrances and exits are also somewhat speculative, as Oedipus’ final departure could have been into the skêne or to the audience’s right, principally because Sophocles seems to combine cultic details from both Colonus and Athens (see Contexts below) in order to cast his institutional net as widely as possible. Either exit would be dramatically significant in these terms (the central confirming his link with the Eumenides, the right the link with Athens), as indeed would be the direction in which Antigone and Ismene depart at the end of the play (left to Thebes or right to Athens, before being sent on to Thebes), because of the exodos’s emphasis on the Antigone intertext (1768–76) and its coming familial disas-

when Creon makes it clear that he has already taken Ismene, will now take Antigone, and intends to do the same to Oedipus. Another short lyric exchange (833–6) between Oedipus, Creon, and the Chorus plays out this attempt. Theseus arrives and adjudicates the following agôn (“contest”) between Creon and Oedipus, whose speech is the third of his apologies. Theseus then gives instructions to his men to intercept the Theban kidnappers.

Second Stasimon (“Battle Ode” 1044–95): The Chorus imagines the location and outcome of the encounter between the Athenians and Thebans.

Third Episode (1096–210): Antigone and Ismene are reunited with Oedipus, also bringing news of the arrival of a suppliant at the nearby altar of Poseidon, who turns out to be Polyneices. Antigone persuades Oedipus to hear his entreaty.

Third Stasimon (1211–48): The Chorus reflects on the troubles of old age, reflecting both on their fortunes and that of Oedipus.

Fourth Episode (1249–555): Polyneices enters and delivers his defense/appeal for Oedipus’ aid, helped by Antigone’s encouragement, but his father rejects his supplication and curses him to death. Antigone unsuccessfully tries to persuade Polyneices not to persist in his expedition, before he leaves. In another lyrical exchange (1447–504), the Chorus and Oedipus in turn comment on a range of omens portending his death, and Theseus arrives. Oedipus explains to him the significance of these portents, outlines his future rites, and then leaves the stage with his children and Theseus.

Fourth Stasimon (1556–78): In a highly troubled state, the Chorus prays to a range of divinities for Oedipus’ painless release.

Exodos (1579–779): A Messenger arrives to detail Oedipus’ rather mysterious death, after which enter Ismene and Antigone to mourn their father in a kommós (“lamentation”) (1670–750). Theseus arrives and puts a stop to their song, before promising to send them to Thebes as Antigone requests. All exit.
ter (see also Ancient Greek Theaters; Space; Staging; Theater Architecture)

Myth Covering one of the most popular individuals in Greek myth, whose story was well known to Homer (Il. 4.376–98, 23.679–80; Od. 11.272–4) and told inter alia in the lost epics Thebais and Oedipodeia, Oedipus’ myth has been argued to take a dramatic turn for the worse in fifth-century Athens (March 1987), with emphasis especially on the incessuous offspring, his exile, and his self-blinding, but these details could well have been known before the tragedians; Pindar’s fourth Pythian (after 462 BCE) refers to Oedipus in a way that could imply exile, whilst the argument that Od. 11.272–4 knows nothing of children from Epicasta (for Jocasta, Oedipus’ Wife/Mother) depends on the translation of a single word. Nonetheless, the troubling elements of his story are of primary interest to the tragedians (cf. Pindar Ol. 2.33–48 on the survival of his line through Polyneices; also Pyth. 4.263–4; see also Greek Epic and Tragedy; Greek Lyric Poetry and Tragedy).

In terms of its specifically tragic precursors, including the trilogy to which Aeschylus’ Seven Against Thebes belonged (467 BCE), Oedipus at Colonus interacts most thoroughly with Sophocles’ earlier (undated) treatment in the Oedipus Tyrannus (Seidensticker 1972), with both a general thematic reversal around the career of Oedipus — from greatness to blindness and then back again — and specific structural parallels underlining that reversal: for example, the image of blind Oedipus accompanied by his daughters ends the Oedipus Tyrannus and opens the Oedipus at Colonus (Antigone alone); conflict scenes with Creon are interrupted and resolved by the arrival of a third character (Jocasta OT, Theseus OC); the Oedipus Tyrannus’ conflict between Oedipus and Teiresias is replayed in the Oedipus at Colonus’ conflict between Polyneices and Oedipus (younger man facing an old, blind man who has particular “sight”); both plays end with Oedipus and his children leaving the stage in the company of an authority figure (Creon OT, Theseus OC) to whom Oedipus has entrusted his children; the prologoi of both plays are opened by a 13-verse speech from Oedipus. An aesthetic of reversal controls all these (and more) parallels, by which the reversal in Oedipus’ fortune is made clearer (see also Fate and Chance; Sophocles: Gods and Fate). There are also intertextual references to other plays, most notably Sophocles’ own undated Antigone (1405–13, 1724–36) and Euripides’ Phoenician Women (411–409 BCE) (1703–7).

Structure and themes The play is structured broadly with the aid of two thematic runs, inextricably combined. The first is that of a “suppliant drama” (Burian 1974), a type represented particularly well in our surviving tragic corpus (given Athenian insistence on its role as a haven in the heroic age), being seen also in Aeschylus’ Suppliants and Euripides’ Suppliants and Children of Heracles. According to this sequence, a seemingly powerless suppliant arrives at, and is protected by, a new community, which is then rewarded with some benefit. For Oedipus that benefit is crucial, as it convinces the Athenian Stranger (70–4) and the Chorus (294–5, also 461–4) to leave the final decision to Theseus, and indeed Oedipus stresses the benefit (576–8) when speaking to that figure almost to the exclusion of any of the traditional suppliant topoi. This is not to say, for example, that self-justification (a typical topos) is absent from his self-presentation (see below), but pragmatism is notable in Oedipus’ success.

This prepares us for the other individual aspect of this suppliant drama, namely that Oedipus himself becomes the object of a supplication by his son Polyneices, to join him in the war against Eteocles. Marked structurally by the fact that the news of his supplication comes in the third episode (the only episode not divided by a lyric exchange with the Chorus), Polyneices’ request and situation parallel his father’s (e.g., Antigone persuades an initially reluctant audience to hear the entreaty, the revelation of the suppliant’s name produces revulsion, etc.), but the son...
makes greater use of the standard *topoi* – *AIDs* ("shame"), *kinship*, the rights of the supplicant, self-justification, etc. Oedipus’ vehement rejection is the only time in extant drama that supplication is denied (though this was not uncommon in contemporary Athens), and it has seemed to most scholars warranted to varying degrees (cf. Easterling 1967 with Markantonatos 2007), but the similarities between father and son speak for a more nuanced attitude on the part of the playwright, according to which the errors and character of the former are reprised, tragically, in the latter’s doom.

The second thematic is that of hero cult, a controversial topic in modern studies of tragedy (Griffin 1998; Seaford 2000), but one undoubtedly prominent in the play, from the moment that Oedipus first speaks of his future benefit to the community (72; also 92–3, 287–90, 459–60, 575–6, etc.), though it may also be seen in the *secrecy* surrounding his tomb and coming cult (624–6, 1522–34, 1640–4, 1760–3) and in its direction towards the protection of Athens and the harm of its enemies (see also *Contexts* below).

Both of these themes center around Oedipus, much of whose self-presentation in the course of the play proceeds from his new-found (i.e., post *OT*) belief in his “essential” or moral innocence, given that he did not know who Laius was when he killed him, nor Jocasta when he married her (see also *Knowledge*). His three “apologies,” the first and second to the Chorus (258–74, 510–48), the third in Theseus’ presence to answer Creon’s charges (960–1013), all draw extensively on legal terminology, and their total effect has been seen, contrastingly, to be probative of his innocence (e.g., Finkelberg 1997) and his guilt (Kelly 2009: 52–9). Certainly the *Oedipus Tyrannus* intertext makes very difficult Oedipus’ somewhat belated claim that he acted in self-defense (989–96; cf. *OT* 800–13), which would have been a complete answer under Athenian law, but we should not conclude that he is being *cunning*, rather than completely self-convined. Indeed, the point is that contemporary legal norms cannot encompass a figure like the living Oedipus; his incorporation into society, in the form of the Athenian *polis*, can only be achieved through his cult *post mortem*.

**Contexts** Two historical contexts must be considered: (1) the period before Sophocles’ death (406/5 BCE) when he wrote it, and (2) the aftermath of the *Peloponnesian War*, which ended in 405/4 BCE, some three years before the play’s first performance. Scholars have routinely considered the play’s depiction of Colonus (especially in the first *stasimon*) and forecast for Athens’ future as simple nostalgia for a time when the Spartans were not encamped at Decelea (from 413 BCE), but more recent work has emphasized the continuity and hardiness in Athenian rural life during this period (Hanson 1983; Krummen 1993), so that the image is an expression of civic and religious immanence and permanence, designed for an audience which knew all too well how difficult the future would be, but did not inevitably think it would end in Athenian disaster. The second context was also more hopeful than is generally assumed, as Athens pulled itself out of imperial collapse and managed, albeit with effort, to reestablish its cultural norms and institutional dynamics. Its image of Athens and Attica is no mere fantasy. As the Chorus put it (726–7), “Even if I am old, | the strength of this land has not grown old.”

To add to these fraught settings, Colonus was also significant in the oligarchic revolution of 411 BCE, for here the assembly of the Four Hundred, with which movement Sophocles himself was involved, had been summoned (Thuc. 8.67.2) because of the aristocratic associations of its cult of Poseidon *hippios*. Sophocles certainly does not try to hide the cult: Theseus arrives thence twice (887–90, 1491–5) and Polyneices supplicates there (1156–9), but this underlines the unity in Athens, not its divisions. The protection which the gods afford Attica represents the city’s power and future: the *gifts* of Athena and Poseidon in the first *stasimon* combine
their powers and class associations under the banner of unity, downplaying the potential class divisions which a place like Colonus could represent (see also Political Approach to Greek Tragedy).

But divine benevolence is not limited to Athens as a community, for the gods eventually prove to have taken thought for Oedipus, and compensate him for his suffering. This concern is manifest in several ways, from the many oracles which seem to surround his story before and after the play (87–95, 356, 389–90) to the meteorological signs heralding his demise (1447–99, cf. 94–5), but it can also be seen in more indirect forms, such as the omen leading Oedipus to think of Colonus as his resting place (96–8). The theological shorthand for this generalized concern is, of course, Zeus himself, who is invoked constantly during the play (143, 221, 642, 1079, 1085–95, 1749, etc.), though it is not clear whose voice summons Oedipus to his final doom (1627–8).

The setting of the play, the grove of the Eumenides, makes clear the association between these gods and Oedipus, both eventually socialized figures of vengeance who have the power to benefit and harm (40, 42; cf. 92–3), a link strengthened by Oedipus’ repeated cursing of his sons (421–30, 787–90, 868–70, 1375–82) (Winnington-Ingram 1980: 275) but also shown by several thematic and verbal parallels as well (e.g., 631 and 486–7, 74 and 42; Kelly 2009: 72–3). That he should disappear into the skēnē representing their grove would, therefore, be particularly suitable (see Staging above; see also Gods’ Role/Gods And Mortals).

Yet we should remember that the form of the cults in the Oedipus at Colonus, both of Oedipus himself and the Eumenides, are not precisely those we can reconstruct from the period, and seem to combine elements from both Colonus and Athens (Kelly 2009: 41–5): later authors speak of a cult of Oedipus at Colonus (sometimes associated with Demeter), and also a cult on the Areopagus in Athens in association with the Eumenides, though no such association is known in

Colonus itself. Whatever the level of institutional innovation here, this intriguing mixture serves to link Athens and its deme in a ritually significant manner which justifies both locations in their claims on Oedipus’ power and presence. The uncertainties over the precise location of his tomb strengthen that inclusiveness (cf. 1520–3, 1590–7, and 1760–3) by refusing to rule either place out. A final exit to audience right at 1555 would add tremendously to that connection (see Staging above).

Indeterminacy over the burial site would also be significant of mystery cult, for Oedipus has been seen as a mystic initiand who undergoes an apotheosis at the end of the play (Calame 1998). Certainly Demeter is important in the Oedipus at Colonus, with her major shrine at Eleusis being a prominent part of Attic geography mentioned in the first two stasima (683, 1050–3); Oedipus refers to the “watchword” (synthēma) of his fate (46), which may be linked with the pledges (synthēmata) of Theseus and Peirithous in their attempt to seize Persephone from the underworld (1594) and in turn with the mystery “token” (synthēma) which was intended as proof of readiness for initiation; the “sheer threshold” (1590) near his disappearance seems also to evoke Eleusis itself; and several traditions outside the Oedipus at Colonus connected Oedipus with Demeter.

Characters Oedipus himself is the focus, dramaturgically and dramatically, but he has a wonderful and varied cast against which to shine. His relationship with his daughters Ismene and Antigone is as loving as that with his sons is marked by hatred, but it is only the latter daughter who receives much individuation. A support and prop at the beginning of the play, she remains sympathetic throughout, especially in her interactions with Polyneices in the fourth episode, both before and after her father’s rejection of his appeal. That she should argue as passionately to the Chorus to hear her father’s supplication as she tries to persuade her father to hear his son (237–53, 1181–203), no less than
their touching affection in the fourth episode, serves also to cast doubt on scholarship’s usually one-sided damnation of Polyneices (e.g., Kirkwood 1986: 114), who – for all his faults – manages at least to admit the error in his treatment of his father, and expresses a desire to make amends.

Interestingly, Polyneices is paralleled with two of his kinsmen, first, Oedipus in their parallel situations as suppliants, and second, Creon in his decision to approach Oedipus to acquire his aid. Unlike the latter he is open about his intentions, and unlike the former he fails as a supplicant, and so he is not without sympathy (Winnington-Ingram 1980: 276). When Antigone tries without success to dissuade him from the coming attack on Thebes despite knowing its eventual failure, he impresses us above all with the heroic stubbornness that is such a hallmark of his father’s behavior.

Creon serves as an illustration of Theban rule and authority, naturally contrasted with Theseus as the ideal Athenian autocrat. Even before we see Creon, we know from Ismene his deceptive intentions, and he does not shrink from violence to achieve his ends. Yet he acts for no personal aggrandizement, given his willing departure from power in favor of Oedipus’ sons, and his insistence on acting for Thebes (737–8), and he well understands the extremity of Oedipus’ character (852–5).

As an active ruler, Theseus presents another picture: upright, swift to act, and decisive both in making and in fulfilling his promises to Oedipus, he is a fitting recipient or guardian of the protective benefit Oedipus is to bring Athens, not least in the reasoned way he counsels his guest to restraint (592–4, 1175–6) or upbraids Creon for his presumption (897–936), and also in his constant ten-}

dence of the gods; twice he appears from sacrificing to Poseidon (887–90, 1500–4), and he is the only figure allowed to observe (or very nearly) Oedipus’ death. And yet, despite this generally positive glow, there are still elements which make the tragic autocrat: the touchiness about honor (648–67), a hint of paranoia (1028–33), and the memory of a past transgression in the form of the trip to the underworld (1593–4). Though better than most, there are ambiguities to his presentation as well (see also Greek Tragedy’s Political Content).

About Oedipus himself we have already said much. The paradox of the “saving supplicant” (487) is reflected not only in the structure of the play, but also in its central character, for his extremes of love and hate admit of no behavioral or interpretative middle ground. As harsh in his judgments of others as he is utterly convinced of his own innocence, his association with the Eumenides (see Structure and Themes above) captures the preternatural vigor which makes him both impossible in life and sought after in death. Though scholars have veered from being completely convinced by his self-presentation (Markantonatos 2007) to utterly repelled (Rosenmeyer 1952), Oedipus’ character drives the entire play, and the future of Athens it predicts.

Afterlife The reception of the Oedipus at Colonus begins with the ancient promulgation of a story that Sophocles was prosecuted by his son Iophon for incompetence, and successfully delivered the first stasimon to the court as proof of his capacity. Possibly evidence of a comic treatment (Jebb 1900: xxxix–xli), the biographical strain was a powerful stimulus towards the play’s early popularity, perhaps accounting for its relative infrequency, next to the Oedipus Tyrannus, in modern repertoires, where less is known or cared about Sophocles as an historical figure. This is not to deny its importance: from Milton’s Samson Agonistes (1671) to T.S. Eliot’s The Elder Statesman (1958), the play has continued to exert a powerful influence over the finest artists (Morwood 2008: 83–119; Rodighiero 2007). Nor is it to deny the possibility of a dynamic between ancient and modern receptions, for many of the latter link the play with its “Theban” counterparts (as in several modern translations), for example, the BBC Radio 3 production of Robert
Fagles’s translations (1984), and scholars have proposed that just such a sequence was actually performed in Athens in 401 BCE (March 1987: 148–54). Though there have been many famous theatrical productions, possibly most notably that of the National Theatre of Greece (translated by Gryparis) which toured the world several times after its first performance in Epidaurus (1958), the play has also drawn the attention of composers, with complete operas by, amongst others, Antonio Sacchini (1786) and Georges Enescu (1936), and incidental music from Giacomo Rossini (1813–16) and Felix Mendelssohn (1845). But perhaps the best-known and most frequently reperformed modern reception is the Gospel at Colonus, the translation of the story to an American Pentecostal church by Lee Breuer and Bob Telson (1985). (See also Reception.)

See also Renaissance Scholarship; Titles of Tragedies

References


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