Skenè Studies I • 2

Oedipus at Colonus and *King Lear*: Classical and Early Modern Intersections

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi

Supplement to *SKENÈ. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies*

ISSN 2464-9295
ISBN 979-12-200-6185-8

SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
https://textsandstudies.skeneproject.it/index.php/TS
info@skeneproject.it

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù
P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138

Contents

4

A Wise and Irascible Hero: Oedipus from Thebes to Colonus

Gherardo Ugolini

Abstract

The essay aims at foregrounding the opposite yet complementary dimensions which typify Oedipus' character in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. On the one hand, he is introduced as a wise man, the old blind one – both blindness and old age being traditionally associated with wisdom – who has learnt from experience and is now able to grasp life's deepest meaning. This wisdom is based upon religious piety, the awareness of fate's superior and unfathomable power, but also of time as well as of the oracles' truthful validity. Such a model of wisdom is radically different from the one young Oedipus exhibited in *Oedipus the King*, where he sported a knowledge through which he wished to measure and dominate time in contrast with the word of oracles and prophecies. On the other hand, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus is often prone to uncontrollable outbursts of anger, in that he retains a tendency towards ὀργή (anger, wrath, irritation), which, in the previous drama, was an essential component of his character and whose most manifest expression dwells here in his repeated curses against his two sons. Wisdom and impulsiveness are therefore the two main aspects which characterise Oedipus' identity in Sophocles' last play. They intertwine continually and set the rhythm of the play by creating a tension between two identities: a more human one, dominated by impulsiveness and connected with the protagonist's familial history and his own past crimes (i.e. parricide and incest) of which he cannot get rid, even though he pleads innocent, and one that tends towards divinity, eventually transforming him into a cult hero and the protector of the Attic land.

Keywords: Sophocles; Oedipus; Antigone; Colonus

The initial lines of *Oedipus at Colonus*, pronounced by the protagonist, contain a sort of self-representation that offers extremely in-

teresting points to analyse. Here is the old king of Thebes' first speech upon entering the stage (*OC* 1-8):[1]

> Τέκνον τυφλοῦ γέροντος Ἀντιγόνη, τίνας
> χώρους ἀφίγμεθ' ἢ τίνων ἀνδρῶν πόλιν;
> τίς τὸν πλανήτην Οἰδίπουν καθ' ἡμέραν
> τὴν νῦν σπανιστοῖς δέξεται δωρήμασιν,
> σμικρὸν μὲν ἐξαιτοῦντα, τοῦ σμικροῦ δ' ἔτι
> μεῖον φέροντα, καὶ τόδ' ἐξαρκοῦν ἐμοί·
> στέργειν γὰρ αἱ πάθαι με χὠ χρόνος ξυνὼν
> μακρὸς διδάσκει, καὶ τὸ γενναῖον τρίτον.
>
> [Child of a blind old man, Antigone, to what region have we come, or to what city of men? Who will entertain the wandering Oedipus today with scanty gifts? Little do I crave, and obtain still less than that little, and with that I am content. For patience is the lesson of suffering, and of the long years upon me, and lastly of a noble mind.]

The spectators who sat in the seats at the theatre of Dionysus, who years before had witnessed the first performance of *Oedipus the King*[2] or some of the subsequent revivals, or were familiar with the plots of Sophocles' earlier tragedies, would have been amazed to see the enormous changes endured by the character. In addition to underlining his old age (1: γέροντος) and blindness (1: τυφλοῦ),

1 All Greek passages from *Oedipus at Colonus* are cited from the edition of Guido Avezzù (Sophocles 2008); translation of Richard Claverhouse Jebb (Sophocles 1889) with some slight modifications.

2 All Greek passages from *Oedipus the King* are cited from the edition of Patrick J. Finglass (Sophocles 2018); translation of Richard Claverhouse Jebb (Sophocles 1887) with some slight modifications. If the first representation of *Oedipus at Colonus* is dated with certainty at the end of the 5th century BC, shortly after the death of Sophocles (406 BC), there is no agreement among scholars on the dating of *Oedipus the King*. Datation oscillates between an earlier date (433) proposed by Müller (1984) and a later one, proposed by Perrotta (1935: 257-68) and then confirmed by Diano (1952: 81-9). The prevailing opinion is that the scourge that hits Thebes at the beginning of the drama is a reference to the Athenian epidemic that broke out in 430 BC, which places the tragedy around this time. See, among others, Bates 1933; Knox 1956; Lesky 1972: 217-19. On the whole issue see the recent overview by Finglass (Sophocles 2018: 1-6).

Oedipus' words highlight his condition of being a "vagabond" (3: πλανήτην) and of absolute destitution to the point that his physical existence is made possible only upon his acceptance of donations. Along with these material dimensions, the moral values of moderation, resignation, and humility immediately emerge, and also "knowing how to make do" (7: στέργειν) with the little that he has. These three values "teach" (8: διδάσκει) Oedipus in this new way of life. He lists them one after the other in 7-8, arranging them in a sequence that seems to reproduce a climactic structure. He speaks of:

1) the "sufferings endured" (αἱ πάθαι) according to the traditional Aeschilean formula of learning through pain (πάθει μάθος);[3]
2) the "long time spent" (χρόνος ξυνὼν μακρὸς), and in this case an archaic form of traditional wisdom is brought back into use, for which the inexorable passing of time discovers the truth and modifies men's attitudes with a consequent educative efficacy (cf. *OT* 613-15);
3) finally, the third (τρίτον) and most important element of the series, the "noble nature" that is intrinsically a part of him, indicated by the neuter syntagm τὸ γενναῖον, understood as the equivalent of γενναιότης, and referred not so much to the nobility of birth (which also for Oedipus is an indisputable fact since it belongs to the royal family of the Labdacids), but to the nobility of mind. This last feature will be recognised by Oedipus and also King Theseus (569), and it is precisely the recognition of their common noble nature that represents the starting point of the welcoming process in the Attic territories.

The Oedipus found at the beginning of *Oedipus at Colonus* is depicted with great emphasis as an individual who has fallen into the lowest sphere of social, political, and economical exclusion, who is uprooted, "one without a homeland" (207: ἀπόπτολις). He is practically without a physical body of his own, he is only a "phantom" (110: εἴδωλον) unable to survive without the atten-

3 See Aesch. *Ag.* 177. Πάθαι indicates the facts of life in general that we undergo, and here it prefigures a tension between acting and undergoing (παθεῖν / δρᾶν) which constitutes a fundamental thematic axis of Oedipus' repeated self-defences during the drama.

tive assistance of his daughter, Antigone. At first glance, it appears that he is a completely different figure from the Oedipus depicted in *Oedipus the King*. At least this is the sensation that the first lines of the text suggest, which Oedipus himself intends to convey by celebrating his own self-representation. In his explanation of his painful apprenticeship to the public, he points out the obvious change between who he is now and who he was before. *Quantum mutatus ab illo!*, we could say. The Oedipus we see at the end of *Oedipus the King* is a lonely and blind sovereign, completely annihilated by misfortunes and the suicide of his mother-wife, and denied political power and intellectual prestige after having been "renowned by all" (*OT* 8: πᾶσι κλεινὸς), "the first among men" (33: ἀνδρῶν δέ πρῶτον), "the best of the mortals" (46: βροτῶν ἄριστ'), "almost equal to a god" (31: θεοῖσι μέν νυν οὐκ ἰσούμενόν), "the most powerful of all" (40: κράτιστον πᾶσιν). After he blinds himself in the exodus, he is a man "disliked by the gods" (1345-6: θεοῖς ἐχθρότατον βροτῶν; 1519: θεοῖς γ' ἔχθιστος), abandoned by them (1360: ἄθεος, "forsaken by the gods"), as he himself recognises, banished from the city (1378ff.), and left alone to bear an unsurpassable pain (1365-6: εἰ δέ τι πρεσβύτερον ἔτι κακοῦ κακόν / τοῦτ' ἔλαχ' Οἰδίπους; 1414-15: τἀμὰ γὰρ κακὰ / οὐδεὶς οἷός τε πλὴν ἐμοῦ φέρειν βροτῶν),[4] dominated by the desire to sever the ties connecting himself to the outside world. His goal of blinding himself is never to see the world again (1334-5: τί γὰρ ἔδει μ' ὁρᾶν, / ὅτῳ γ' ὁρῶντι μηδὲν ἦν ἰδεῖν γλυκύ; 1337-9: τί δῆτ' ἐμοὶ βλεπτὸν ἢ / στερκτόν, ἢ προσήγορον / ἔτ' ἔστ' ἀκούειν ἡδονᾷ, φίλοι;),[5] so that he does not have to look into the eyes of other men (1384-5: τοιάνδ' ἐγὼ κηλῖδα μηνύσας ἐμὴν / ὀρθοῖς ἔμελλον ὄμμασιν τούτους ὁρᾶν;),[6] with the regret of not having destroyed all the physical channels of sensory perception, including his hearing (1386-90: ἥκιστά γ'· ἀλλ' εἰ τῆς ἀκουούσης ἔτ' ἦν / πηγῆς δι'

4 "If there is a woe surpassing all woes, it has become Oedipus' lot" and "my plague can rest on no other mortal".

5 "Why should I see, when sight showed me nothing sweet?" and "What, my friends, can I behold anymore, what can I love, what greeting can touch my ear with joy?".

6 "After bearing such a stain upon myself, was I to look with steady eyes on this folk?".

ὤτων φαργμός, οὐκ ἂν ἐσχόμην / τὸ μὴ ἀποκλῇσαι τοὐμὸν ἄθλιον δέμας, / ἵν' ἦ τυφλός τε καὶ κλύων μηδέν· τὸ γὰρ / τὴν φροντίδ' ἔξω τῶν κακῶν οἰκεῖν γλυκύ).[7]

In the final lines of *Oedipus the King*, the sovereign, having committed parricide and incest, recognises that Apollo is the architect of his destiny (1329-30: Ἀπόλλων τάδ' ἦν, Ἀπόλλων, φίλοι, / ὁ κακὰ κακὰ τελῶν ἐμὰ τάδ' ἐμὰ πάθεα),[8] and even though at this point he is deprived of all power, Oedipus continues proudly to show that he at least decides his own destiny. He insistently requests to be killed (1410-11) or sent into exile from Thebes (cf. 1436-7: Ῥῖψόν με γῆς ἐκ τῆσδ' ὅσον τάχισθ', ὅπου / θνητῶν φανοῦμαι μηδενὸς προσήγορος, "Cast me out of this land with all speed, to a place where no mortal shall be found to greet me"; 1518: γῆς μ' ὅπως πέμψεις ἄποικον, "See that you send me to dwell outside this land") in agreement with the Delphic oracle and its own proclamation promulgated in the first part of the tragedy. But in the face of this request, peremptory and even arrogant, the ruler Creon replies by challenging Oedipus' power to make decisions by himself, and proposing that all of his choices be subjected to the will of the gods (1438-9: ἔδρασ' ἂν εὖ τοῦτ' ἴσθ' ἄν, εἰ μὴ τοῦ θεοῦ / πρώτιστ' ἐχρῃζον ἐκμαθεῖν τί πρακτέον, "This I could have done, to be sure, except I craved first to learn from the god all my duty").

There is no trace anymore of the arrogance and self-centredness that could be seen in the initial scene of *Oedipus at Colonus*. As mentioned above, Oedipus confesses that he has learned the resignation and the art of making do. But is this really true? Is the old Oedipus, blind and a beggar, exiled and poor, who arrives at Colonus, truly different from the Oedipus who had reigned over Thebes and then had blinded himself after the discovery of his crimes? From a methodological point of view, it can be considered inappropriate or even unwise to compare two tragedies written decades apart by the same author. They belong to completely

7 "No indeed: were there a way to choke the source of hearing, I would not have hesitated to make a fast prison of this wretched frame, so that I should have known neither sight nor sound. It is sweet for our thought to dwell beyond the sphere of grief".

8 "It was Apollo, friends, Apollo who brought these troubles to pass, these terrible, terrible troubles".

different circumstances from various points of view and are certainly not connected to each other within a unitary theatrical tetralogy. Yet ancient criticism had already established a connection between the two Sophoclean tragedies (cf. *Hypothesis* I of *Oedipus at Colonus*: Ὁ ἐπὶ Κολωνῷ Οἰδίπους συνημμένος πώς ἐστι τῷ Τυράννῳ, "*Oedipus at Colonus* is connected to *Oedipus the King* in a certain sense"), and a vast hermeneutical tradition has tried to read the two texts as a continuation of each other, if not as a completion and a realisation of the first in the second, as if Sophocles, from the beginning, had imagined the myth of Oedipus to be articulated in two separate moments. It is not my intention to resume this perspective, let alone bring back the old theory arguing that the old Sophocles intended to offer the reconciliation of Oedipus with himself, the world and the gods. This idea has been argued in the past, albeit with different emphases, by Goethe, Wilhelm August Schlegel, Hegel, Nietzsche and even by the philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (in the chapter on *Oedipus at Colonus* included in the book of his son Tycho on Sophocles' dramatic technique, where he claims that, "The poet settles down thus; he is old and wants to complete his drama, to placate his Oedipus, before he himself finds peace").[9] But nowadays this view is completely unacceptable. However, the fact that *Oedipus at Colonus* is peppered with clues (explicit references and allusions) that consciously refer to the previous *Oedipus the King*,[10] undoubtedly facilitates a conscious re-examination of the old tragedian's

9 "Der Dichter beruhigt sich dabei; er ist alt und will sein Drama noch vollenden, seinem Oedipus den Frieden geben, ehe er ihn selbts findet". (1917: 368; my translation) A detailed overview of the main philosophical and philological interpretations of *Oedipus at Colonus* can be found in Bernard 2001: 12-38.

10 Fundamental to this is Seidensticker 1972, which highlights numerous structural and thematic parallels. On a similar line is also Lanza 1984, which insists on the 'revisitation' of the character of Oedipus by Sophocles. With Winnington-Ingram (1980: 256) it can be said that "The Coloneus is a sequel to the Tyrannus in the sense that it is not the events of the earlier play, but in some measure, the characteristics of the earlier Oedipus are taken for granted". For Thévenet (2015) the continuity between the two dramas is given by the fact that Oedipus acts as an emblem of 'dangerous knowledge' in both.

characterisation of Oedipus, forcing us to compare the similarities and differences.

We do not know what happens to Oedipus in the period of time that separates the end of *Oedipus the King* and the beginning of *Oedipus at Colonus*, nor do we know which events in that time period contributed to characterising and maybe even modifying the protagonist's nature. We do not know this for the simple reason that neither Sophocles nor other tragedians, as far as we know, have ever dramatised the segment of the mythic saga that we could name 'The adventures of Oedipus in exile before arriving at Colonus'. Because of certain passages in *Oedipus at Colonus*, it can be safely said that Oedipus, contrary to what he asks for, is not driven into exile immediately after he finds out that he committed parricide and incest, but is kept segregated in the palace as if he were impure and contaminated. Only many years later did his two sons sanction his expulsion from Thebes against his will. In particular, the *rhesis* Ismene pronounces at 361-84 informs us that for a certain period Eteocles and Polynices ceded the government of the city of Thebes to Creon, but then an "evil strife" (372: ἔρις κακὴ) broke out between the brothers which set them against each other and started the consequent rupture of the city's *stasis* and Polynices' exile. These are tiny fragments that emerge from a past of extreme suffering and loneliness for Oedipus. If we then look at how Sophocles' previous dramas foreshadow the end of Oedipus, we will see that in *Antigone*, at 50, Ismene complains that her father "had fallen into hated ruin and without glory" (ἀπεχθὴς δυσκλεής τ' ἀπώλετο). In *Oedipus the King*, Tiresias concluded his obscure and threatening prophecy with the prediction that no one would know a ruin worse than that of Oedipus (427-8: σοῦ γὰρ οὐκ ἔστιν βροτῶν / κάκιον ὅστις ἐκτριβήσεταί ποτε).[11] The same Oedipus, in *Oedipus the King*, blinds himself knowing well that his fate is destined to be worse than death by illness (1455-7: καίτοι τοσοῦτόν γ' οἶδα, μήτε μ' ἂν νόσον / μήτ' ἄλλο πέρσαι μηδέν· οὐ γὰρ ἄν ποτε / θνήσκων ἐσώθην, μὴ 'πί τῳ δεινῷ κακῷ).[12] All of

11 ". . . for no man will ever be crushed more miserably than you".

12 "And yet I know this much, that neither sickness nor anything else can destroy me; for I would never have been snatched from death, except in or-

these signs point to the fact that the tragedian, when composing *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, did not have any idea about the plot development of *Oedipus at Colonus*, nor the idea of transforming his character into a culture hero protector of Attica.

Now I would like to concentrate, in particular, on two aspects of Oedipus' personality that seem to be relevant and characteristic. Sophocles' emphasis on them highlights the continuity and discontinuity between the earlier and the more recent tragedy: wisdom and irascibility. These two significant traits mark a strongly contradictory dimension of Oedipus' character, and are both present in the first and in the second drama, even if the approach to knowledge appears to be radically changed. The Oedipus of *Oedipus the King* was presented as a champion of γνώμη ("thought", "judgement"), an investigator endowed with a method and proud of the successes achieved (solving the riddle of the Sphynx), eager to learn, able to gather clues and link them together according to logical procedures; he was the emblem of a knowledge both secular and rational similar in many respects to that of the most advanced *téchnai* of the time such as the *iatrikè tèchne*, medicine (and in fact he was summoned to cure Thebes from the epidemic). He is the hero who wants to know the truth at any cost (1065: οὐκ ἂν πιθοίμην μὴ οὐ τάδ' ἐκμαθεῖν σαφῶς),[13] unwilling to stop, who wants to discover his origins in spite of dangerous threats (1076-7: ὁποῖα χρῄζει ῥηγνύτω· τοὐμὸν δ' ἐγώ, / κεἰ σμικρόν ἐστι, σπέρμ' ἰδεῖν βουλήσομαι).[14] And even when he comes to intuit all the circumstances that predict his catastrophic future, his will is never weakened. Even though he knows that he will come to conclusions that will destroy him, he continues his search until the end, remaining faithful to the imperative of discovering the truth.[15] This form of knowledge built over time, accumulating information, and linking clues, certainly reflects cultural trends of the time, as studies have long indicated, such as the

der to suffer some strange doom".

13 "I will not hear of not discovering the whole truth".

14 "Break forth what will! Be my race ever so lowly, I crave to learn it".

15 On the paradigm of Oedipus, the champion of knowledge and research, and on the reference models that inspire it, see especially Knox 1957, Newton 1975, Di Benedetto 1983: 85-104, Ugolini 2000: 157-84.

aforementioned medical science or the historiographical research model. And in some ways the *zétesis* of Oedipus focused on ascertaining his own identity would seem to be the starting point of the research model in the Platonic dialogue.[16]

But in that first drama on Oedipus, all the deficits of such a model of inquisitive knowledge were highlighted during the unfolding of the action. What Oedipus thought he knew reveals in fact to be vain and illusory. His reasoning, his reconstructing hypotheses, his logical deductions, are defeated in the face of the truth about his past. His self-inflicted blindness is the obvious symbol of his defeat, but the condition of blindness also marks a radical turning point whose effects are perceivable in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Also in this drama, Oedipus seems to be profiled as a figure of great wisdom, but his wisdom is now completely different: he has learned to be satisfied, just as he has learned the values of humility and resignation. His curiosity is still alive (in the opening scene, for example, he quivers from the desire to know where he has arrived and insists on his daughter Antigone's getting information),[17] but in some ways he has learned to dominate it and channel it in the right direction. For example, now he knows how to recognize the signs forewarned by Apollo regarding the place where he is destined to end up, those *semeia* of the oracle's predictions[18] that the earlier Oedipus could not decipher, whether it was the Delphic oracle that pronounced them or the *mantis* Tiresias on the stage at the theatre of Dionysus. Now he is determined to fulfil the oracle as much as he had desperately tried to avoid it as a young man. His self-blinding becomes retrospec-

16 This suggestive hypothesis has been advanced by Flashar 1977: 135.

17 *OC* 23: ἔχεις διδάξαι δή μ' ὅποι καθέσταμεν; ("Can you tell me, now, where we have arrived?"); 26-7: ΑΝ. ἀλλ' ὅστις ὁ τόπος ᾗ μάθω μολοῦσά ποι; ΟΙ. ναί, τέκνον, εἴπερ ἐστί γ' ἐξοικήσιμος ("ANT. Well, shall I go and learn what the spot is called? OED. Yes, child, if indeed it is inhabited").

18 *OC* 94-7: σημεῖα δ' ἤξειν τῶνδέ μοι παρηγγύα, / ἢ σεισμὸν ἢ βροντήν τιν' ἢ Διὸς σέλας. / ἔγνωκα μέν νυν ὥς με τήνδε τὴν ὁδὸν / οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅπως οὐ πιστὸν ἐξ ὑμῶν πτερὸν / ἐξήγαγ' εἰς τόδ' ἄλσος· ("And he went on to warn me that signs of these things would come, in earthquake, or in thunder, or in the lightning of Zeus. Now I perceive that in this journey some trusty omen from you has surely led me home to this grove").

tively the paradoxical symbol of his access to a higher form of knowledge. His wisdom is no longer based on rational research, but on the recognition and acceptance of the established values of the ethical-religious tradition. Now that he is blind, Oedipus sees and understands better than before, manifesting a sort of inspired knowledge, or "visionary energy" (Giulio Guidorizzi in Sophocles 2008: 220), that in certain aspects makes him resemble the Tiresias of the previous drama.[19] The condition of physical blindness has profoundly changed his approach to knowledge. In the ancient world, the nexus of blindness and prophecy was widespread in the sense that it tended to identify, in the deprivation of physical sight, the sign of a second, even deeper inner vision (just think of the cases of Tiresias, of Evenius from Apollonia, of Phineus).[20] In place of perception, that is external knowledge, the internal vision takes over. If on the one hand his disability destroys the possibility for Oedipus to have intersubjective relations, on the other it is necessary for its own survival. Antigone, who supports and guides him, must see for two people,[21] and it is not by chance that Oedipus calls his daughter his "eye" (866: ὄμμ'), and in this same way he calls Ismene his "sticks" (1109: σκῆπτρα).

The long and heartfelt prayer that Oedipus addresses to the Eumenides (84-110) is symptomatic of the status of superior wisdom that the protagonist has reached, or at least this was supposed to appear to the public who kept the memory of a sceptical Oedipus towards oracular knowledge to the point of impiety (*OT*

19 Reinhardt (1947: 227-8) had already highlighted the character affinity between Tiresias of *Oedipus the King* and Oedipus of *Oedipus at Colonus*: the same contradictoriness between human nature and divine-prophetic knowledge.

20 On Tiresias see Ugolini 1995. The connection between blindness and vision concerns not only seers, but also poets and singers (Homer, Demodocus): see Tatti-Gartziou 2010. On the topic of blindness in *Oedipus at Colonus*, see in particular Bernidaki-Aldous 1990. The 'clairvoyance' of Oedipus is a trait that appears from the beginning of the drama and intensifies gradually towards the finale: see Shields 1961.

21 *OC* 33-6: ὦ ξεῖν', ἀκούων τῆσδε τῆς ὑπέρ τ' ἐμοῦ / αὐτῆς θ' ὁρώσης οὕνεχ' ἡμὶν αἴσιος / σκοπὸς προσήκεις τῶν ἀδηλοῦμεν φράσαι ("Stranger, hearing from this maiden, who has sight both for herself and for me, that you have arrived as a scout of good fortune for the solving of our doubt").

380-98, 702-25). Now he seems to be endowed with a strong intellectually inspired ability accompanied by a profound religious piety and a total acceptance of the destiny that was prophesied to him, in particular with the readiness to tread to the end of the path that Apollo has prepared for him. He proclaims himself "sacred and pious" (*OC* 288: ἱερὸς εὐσεβής τε), despite being aware of his own status of impurity.[22]

In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus' indomitable desire to investigate and discover the truth is intertwined with an immoderate passion, with a tendency towards irony and impulsivity that in Sophocles' text is systematically qualified as ὀργή.[23] It is difficult to establish whether this inclination was a typical feature of Oedipus' character even before Sophocles made him the protagonist of his tragedy. There is no trace of this in the very few attestations available, but there are too few instances to be sure.[24] Certainly, the Athenian tragedian has greatly emphasised this characteristic. His insults directed at Tiresias, his exaggerated and absurd slanders against Creon, his scornful doubts about the veracity of the oracles, his impulsive and violent reaction during his confrontation with Laius (807: παίω δι' ὀργῆς, "I hit for anger"), and his escort at the fateful crossing of three roads, are concrete examples of how this uncontrollable inclination of ὀργή translates within the design of the drama. And this irascibility is consistent with the one we find in *Oedipus at Colonus*. The stages of life change (from adulthood to old age), the places change (from Thebes to Colonus), his

22 As Knox rightly observes (1964: 147-8), here Oedipus seems to possess all of those characteristics of divinity (knowledge, security, a sense of justice) which in *Oedipus the King* he attributed to himself arrogantly without really having them.

23 The term ὀργή is a keyword that occurs with unusual frequency in *Oedipus the King*: there are seven occurrences, almost all of which refer to the character of Oedipus (*OT* 337, 344, 345, 405, 524, 807, 1241). In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the lemma records three occurrences (*OC* 411, 806, 905), two of which (411 and 806) explicitly concern the protagonist's character.

24 On the myth of Oedipus before Sophocles' re-elaboration, see Robert 1915, Dirlmeier 1948, Wehrli 1957, De Kock 1961, Edmunds 1981, March 1987: 121-48, Cingano 1992 and 2003, Bona 2005, Markantonatos 2007: 41-60, Finglass in Sophocles 2018: 13-27.

status changes (from ruler of the *polis* to beggar without a homeland), the forms of knowledge change (from the impetus of rational inquiry to the peaceful contemplation of superior wisdom), but the character of Oedipus remains the same: a restless, impulsive and resentful figure, prone to rage, to irascibility, and violence.[25] It is Theseus himself who points out that a beggar cannot afford to have such outrageous θυμός outbursts, since it is unreasonable to show hatred towards enemies when one is not in a position to defend oneself (592: ὦ μῶρε, θυμὸς δ' ἐν κακοῖς οὐ ξύμφορον, "Foolish man, anger amidst woes is not suitable").[26]

Therefore his calm and moderate senile wisdom, achieved over time through suffering, does not correspond at all to the imperturbable character of a reassured hero, but to a restless one, greedy for vengeance, obstinate and selfish, not at all softened by misfortunes, but feral, full of envy, of an unshakeable anger facing his destiny. There are various elements that contribute to his outburst of anger, including Oedipus' awareness that they do not want to make him king of Thebes again. The resentment of Oedipus towards the Thebans who hunted him is a *fil rouge* that accompanies the whole drama, a constant retro-thought that guides his feelings with an uncontrollable force. Already in the aforementioned prayer to the Eumenides (84-110) a rancorous indication of hate emerges in line 92, when he alludes, next to the "benefits" (κέρδη) that in the future he may grant the country that will welcome him,

25 Erwin Rohde was the first to reject the traditional hermeneutical model that saw in the old Oedipus who arrived at Colonus a heroic transfiguration with ethical and religious overtones; for him, Oedipus is a man "hardened in his bitter excitement, greedy, stubborn, and selfish, not refined by his misfortune but turned wild", "a man, savage, angry, ruthless, who horribly curses his children, who relishes, thirsty for revenge, the misfortunes of his country". See Rohde 1903: 2, 574 (my translation).

26 The concept of ὀργή defined by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* seems to adapt quite well in the case of the old Oedipus who arrives at Colonus: Ἔστω δὴ ὀργὴ ὄρεξις μετὰ λύπης τιμωρίας [φαινομένης] διὰ φαινομένην ὀλιγωρίαν εἰς αὐτὸν ἢ <τι> τῶν αὐτοῦ, τοῦ ὀλιγωρεῖν μὴ προσήκοντος ("Let us then define anger as a longing, accompanied by pain, for a real or apparent revenge for a real or apparent slight, affecting a man himself or one of his friends, when such a slight is undeserved"). Text: William David Ross (Aristotle 1959); translation: John Henry Freese (Aristotle 1926).

also the "ruin" (ἄτην) that he will procure "for those who sent me forth, who drove me away" (τοῖς πέμψασιν, οἵ μ' ἀπήλασαν).[1] It is the first trace of a theme – posthumous revenge – that traverses the whole play with both vampire-like and crude images (620-1: the body of Oedipus in the tomb drinking the warm blood of his enemies; 788: Oedipus as χώρας ἀλάστωρ, "vengeful spirit on the land").

His angry impetus is constantly connected to the painful memories of his past (parricide, incest, exile), which far from having taught him moderation and self-control are unhealed wounds imprinted in his soul, wounds that shake him to his core and produce choleric reactions. Thus, we see his anger explode in front of Creon in a progressive crescendo when Oedipus does not hesitate to curse him for his lies, his deceit, and his lack of morality (761-99). Even the way he treats his son Polynices, building a wall of chilling silence and coldness between them, takes the shape of the most exasperated anger, to the point that Antigone and Theseus reproach Oedipus for his excessive insensitivity towards his son.[2] Oedipus' indignation towards both of his sons then results in his curse of their mutual killing (1380-93), a traditional theme of the Labdacid saga, already attested in the *Thebaid* part of the epic cycle, and in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, but amplified here to testify, in fact, to the impulsive and violent character of Oedipus. Regarding the cursing of Oedipus, it should be noted that in this drama it only sanctions the dispute between the two brothers that has already happened, but does not provoke it (as in the *Seven Against Thebes* and the *Cyclic Thebaid*).

1 At 411 Oedipus' daughter Ismene mentions the ὀργή of her father in relation to his vengeance against the Thebans *post mortem*: τῆς σῆς ὑπ' ὀργῆς, σοῖς ὅτ' αντῶσιν τάφοις ("Under the power of your anger, when they stand at your tomb").

2 See the dialogue between Oedipus and Theseus at 175-80 and Antigone's *rhesis* at 1181-203. The way in which the scene of Polynices is constructed as well as his characterisation as a suppliant and repentant serve to emphasise the hardness and the violence of Oedipus' anger and have no "superhuman" trait (as Knox would have it, 1964: 159-60). See Easterling 1967 and Di Benedetto 1983: 225-7. For Burian that of Oedipus in front of his son Polynices is "an explosion of wrath and hatred without parallel" (1974: 425).

Wisdom and moderation are indissolubly intertwined with his constant irascibility. For example, think about his words of resignation because of the inconstancy of all that is temporal in 607ff. On the one hand, they seal Oedipus' judicious acceptance of mundane temporality and its constant variability (609: συγχεῖ πάνθ' ὁ παγκρατὴς χρόνος, "but everything else sinks into chaos from time which overpowers all"), as well as the need to understand the reasons for the changes due to time passing; but, on the other hand, they must be framed in the context of his angry refusal to adapt to the political interests of his sons and his distressing fear of being kidnapped. Oedipus is only apparently an old, pacified and serene man, as he says upon his arrival at Colonus. His inclination towards ὀργή is always lurking and cannot be reduced to a simple character trait of a tyrannos and not even to a device that attenuates and reduces Oedipus' guilt. This inclination undermines the stability and superiority of the wisdom he has gained.[3] At a certain point, when Ismene affirms with consolatory intent that the gods who have overthrown Oedipus will now raise him again (394: νῦν γὰρ θεοί σ' ὀρθοῦσι, πρόσθε δ' ὤλλυσαν, "the gods now raise you up; but before they worked your ruin"), Oedipus replies with a fulminating joke (395: γέροντα δ' ὀρθοῦν φλαῦρον ὃς νέος πέσῃ, "It is a paltry thing to raise up age, when youth was ruined"). At first sight, this is an uncomfortable judgment for many modern interpreters (Perrotta considered him openly blasphemous, 1935: 563). It is an aggressive joke towards the divinity that clashes with a drama focused on the acceptance of destiny. Oedipus firmly rejects the traditional conception of heroisation as being a divine reward in exchange for undeserved suffering. In fact, it is a joke that reveals the ambivalence of the old Oedipus, who evidently remains quite sceptical of his own expectations, despite what was predicted by the oracles, and so embittered to the point that he asks his daughter if she ever really believed that the gods took care of him (385-6: ἤδη γὰρ ἔσχες ἐλπίδ' ὡς ἐμοῦ θεοὺς / ὤραν τιν' ἕξειν, ὥστε σωθῆναί ποτε, "What, had you come to

3 On the contrary, Rosenmeyer (1952) believes that Oedipus' anger, with the curses against his children it produces, is a trait that leads him back to the divine sphere.

hope that the gods would ever have concern enough for me to give me rescue?"). This impulse leads him to express doubts about the role of the gods, and Sophocles uses this situation to problematize the contradictions of divine justice.

In conclusion, this ambiguity of Oedipus' character, his wisdom accompanied by a lack of self-control, seems to be the constant theme that connects the young Oedipus of *Oedipus the King* with the old Oedipus of *Oedipus at Colonus*. He changes his way of thinking, and he modifies the paradigm of his wisdom, but the same impulsive, precipitous, rabid temperament remains. Once the similarities and differences of Oedipus' character traits are found and documented from the first drama to the second one, the question remains why Sophocles insisted on such a portrayal of his character. The answer that I venture to suggest is this: Sophocles intended to present a tense and ambiguous character hardly in line not only with the paradigms of the archaic tradition, but also with other famous heroic figures of Sophoclean drama. Oedipus is a hero with obvious traits of humanity and weakness (think, for example, of the anxiety which at the end he has about Theseus not arriving in time to assist him in the moment of disappearance: 1457-8, 1461, 1465-6, 1486-7). His anger and the curses he launches eventually underline his condition of isolation and exceptionality. This ambivalence seems to be dictated by motivations fundamentally linked to the dramatic structure of the tragedy. A wise Oedipus, who continually trips over his own limits, creates a certain tension that makes the journey towards the final outcome of his death and his consequent transformation into a cultic and protective hero more problematic. It is this internal conflict of the protagonist, on which the tragedian insists, and which produces a continuous slowing down of the dramaturgical progression, that makes it impossible to reach a final conciliation or reassuring conclusion.

Translation by Carina Fernandes

Works Cited

Aristotle (1959), *Aristotelis ars rhetorica*, ed. by William David Ross, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

— (1926) *Aristotle. The "Art" of Rhetoric*, ed. by John Henry Freese, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

Bates, William N. (1933), "The Dating of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*", *American Journal of Philology* 54 (2): 166-8.

Bernard, Wolfgang (2001), *Das Ende des Ödipus bei Sophokles. Untersuchung zur Interpretation des Ödipus auf Kolonos*, Beck: München.

Bernidaki-Aldous, Eleftheria (1990), *Blindness in a Culture of Light. Especially the Case of Oedipus at Colonus of Sophocles*, New York, Bern, Frankfurt am Main, and Paris: Lang.

Bona, Giacomo (2005), "Edipo pretragico," in Id., *Scritti di letteratura greca e di storia della filologia*, Amsterdam: Hakkert, 103-9.

Burian, Peter (1974), "Suppliant and Saviour: *Oedipus at Colonus*", *Phoenix* 28 (4): 408-29.

Cingano, Ettore (2003), "Riflessi dell'epos tebano in Omero e in Esiodo", in Lucio Cristante and Andrea Tessier (eds), *Incontri triestini di filologia classica*, 2, Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste, 55-76.

— (1992), "The Death of Oedipus in the Epic Tradition", *Phoenix* 46 (1): 1-11.

De Kock, E.L. (1961), "The Sophoklean Oidipus and its antecedents", *Acta Classica* 4: 7-28.

Diano, Carlo (1952), "Edipo figlio della τύχη. Commento ai vv. 1075-85 dell'*Edipo re* di Sofocle", *Dioniso* 15: 56-89.

Di Benedetto, Vincenzo (1983), *Sofocle*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia.

Dirlmeier, Franz (1948), *Der Mythos von König Oedipus*, Mainz: Kupferberg.

Easterling, Patricia Elizabeth (1967), "Oedipus and Polyneices", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 193: 1-13.

Edmunds, Lowell (1981), *The Sphinx in the Oedipus Legend*, Konigstein/Ts.: Hain.

Flashar, Hellmut (1977), "König Ödipus. Drama und Theorie", *Gymnasium* 84: 120-36.

Knox, Bernard MacGregor Walker (1964), *The Heroic Temper. Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

— (1957), *Oedipus at Thebes*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

— (1956), "The Date of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles", *American Journal of Philology* 77: 133-47.
Lanza, Diego (1984), "Edipo rivisitato da Sofocle", in Bruno Gentili and Roberto Pretagostini (eds), *Edipo: il teatro europeo e la cultura europea*, Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 27-44.
Lesky, Albin (1972), *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellenen*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
March, Jennifer R. (1987), *The Creative Poet. Studies on the Treatment of Myths in Greek Poetry*, London: University of London, Institute of Classical Studies.
Markantonatos, Andreas (2007), *Oedipus at Colonus. Sophocles, Athens and the World*, Berlin and New York: de Gruyter.
Müller, Carl Werner (1984), *Zur Datierung des sophokleischen Ödipus*, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner.
Newton, Rick Marcus (1975), *Oedipus and the Ways of Knowing*, Diss. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
Perrotta, Gennaro (1935), *Sofocle*, Messina-Milano: Principato.
Reinhardt Karl (1947), *Sophokles*, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann.
Robert, Carl (1915), *Oidipus. Geschichte eines poetischen Stoffs im griechischen Altertum*, 2 vols, Berlin: Weidmann.
Rohde, Erwin (1903), *Psyche. Seelenkult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen*, 2 vols, Tübingen and Leipzig: Mohr.
Rosenmeyer, Thomas G. (1952), "The Wrath of Oedipus", *Phoenix* 6: 92-112.
Seidensticker, Bernd (1972), "Beziehungen zwischen den beiden Oidipusdramen des Sophokles", *Hermes* 100: 255-74.
Shields, M.G. (1961), "Sight and Blindness Imagery in the *Oedipus Coloneus*", *Phoenix* 15 (2): 63-73.
Sophocles (2018), *Sophocles, Oedipus the King*, ed. with introduction, translation, and commentary by Patrick J. Finglass, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
— (2008), *Sofocle. Edipo a Colono*, ed. by Guido Avezzù, trans. Giovanni Cerri, comm. Giulio Guidorizzi, Milano: Mondadori.
— (1889), *The Oedipus at Colonus*, ed. with introduction and notes by Richard Claverhouse Jebb (1885), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
— (1887), *The Oedipus Tyrannus*. ed. with introduction and notes by Richard Claverhouse Jebb, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Tatti-Gartziou Ariadni (2010), "Blindness as punishment", in Menelaos Christopoulos, Efimia D. Karakantza, and Olga Levaniouk (eds), *Light and Darkness in Ancient Greek Myth and Religion*, Lanham

MD: Lexington Books, 181-92.
Thévenet, Lucie (2015), "De Thèbes à Colone: l'identité d'Œdipe comme savoir dangereux", in Hélène Vial and Anne de Cremoux (eds), *Figures tragiques du savoir: les dangers de la connaissance dans les tragédies grecques et leur postérité*, Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 99-110.
Ugolini, Gherardo (2000), *Sofocle e Atene. Vita politica e attività teatrale nella Grecia classica*, Roma: Carocci.
— (1995), *Untersuchungen zur Figur des Sehers Teiresias*, Tübingen: Narr.
Wehrli, Fritz (1957), "Oidipus", *Museum Helveticum* 14 (2): 108-17.
Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Tycho von (1917), *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles*, Berlin: Weidmann.
Winnington-Ingram (1980), *Sophocles: An Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.