

**Skenè Studies I • 2**

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

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi



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## Some Notes on Oedipus and Time

GUIDO AVEZZÙ

### Abstract

By solving the Sphinx's famous riddle, Oedipus unveils man's fundamental bond with time, whose essence lies in the sequence of infancy, adulthood, and old age. Oedipus is acknowledged to be a master of this kind of temporality as illustrated in the prologue. And yet, Oedipus does not know himself, and even becomes enmeshed in the ambiguities of *tyche* when speaking about himself as the "child of the event" (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 1083), first marked as being 'small' and then 'great' (i.e. mighty) by the passing of time, beyond a biologically-bound definition of birth, growth, and decay. This suggests a problematic interpretation of 'being in time' either through 'doing' (in the case of the Theban Oedipus) or through 'being made to do' (as in the apologia often repeated by Oedipus at Colonus). This idea of *tyche* leaves the question of agency undecidable. In the liminal position of the exile about to die, Oedipus at Colonus eventually solves this ambiguity. On the threshold of non-being (death), while 'being no-one' socially – an exile doomed to wander away from Thebes – Oedipus eventually refuses to be brought back to his homeland, raising a challenging question about man: only once socially reduced to 'nothing' does Thebes acknowledge him to be 'something'. Is man a man only when reduced to nothing? Is perhaps his nullification the precondition of his use/valorisation in a political key? What does being a man mean at that point? This essay investigates the idea of 'man in time' by looking at the dimensions and perception of time characterising first the Theban Oedipus and then the Coloneus on both the social plane and with regard to the role of transcendence in the later play.

KEYWORDS: Sophocles; *Oedipus Tyrannus*; *Oedipus at Colonus*; time

PREACHER Welcome, brothers and sisters.  
I take as my text this evening the *Book of Oedipus*.  
Lee Breuer, *The Gospel at Colonus*

An epilogue may entail a kind of retrospective apologia: “why, know that my actions consisted in suffering rather than in doing”, exclaims Oedipus addressing the citizens of Colonus, before repeating the same concept with a juridical formulation.<sup>1</sup> All prologues, instead, open up a double temporal perspective: towards the past and towards the future. In the long Book of Oedipus, *Oedipus tyrannus* (OT) somehow represents the prologue, and *Oedipus at Colonus* (OC) the epilogue of the chapter represented by Sophocles.<sup>2</sup> When the ‘Epilogue’ comes, as in Giotto’s *Revelation* fresco in the Scrovegni chapel and in the fresco, slightly later in time, in the Constantinopolitan church of Holy Saviour *in Chora*, the Messengers rewind Time’s bookroll. On the contrary, when the tragic prologue of OT, like any tragic prologue, unwinds the bookroll it offers an ‘archeology’ of the past. It discloses the sequence of actions the past is disseminated with as well as the prefigurations of the future it incapsulates. It lays open the dynamic present unfolding on stage to the increasingly astonished gaze of the protagonist who strives to penetrate the past and grasp what is needed to make the right choices. But it also reveals it to the audience who know the story already and enjoy losing themselves in the labyrinthine meandering of the tragic hero. Thus dramatised by the playwright, the time lived, or re-lived,

1 Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 266-7 (τά γ’ ἔργα με / πεπονθότ’ ἴσθι μᾶλλον ἢ δεδρακότα) and 547-8, respectively (on the latter lines see Giulio Guidorizzi’s commentary in Sophocles 2008: 271-2). All Greek passages from OT are from Sophocles 2018; those from OC are from my critical edition in Sophocles 2008; translations of both plays by Hugh Lloyd-Jones are respectively from Sophocles 1994a and 1994b; I have sometimes slightly modified the translations.

2 It goes without saying that Sophocles’ privileged position is due to the lack of Aeschylus’ Oedipus plays, as well as of Euripides’ and the ‘minor’ playwrights’ of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, besides the historic and mythographic sources and nearly all pre-dramatic treatments.

by the characters does not necessarily coincide with the entire sequence of the *mythos*; nor are the events in their temporal sequence perceived in the same way by all the characters and the collective Chorus – at least, their perception does not coincide ‘literally’ with the timeline of the Book of *Oedipus* as known to the audience. I recalled *The Book of Oedipus* mentioned in Lee Breuer’s *Gospel at Colonus* to suggest a comparison between the omniscient linear temporality of the mythical tale – an especially apparent feature once it is given the status of the Book par excellence – and that of tragedy, which is selective and open to increasingly different possible diversions or beginnings. The following notes will offer a first inquiry into a field which requires a necessarily broader and more complex research. They will provide a few considerations on the dimension and perception of time in *OT* and *OC* by focusing on the different aspects they assume in the two tragedies.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. Men’s Seasons and *Oedipus’* Narrative (*OT* 8, 16-17, 31-50)

At *OT* 771-813 *Oedipus* will tell *Iocasta* what he knows about his own life, from his childhood, as the son of *Polybus* and *Merope*, to the eve of his unsuspecting return to “to the city of [his] father” (1450).<sup>4</sup> At 31-50 we instead hear the Priest tell about *Oedipus’* victory over the Sphinx and the rest of his life to the eve of the fatal day (‘up to now, hitherto’: πάρος, 48). The Priest’s tale has a different tonality from the supplication which he pronounces on behalf of the citizens (16-30 and 50-57), since, as we will see, it responds to a solicitation expressed by the sovereign himself.

As is well known, although structurally and functionally different in many respects, the prologue of *OT* shares many aspects with that of *Aeschylus’ Seven Against Thebes (Se.)*: from *Eteocles’* and *Oedipus’* addresses to the citizen to the emphasis on the ‘king who does not sleep’ and the pervasive presence of the city/ship allegory. Yet, forced to face an emergency, the two protagonists

<sup>3</sup> This study is indebted to many suggestions contained in Nicolai 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Finglass proposes *OT* both as a “Nostos-Play”, and a “Suppliant Drama” (*Sophocles* 2018: 57-62 and 41-57, respectively).



show opposite temporal inclinations: one towards the future, the other towards the past.

It could be asked whether, and to what extent, this choice is instrumental to their individual political rhetoric or, instead, symptomatic of precise characterial connotations. It might also be argued that it could suggest opposite views about destiny. However, this is a question that goes beyond the scope of these pages. The hypothesis that in the two tragedies a group of Theban males appear against the backdrop when the *orchestra* is still empty, raises questions on the distinction made by both Eteocles and the Priest between the represented generations, as well as on the scenic collocation and, more radically, the actual presence of the recipients of the illocutionary act – unless these were the audience itself.<sup>5</sup> Yet, whether or not the Thebans are present at the beginning of *Se.* and actually surround, in variable number, the Priest in *OT* – where traces of their presence are not lacking –<sup>6</sup> is not relevant to the issue I will be dealing with shortly: all allocutions are oriented within the stage boundaries, that is, towards the Thebans, regardless that the addressees are a dynamic *tableau*<sup>7</sup> or are only evoked;

5 With regard to *The Seven*, “whether the Athenian audience is addressed directly as ‘surrogate Thebans’” is an “old question” (Edmunds 2017: 92) strictly connected with our idea of tragic dramaturgy as opposed to the comic one. On *Se.*, see Taplin 1989: 128-36; Wiles 1997: 115 and 213; Hutchinson (Aeschylus 1987: 41-4). An alternative solution about *OT* is offered by Calder 1959: 129 (“just before verse one a priest and two boys enter from the right parodos. Oedipus, possibly with an attendant, then enters from the palace and addresses the audience as his children”); but cf. Dawe (Sophocles 2006: 73), Seale 1982: 215-6, Paduano (Sophocles 1982: 426n1), Finglass (Sophocles 2018: 166-7). Budelmann (2000: 206-9) instead seems to identify arbitrarily the “large group” facing Oedipus with the Chorus, but the positions of the latter and of the “large group” are to be considered with regard to what differentiates or define them. Whatever dramaturgical solution is chosen, the addressees of the two allocutions in both plays cannot possibly be identified with the Chorus.

6 See 18 and 78 (οἷδε: “these”, the Priest) and 91-2 (τῶνδε . . . πλησιαζόντων: “in these people’s presence”, Creon). At 700, “I have more respect for you, lady, than I have for these”, τῶνδ[ε] will refer to the Chorus instead.

7 See Taplin 1989: 134. But as David Seale remarks, “*Oedipus the King* opens with a movement, not a *tableau*” (1982: 215). Walking out of the royal palace, the two sovereigns address the civic space on stage and off stage, en-

from this angle, *opsis* is the least necessary of all. Both the epithets in Oedipus' address and the description of the suppliants in the Priest's words set the coordinates of the temporal dimension in which the rest of the prologue and the whole dramatic action will be situated:

(a) at *OT* 1 the "new" descendants (νέα τροφή) of the ancient progenitor are for Oedipus "my' children (τέκνα)"; this is how Jebb, Paduano, and Condello fittingly translate the Greek, making explicit the sympathetic emphasis conveyed by the minor pause after the noun, in respect of which the rest of the line is an addition typical of the beginning of prologues.<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly this privileges "the political relationship between subject and object",<sup>9</sup> but it should be considered that the motif of paternity is questioned throughout the whole tragedy: first in this address, where Oedipus implicitly says that he is alien to the Cadmean genealogy and the city, but claims a metaphorical paternity over 'new' Cadmeians (see Condello, Sophocles 2009: 135), as later in the hyperbolic irony of 258-60 and 264 (κυρῶ τ' ἐγὼ / ἔχων μὲν ἀρχᾶς, ἄς ἐκείνος εἶχε πρὶν / ἔχων δὲ λέκτρα καὶ γυναῖχ' ὁμοσπόρον / . . . / . . . ὥσπερ εἰ τοῦμοῦ πατρός / ὑπερμαχοῦμαι ["since I chance to hold the power which once he held / and to have a marriage and a wife in common with [Laius] . . . I shall fight for him as though he had been my father"]); then again, definitively, albeit *in absentia*, at 1076-82, where the inquiry into his own ancestry (1077: σπέρμα)

closed within the double circle of the siege and the walls that of *Se.*, articulated in multiple public spaces that of *OT* ("marketplace", "the two temples of Pallas", and "the sanctuary of Ismenos", at 20-1).

8 Besides the local and genealogical information provided by Κάδμου, the complementarity here configured by πάλαι . . . νέα, is typically prologic; cf. *Ai.* 1, 3 e 5 (ἀεὶ . . . καὶ νῦν . . . πάλαι), *El.* 2-3 (νῦν . . . ἀεὶ); *Eur. Cy.* 2-5 (νῦν χῶτ' ἐν ἧβῃ . . . πρῶτον . . . ἔπειτα κτλ.); *Med.* 3 and 16 (ποτε . . . νῦν); *Held.* 1 and 9 (πάλαι . . . νῦν), etc. When Oedipus addresses the young suppliants only (58: ὦ παῖδες οἰκτροί), his address will contain a pragmatic implication noticed by Jebb (cf. Sophocles 2018: 185) which, to some extent, will veil the more inclusive paternal relation declared at the outset.

9 Sophocles 1982: 426n1. As regards the "special bond" generally established by τέκνα in the absence of an actual parental relation cf. Dickey 1996: 69.

leads him to identify a mother, although impersonal (Τύχη), not a father;<sup>10</sup> this occurs right before the *anagnorisis* which will make him aware that “[I] engender[ed] with the person from whom I was sprung” (1361, trans. Finglass, in Sophocles 2018).<sup>11</sup>

(b) It is then for the Priest to introduce the suppliants by distinguishing them according to age (16-17): those who “[are] not yet able to fly far” (οἱ μὲν οὐδέπω μακρὰν / πτέσθαι σθένοντες) and those who “[are] weighed down with age” (οἱ δὲ σύν γήρῳ βαρεῖς); he himself, the sole representative of this latter class (18), leads a selected group of adolescents towards whom he gestures (18-19: οἶδε τ’ ἠθέων / λεκτοί, “and these are chosen from the unmarried young”). The classification by age was also present in *Se.* 10-13, but there it was tripartite; although the text is controversial here, it is clear that to (1) “those who have not yet reached the peak of young manhood” (10-11)<sup>12</sup> were opposed to (2) the “men of military age” (11-13).<sup>13</sup> The question remains open whether the polarity proposed in *OT* is totalising,<sup>14</sup> or instead is meant to represent “two groups . . . that especially need . . . protection”,<sup>15</sup> both excluded from an active role beneficial to Thebes.<sup>16</sup>

In sum: the definition of age classes, which was totalising in *Se.*, in the polarisation of *OT* entails the Priest’s acknowledgment of Oedipus as a ‘middle factor’, the sole subject who fully owns the

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the Chorus’s stereotypical question (τίνος εἶ σπέρματος πατρόθεν;) at *OC* 214.

<sup>11</sup> For the interpretation of *OT* 1361 cf. Sophocles 2018: 582.

<sup>12</sup> Greek passages and translations from *Se.* are from Aeschylus 2008.

<sup>13</sup> This is Hutchinson’s apposite synthesis (Aeschylus 1987: 44).

<sup>14</sup> Finglass (Sophocles 2018: 172): “His polar expression . . . suggests the universality of the city’s appeal to its leader”. But see my following discussion of the tripartition/bipartition of male population.

<sup>15</sup> Longo (Sophocles 2007: 105), echoed by Finglass (Sophocles 2018), who presents both interpretations.

<sup>16</sup> The intent of this distinction will be reverted in Lysias’ *Funeral Oration* with regard to the War of Megara (458-457 BCE), waged and won τοῖς ἤδη ἀπειρηκόσι καὶ τοῖς οὐπω δυναμένοις (52: “with troops whose strength was already failing or not yet capable”), in the absence of the age class tasked with the use of weapons (τῆς ἡλικίας ἀπούσης, 49: “as . . . [Athenian] men of serviceable age were absent”) (trans. Lamb, in Lysias 1930).

vigour of maturity and is therefore the only one entitled to rescue the city.<sup>17</sup> Correspondingly, the sovereign's exordium includes the generative potential that makes him a father both privately and, especially, publicly: in contrast with the suppliants, Oedipus invests himself, and is invested, with the power of ruling over seasons and men, in sync with the riddle of the Sphinx, that traditionally concerns 'man in his time'.

If we consider time not only as the course of the events variously structured by the tragic playwright, but also, and especially, as what the protagonist's intelligence and his action are mapped onto, Oedipus' self-presentation constitutes an essential starting point. The similarities with Eteocles' own self-presentation emphasise its peculiarities: both start with the definition of the place, implicit in their allusions to Cadmus,<sup>18</sup> both inform that the city is in a state of emergency,<sup>19</sup> and eventually declare their own names (at 6 and 8, respectively). According to the prologic conventions, the final recipient of the information is the audience, yet addressing the Thebans entails further levels of signification: in order to emphasise his own responsibility Eteocles prefigures the effect of a possible defeat;<sup>20</sup> on the contrary, Oedipus defines himself ὁ πᾶσι κλεινός (first hemistich of 8: "renowned to all"), which is only seemingly pleonastic in respect to Οἰδίπους καλούμενος (second hemistich of 8: "I who am called Oedipus"), but in fact with the function of "encourag[ing] his people by reminding them of his fame, and by implication the resourceful-

17 The age will be indirectly defined by Iocasta's words on his similarity with Laius (742: μέλας, χνοάζων ἄρτι λεθοκανθές κάρα, "he was dark, but just beginning to have grizzled hair"; cf. Sophocles 2018: 401).

18 On the dual civic and/or ethnic designation of the addressees, see again, for *Se.*, Aeschylus 1987: 41-4, and, for *OT*, Sophocles 2018: 167-8.

19 Eteocles implicitly at 1-5, and then explicitly at 27-9; only indirectly Oedipus at 2-5, and the symptomatology of the pestilence will be presented by the Priest at 25-30 – confirming Sophocles' propensity for the dialogic prologues (cf. Schmidt 1971: 4-6, 8).

20 6-8: Ἐτεοκλήης ἄν εἶς πολὺς κατὰ πτόλιν / ὕμνοϊθ' ὑπ' ἀστῶν φροοιμίους πολυρρόθοις / οἰμώγμασίν τε ("Eteocles' name alone would be repeatedly harped on by citizens throughout the town amid a noisy surge of terrified wailing") – the modern reader grasps a sort of anticipation of "Upon the King . . ." of Shakespeare's *Henry V* 4.1.218-20 (Shakespeare 1982).

ness that lies behind it”.<sup>21</sup> Eteocles describes his action in view of the desirable result: a sleepless helmsman (2-3), he explains that he is facing the state of necessity in a responsible way with regard to both the words dictated by necessity (1: *χρὴ λέγειν τὰ καίρια*), and the rule (2: *φυλάσσει*); he underlines (5) what an unhappy result would reserve to the people, that is, the experience that would cause the lamentations prefigured at 7-8,<sup>22</sup> and to himself – that is, the citizen’s execration: we could call it ‘bad fame’, a negative *kleos*. Oedipus, instead, offers his subjects full availability and the reassurance of his own reputation grounded in his past, the *kleos* of he who is *kleinos*; with regard to the future, he only alludes to it with the indefinite promise to *προσαρκεῖν πᾶν* (12: “render every kind of aid”). His commitment will remain undefined also in the imminence of Creon’s arrival, when the sovereign will reiterate his commitment to “take any action” (77: *δρῶν . . . πᾶν[τα]*). Differently from Eteocles’, Oedipus’ is not a real ‘King’ speech’: he foreshadows neither success nor failure because his knowledge of the state of emergence is limited to the visible signs of his subjects’ suffering and, soon afterwards, to the description the Priest gives of it. His medical semeiotics does not allow either to “render . . . aid” (13) or to “take . . . action” (77) until he gains the anamnestic knowledge that only the god may grant. We are authorised to believe that that “renowned to all” (*πᾶσι κλεινός*) with which he wishes to inspire faith in the people is also to some extent “expressive of his self-confidence”.<sup>23</sup> However, there is no doubt that Eteocles’ gaze is fixed on the future precisely as Oedipus’ is on the past, on the actions that have bestowed fame upon him and constitute his own ‘epic’. And yet, not on his entire past, because he privileges the reputation that he has built after his pilgrimage to Delphi and his encounter with Laius. “This is I, the man called Oedipus, renowned to all”: it is a proclamation destined to reas-

21 Sophocles 2018: 169. This self-presentation is traditionally compared with Odysseus’ (*Od.* 9.19-20: *εἴμι’ Ὀδυσσεὺς Λαερτιάδης, ὃς πᾶσι δόλοισιν / ἀνθρώποισι μέλω, καὶ μευ κλέος οὐρανὸν ἴκει*: “I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, who am on the minds of all men for my tricks; my reputation reaches the sky”, trans. Dawe 1993).

22 For an analysis of *Se.* 6-7 see Aeschylus 1987: 43-4.

23 Kamerbeek 1967: 33.

sure the Thebans, and at the same time it prompts them to sing an *epos* concerning his merits – this is what the Priest will do at 31-53 on behalf of all. This epic, which however does not possess genealogical connotations,<sup>24</sup> looks like a first sign of his resistance towards entering a tragic dimension, as well as of his choice of narrating himself first as the son of Polybus and Merope (openly only from 774), and saviour of Thebes (47-8), then as the son of the events which “have determined [his] smallness and [his] greatness” (1082-3). The *kleos* which gives shape to his pride of *kleinos* comes from a recent past which originates in the killing of the Sphinx. Albeit still engrossed in the memory of his excellent condition in Corinth (775-6), Oedipus produces a radical *epoché* in respect to the past preceding that enterprise: every narrative about him and his own existence seems to originate, in his eyes, in the event that has marked his arrival at Thebes, actually a kind of ‘epiphany’.<sup>25</sup> And it is indeed that memorable experience, not yet an *archaiologia*, that dictates the agenda of his necessary interventions in the present, inspiring his feverish scansion of time into discrete, measurable intervals, which, as will be seen, counterpoint his action.

## 2. Operating with Time, and in Time, at Thebes

On that memorable day the present is geared to the ‘long time’ of the prophecy: (1) Apollo’s response to Laius; (2a) Apollo’s response to Oedipus, whose content Oedipus will reveal to Iocasta at 787-93: “Phoebus . . . [said] that I was destined to lie with my mother . . . and I should be the murderer of [my] father” (ὁ Φοῖβος . . . [ἔλεγε] / ὡς μητρὶ μὲν χρεῖη με μειχθῆναι, / . . . / φονεὺς δ’ ἐσοίμην τοῦ φντεύσαντος πατρός); (2b) Oedipus silence about his own death in the sanctuary of the Eumenides (a detail contained in *The Phoenician Women*, 1703-7, if the passage is authentic, and in *OC*);

<sup>24</sup> As instead, in its blunt conciseness, Hamlet’s “This is I, / Hamlet the Dane” (*Hamlet* 5.1.219-20). On the non-genealogical temporality of *OT* I will return later.

<sup>25</sup> Sophocles 2007: 108, note to line 35.

and, finally, (3) the present day's oracular response, which triggers the action at the end of the prologue of *OT*.

Through the Priest we apprehend that to date ("now", 31: νῦν) Oedipus' exploit with the Sphinx has earned him the reputation of "[the] mightiest . . . , [the] best of living men" (40: κράτιστος, 46 βροτῶν ἄριστος). Today (40: again νῦν) this reputation, that drives the Thebans to beg their sovereign for help, is rooted in the memory of a past carefully divided into a 'before' and an 'after', a 'then' and a 'now': 49-50: "never be it our memory of thy reign that we were [first, yet this is only implicit here] restored (*stantes*) and afterwards (*hysteron*) cast down (*pesontes*)" (Jebb): ἀρχῆς δὲ τῆς σῆς μηδαμῶς μεμνήμεθα / στάντες τ' ἐς ὀρθὸν καὶ πεσόντες ὕστερον. This pattern is soon restated in the Thebans' wish (52-3) that "the good fortune you gave us before (τότε) . . . be the same now (τανῦν)": ὄρνιθι γὰρ καὶ τὴν τότε αἰσίῳ τύχην / παρέσχες ἡμῖν, καὶ τανῦν ἴσος γενοῦ. But in the meantime time has stopped at Thebes; the natural cycles have ceased (fruits no longer grow: 25; there are no more births: 26-7) and there is only an incessant and undifferentiated suffering. The present tense (25 and 26 φθίνουσα, 28 ἐλάυνει, 29 κενοῦται; 30 πλουτίζεται) underlines this "imperfective situation" (Hutchinson 1999: 47-8). Pain does not suffice to demarcate time; the events, albeit iterated, are not single points on a directional line, but a suffering shared in a panchronic, abysmal temporality: the "depths [24: βυθοί] of the killing angry sea" (φοινίου σάλου) into which, one after another, Thebes sinks like a ship at the mercy of a tempestuous sea, metaphorise this experience of time.

The sovereign – *tyrannos* until his discovery of the truth; *basileus* only from 1201 (Knox 1979: 89; but cf. Nicolai 2018: esp. 251-5) – is the subject of an ironic contrast between different temporal scansions: on the one hand, he is active protagonist of what I called his *epos*; on the other, he is the patient of events characterised by a long temporality transcending him: the time actualised by the Pythic anamnesis, a sort of panchronia in which time past – even the remotest past – time present, and time future are solidly connected. However, despite the fact that Creon has told him that μακροὶ παλαιοὶ τ' ἂν μετρηθεῖεν χρόνοι ("the count of years

[from the killing of Laius] would run far back”, 561),<sup>26</sup> Oedipus locates himself outside the imploring collectivity. He “feels compassion” (13: κατοικτίρων), is not indifferent to other people’s suffering (12-13: δυσάλγητος γὰρ ἄν / εἶην τοιάνδε μὴ οὐ κατοικτίρων ἔδραν), and has wept copiously for them (66: ἴστε πολλὰ μὲν με δακρύσαντα δὴ, “know that I have shed many a tear”). Albeit afflicted, Oedipus “[has] travelled many roads in the wandering of reflection (*phrontis*)”: (67: [ἴστε] πολλὰς δ’ ὁδοὺς ἐλθόντα φροντίδος πλάνοις). Although uncertain (*planois*), or better, engrossed in the search for the right path, he relies upon reason (*phrontis*, also signifying ‘care’), taking a course that once again directs the time necessary for the investigation, and, subsequently, for a decision.

Oedipus’ inquiry, which he will end up turning against himself, will finally offer an intelligible and definitive meaning for the relation between ‘before’ and ‘after’. At any rate, for Oedipus, who relies upon reason, time is a measurable dimension:

καί μ’ ἤμαρ ἤδη ξυμμετρούμενον χρόνω  
 λυπεῖ τί πράσσει· τοῦ γὰρ εἰκότος πέρα  
 ἄπεστι, πλείω τοῦ καθήκοντος χρόνου.  
 (OT 73-5)

[When I compute the passage of the days, I am troubled, wondering how [Creon] fares”, since Creon “has been away longer than is natural, beyond the proper time.]

It is a time made up of days (73) which rule rational expectations. It is not an abyss, nor a sequence of ruinous waves, but a dimension in which planning is vigilant, drawing the course (*hodoi*) of Oedipus’ reflection (*phrontis*):

ὅταν δ’ ἴκηται, τηνικαῦτ’ ἐγὼ κακὸς  
 μὴ δρῶν ἄν εἶην πάνθ’ ὅσ’ ἄν δηλοῖ θεός.  
 (OT 76-7)

[But when (*hotan*) he (Creon) comes, then (*tenikauta*) I shall be a wretch if I fail to take any action that the god may indicate.]

26 As Finglass remarks, “the combination of μακρὸς . . . with παλαιός . . . conveys how remote the event now seems” (Sophocles 2018: 350).



Clearly, this also involves Oedipus' impatience of all delay, possibly worried about the tardiness of the oracle or because he suspects "that Creon hesitates to come, as also Teiresias will do" (Sophocles 2007: 114). However, it should be underlined that we are dealing with a measurable time (*emar . . . xymmetroumenon chrono*) in which the events and the decision are mutually related (*hotan . . . tenikauta . . .* : "when . . . then . . . [I will] take any action").

The time of Oedipus-sovereign-of-Thebes is therefore open to new beginnings: at the end of his short inquest on the killing of Laius (the nervous question-and-answer exchange with Creon at 108-31), Oedipus reacts to the inertia which has paralysed the Thebans despite the enormity of the crime – "such violent outrage" –<sup>27</sup> and the lethargy for which he will reprimand them also at a later stage (255-8). It is up to him to start the inquiry that has not been carried out yet and that he must accomplish (cf. 258 ἐξερεινᾶν): (132) "Well, I shall begin (ἐξ ὑπαρχῆς) again (αὐθίς) and light up (φανῶ) the obscurity". Importantly, Oedipus now uses the future tense, often almost obsessively in clausal position: 132 φανῶ, "I shall light up", 135 ὄψεσθε, "you shall see", 138 τοῦτ' ἀποσκεδῶ μύσος, "I shall drive away this pollution", 145 πᾶν ἐμοῦ δράσοντος, "[you know] that I shall take every measure", with the alternative (145-6) "either we shall succeed . . . or we shall perish" (once more φανούμεθα: "for our health . . . shall be made certain – or our ruin"; thus Jebb's translation, here the best). Hutchinson rightly pointed out that this use of tenses connotes the perspective of "(im)perfective solutions" (1999: 47). Not coincidentally, when Oedipus reappears in the first *epeisodion* (216), he will once again use the future tense: 219 ἐξερῶ, "I shall speak". This further demarcates his scansion of the timeline into discrete units: the present (the actual occasion when the people "make a demand" – αἰτεῖς repeated at 216); the simple past, referring to the time before the Sphinx's arrival; the present perfect, which begins with the killing of the Sphinx ("I shall speak these words as a stranger to the sto-

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Shakespeare, *King Lear* 2.4.22-3 ("They could not, would not do't. 'Tis worse than murder / To do upon respect such violent outrage") – as suggested by Lewis Campbell (Sophocles 1879: 149n).

ry and a stranger to the deed . . . since it was only after the time of the deed [Laius' murder] that I have become a citizen", 219-22);<sup>28</sup> and the future: the realisation of Oedipus' project publicly announced in his proclamation that he will commit himself to finding out and punishing the murderer and his accomplices (226). Once again, the past is demarcated by two events: (1) the killing of Laius, (2) the Sphinx and the arrival of Oedipus. Paradoxically, scanning time through actions entails a peculiar 'squint' which obscures or deforms the relations between the events. But this is all man is granted.

The succession of actions, as drawn in the first scene of the Prologue (1-77), situates the arrival of the Sphinx before the present plague, yet it is soon denied by Creon's report: the plague is the direct consequence of the event that the Sphinx has induced them to neglect. This is why Oedipus is asked to investigate that original event. Differently from what had happened in his conflict with the Sphinx, now his *phrontis*' power will not be directed towards coping with the riddling voice of a lethal interlocutor, but will have to measure itself against the several, unpredicted and unpredictable, phases of ever new revelations that will confirm what Tiresias had anticipated. Even after the discovery that he is not the son of Polybus and Merope, and despite Iocasta's exit "in bitter pain" (1073-4), Oedipus will show that he still belongs to that linear temporality: a succession of discrete events among which he had already oriented his search. In fact, after learning about his own "low birth" (1079: *dysgeneia*), Oedipus will have to renounce genealogical temporality punctuated by a sequence of male ancestors, and instead avow that he is the child of Τύχη, something that the Greeks indicated by the feminine aoristic noun: 'Fortune', if personified, but strictly speaking 'whatever occurs' (*ho ti etyche*).<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> I have modified Lloyd-Jones' translation following Jebb's, in Sophocles 1902.

<sup>29</sup> Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Sophocles 1994a) translates Τύχη, deverbative from ἔτυχον, aorist of τυγχάνω ('happen to be at' and 'happen to one') as "event" (the 3rd person of the aorist, ἔτυχε = Lat. *evenit*), and not as 'Fortune' (Jebb, Sophocles 1902) or 'Chance' (Finglass, Sophocles 2018: 491); yet he prefers to emphasise "*She*", because of the feminine *tyche*. Lloyd-Jones' translation of *tyche* as "event" is clearly suggested by Diano 1968.

Although he aims at ‘learning all’ (1085: ἐκμαθεῖν) about his own birth, Oedipus will entrust his ‘honour’ (the *time* he alludes to at 1081) to the events following that birth, ordered in a measurable temporal sequence. He displays polemic indifference towards the point of origin – the ‘event’ of his birth – leaving its decodification to the elaborate mythography of the choral ode immediately following his words:

ἐγὼ δ’ ἐμαυτὸν παῖδα τῆς Τύχης νέμων  
 τῆς εὖ διδούσης οὐκ ἀτιμασθήσομαι.  
 τῆς γὰρ πέφυκα μητρός· οἱ δὲ συγγενεῖς  
 μῆνές με μικρὸν καὶ μέγαν διώρισαν.  
 τοιόσδε δ’ ἐκφύς οὐκ ἄν ἐξέλθοιμ’ ἔτι  
 ποτ’ ἄλλος, ὥστε μὴ ἐκμαθεῖν τοῦμὸν γένος.  
 (OT 1080-5)

[But I regard myself as child of the event / that brought good fortune, and shall not be dishonoured. / *She* is my mother; and the months that are my kin / have determined my smallness and my greatness. / With such a parent, I could never turn out / another kind of person, so as not to learn what was my birth. (Translator’s emphasis)]

The months (*menes*), that is, “the time scanned according to the social measure” (Sophocles 2007: 263-4), have accompanied him since his birth. That first ‘event’, however, is a mark laid on his entire life, which is made up of a sequence of favourable events he was granted with “good fortune”: one event was his own ‘epiphany’ when Thebes was besieged by the Sphinx; another event was his acquisition of a throne, which incorporated him into a dynasty; yet another event is, prospectively, the success he means to achieve now. The months have determined his being “small” and “great” according to age and the measure of fortune allowed by *Tyche* – with capital letter, but the small ‘t’ better suggests the idea of *tyche* as the origin of a chain of events and portions of time. Those months can in turn be defined and measured. Oedipus is inscribed – or thinks himself to be inscribed – within the measurable sequence of days and events in which his success unfolds. Doing in time is the constitutive feature of his personality, which no genealogical inquiry may ever disclaim, turning him into “an-

other kind of person” (1085: ἄλλος). Oedipus’ victory over the Sphinx defines the temporal series of the events according to a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ which Oedipus proves to be able to control. The remote past, which precedes Oedipus’ epiphany, is a temporal continuum marked by events – the last ones being the Sphinx’s crimes – whose causes the Thebans, little and overwhelmed just like “children” (*OT* 1, 6, 32, 58, 142, 147), have failed to grasp. They could say nothing about them to the one who was to save them, precisely as they are unable this very day to say anything about the murder of Laius (116-32). It is a time in which the events (*xymphorai*) seem to have neither cause nor remedy and therefore may have meaning only for people experienced (44: τοῖσιν ἐμπείροισι) in making decisions (45: τῶν βουλευμάτων), intellectually equipped to postulate causal relations between events.

Gregory Hutchinson opened his 1999 essay on *Sophocles and Time* on the premise that he would not deal with Sophocles’ conception of time, but that through an analysis of the different temporalities that can be structured in the play thanks to Greek grammar, he would instead study the “contrast between (roughly) single, decisive, final events, and continuous states and/or repeated attempts, which fall short of, or look forward, to completion and fulfilment”, moving from the “grammar of drama” to the “drama of grammar” (1999: 47). Hutchinson explained that this approach did not aim at connecting grammar and cognitive structures.<sup>30</sup> However, this “grammar”, used by both the playwright and his audience, although in different ways, undeniably allows the former to direct the latter’s perception of the events integrated within subjective perspectives. It unveils temporal and causal relations sometimes ‘ironically’ unknown to the characters. If we consider that perhaps these relations are not only deliberately concealed, but could also be unintentionally obliterated by the playwright, in turn reticent, analysing Sophocles is no less relevant than analysing Oedipus. If we return to our topic, we notice that Oedipus’ experience at Thebes is, so to speak, compressed between that initial point in time (what we called Oedipus’ epiphany

30 “[W]hat is envisaged is not . . . at all a matter of linking the grammar of a language to the frame of mind of its users” (Hutchinson 1999: 47).

ny) and the present event, the new *xymphora*. A broader time span will be disclosed to him as the only ‘true’ temporality only when he feels himself “abandoned by the gods” (*atheos*, 1360). However, until that moment of revelation, which will occur during his dialogue with the Messenger and the Shepherd (1110-85), Oedipus’ time maintains a peculiar dimension that differentiates it from that of the Thebans. His days scan the rational expectations and substantiate the perspective of a ‘non-tragic’ action quite different from the frequent “what shall I do?” (τί δράσω;) of the typically disoriented tragic hero.

### 3. A Non-Genealogical Epic: Backward Time

His ‘epic’ is unrooted in a genealogy: as Paduano has remarked, the similarity with Odysseus’ self-presentation in *Odyssey* 9, recalled above, allows one to grasp the main features of Oedipus’ own (Sophocles 1982: 427n2). First of all, the omission of the patronymic: while the former’s “I am Odysseus, son of Laertes” follows a conventional pattern, Oedipus declares his name – an *unicum* among the Sophoclean *prologizantes* (with the specific meaning of ‘first speakers’) – with no further addition. This silence cannot be attributed to his father’s identity having been contested in Corinth, the event that provoked his inquiry at Delphi (775-8). Nor can this be interpreted as a hint to the audience, whose mythological competence would have instead enjoyed an ironically tragic allusion to Polybus pronounced by Oedipus at the peak of his power as sovereign-saviour. On the contrary, as Paduano rightly commented on Oedipus’ “confiding” in Iocasta (771-833), it should be assigned to “the particular relation Oedipus has with his own past. . . . he himself has forgotten or, perhaps better, removed his own past and only provided this may the king be wise and charismatic” (Sophocles 1982: 476n45). A last remark before leaving the Theban Oedipus for the Athenian one: the reflective ability (*phrontis*) of Oedipus *tyrannos* entails a vision of linear time characterised by an origin close in time and orientation. As anticipated above, this vision is not genealogical: even when he seems to incline towards the past – if only by dreaming of it – Oedipus paradoxically lo-

cates himself at its origin. In a passage whose extreme ironic import was well-known to the ancients, he redraws the Theban dynasty. Yet, the very moment he decides to avenge Laius “as though he had been my father” (263-5: ὡσπερὶ τοῦμοῦ πατρός), he redraws it by implicitly starting from himself:

κάπι πάντ' ἀφίξομαι  
 ζητῶν τὸν αὐτόχειρα τοῦ φόνου λαβεῖν  
 τῷ Λαβδακείῳ παιδί Πολυδώρου τε καὶ  
 τοῦ πρόσθε Κάδμου τοῦ πάλαι τ' Ἀγήνορος.  
 (OT 265-8)

[(I) shall go to every length in searching for the author of the murder done upon the son of Labdacus (*scil.* Laius), sprung from Polydorus and from Cadmus before him and from Agenor long ago.]

Differently from the one which, spoken by Iocasta, opens Euripides' *Phoenician Women*,<sup>31</sup> this genealogy is not oriented towards a descending but an ascending line (as also in Herodotus 5.59, where however it is used only to date an epigraph). The genealogy sketched in *The Phoenician Women* presents the Cadmus-Polydorus-Labdacus-Laius sequence, and leaves out Agenor, the Egyptian father of the first Theban king, Cadmus. Pronounced by the Queen Mother, rather than a genealogy it seems aimed at sketching the royal dynasty in a phase in which the succession is being discussed. On the contrary, the Corinthian Oedipus, in spite of having the “power” (259: ἀρχαί)<sup>32</sup> once possessed by Laius, also includes in the genealogy its founder who never was king in Thebes, thus producing a peculiar symmetry between the actual sovereign, who is stranger to the Theban dynasty, and the foreign progenitor, who was never king of Thebes. He is confident that he belongs to a royal race, Polybus', and has not yet discovered his own “low birth” (*dysgeneia*: 1079). Nonetheless, he in-

31 *Phoe.* 5-9: Κάδμος ἦνικ' ἦλθε γῆν / τήνδ', ἐκλιπὼν Φοίνισσαν ἐναλίαν  
 χθόνα· / ὅς παῖδα γήμας Κύπριδος Ἀρμονίαν ποτὲ / Πολύδωρον ἐξέφυσε,  
 τοῦ δὲ Λάβδακον / φῦναι λέγουσιν, ἐκ δὲ τοῦδε Λάιον.

32 As he says *archai*, and not *kratos*, it would be more correct to translate as ‘sovereignty’. See Diano 1968 and 1994.

cludes himself within a virtual gallery of progenitors, arrogating to himself the right to acknowledge the whole ancestry, not starting with the dynasty's founder but with himself – with the only one who, ironically, has not been recognised as a descendant. On a first level, we can observe that the way he presents the genealogy confirms that he feels alien to this *genos*: he may redraw the genealogical line only because he is outside it. If however we move to a deeper level, we cannot but see that he not only considers himself as the vantage point from which to survey the whole dynasty, with the effect of producing a backwardly perspectival vertigo, but he also quite unconsciously formulates his own actual genealogy, and chooses to begin it from the moment of his own acquisition of sovereignty thanks to the exploits that have endowed him with κλέος. Although projected towards the past, this genealogy is grounded in a segment of time on which the Theban Oedipus maps his action, refounding the past on the present. The origin of that segment is oriented by the same Oedipus who is also its ending point: no-one can follow Oedipus after he eventually manages to master the genealogical time with this incorrect orientation. At 1201 the Chorus will recognise for the first time “[his] king” with words that echo line 8, where instead Oedipus proclaimed himself “renowned” for his deeds and called himself with no patronymic, thus excluding himself – as we have already seen – from all genealogy: “[o]nce you were called Oedipus, famous among all men [cf. 8: ὁ πᾶσι κλεινὸς Οἰδίππου καλούμενος] and now ‘you are called my king’ [βασιλεὺς καλῆ ἑμός]” (Knox 1979: 89). In the following lines of this *stasimon*, the “famous and beloved Oedipus” (1207: ἰὼ κλεινὸν Οἰδίπου κάρα) will be called to all effects the “son of Laius” (1216: ἰὼ Λαίειον <ῶ> τέκνον). Significantly, these two lyrical lines are in responsion (1207/1216: *dochmiac* + *iambus*). For Oedipus “the proof of his legitimacy is at the same time the exposure of his unspeakable pollution” (*ibid.*); yet we can go so far as to oppose the claustrophobic and incestuous introversion of *genos* to the apparent extroversion of walking in time.

#### 4. Time in *Oedipus at Colonus*

Gregory Hutchinson has rightly observed that “the experience . . . of Oedipus’ life of exile [is that of] a wandering beggar” (1999: 58). Yet we know nothing of the places where he has been, and in his first words, “Oedipus sees in ‘this day’ (3-4: καθ’ ἡμέραν / τὴν νῦν) mere repetition of a routine” (62). This routine, in which Antigone has accompanied her father, stands out against the backdrop of an irretrievable past, and is especially connoted in Oedipus’ description of his daughter’s life (345-52: ἐξ ὅτου . . . ἀεὶ . . . πολλά: “ever since . . . often”). Also Creon’s reproach for the poor living conditions which Oedipus ever and ever reserves for his daughter (746 and 750: ἀεὶ . . . ἀεὶ) contributes to delineating this long duration, that Oedipus synthesises in the few concise words with which he describes, in the exordium, his own existence: “my sufferings, and the time that has long been my companion (χρόνος ξυγών / μακρός), and thirdly my nobility teach me to be content with it” (7-8). Yet, his discovery of being in a place sacred to the Eumenides and, therefore, of having an unequivocal “token of [his] destiny” (46: συμφορᾶς ζύνθημ’ ἐμήης), contained in the Prologue, draws the contours of the long temporality that, oriented by higher powers, frames Oedipus’ experience as a beggar against the background of the routine of his daily life. Again, Hutchinson points out that “most fundamentally, the play sets the supreme event of the play, Oedipus’ death, against the long time which has preceded it” (1999: 60). We could imagine that this long duration coincides with the “earlier happiness” Oedipus and Iocasta had enjoyed, and whose distance in time the Second Messenger insistently underlined in *OT*: ὁ πρὶν (‘earlier’) παλαιός (‘of yore’) δ’ ὄλβος ἦν πάροιθε (‘formerly’) μὲν / ὄλβος δικαίως (1282).<sup>33</sup> However, it is Oedipus himself who expresses the idea of this “long time” (*chronos makros*) – not a merely predictable succession of days, but of a life-span corresponding to a superior design

<sup>33</sup> Jebb (Sophocles 1902) tries to render this sequence as follows: “the *old* happiness of their *ancestral* fortune was *afortetime* happiness indeed” (my emphasis).



– as soon as the Peasant of Colonus leaves (82), as if it were a secret truth not to be shared with strangers. The usual translation here is “long years”:

ὄς μοι, τὰ πόλλ' ἐκεῖν' ὄτ' ἐξέχρη κακά,  
ταύτην ἔλεξε παῦλαν ἐν χρόνῳ μακρῷ,  
ἐλθόντι χώραν τερμίαν,  
(OC 87-9)

[He (Phoebus) told me, when he predicted all that evil, that it should be my respite after long years, when I came to the land that was my final bourne (*chora termia*).]

And yet, rather than a mere succession of discrete temporal units, this is the time drawn by the prophecy, precisely as this “country” is the “last” one (trans. Fitzgerald: Sophocles 2013), not only because this is the place of Oedipus’ last day (*termia hemera*, as the Greeks called it), but because it is the day ‘appointed by destiny’, *eimarmene*, as the ancient *scholium* explains.<sup>34</sup> It fulfils Apollo’s prophecy, that part of it which Oedipus has not revealed to anyone yet (he has told it only to Antigone in Euripides’ *Phoenician Women* 1703-7; see above, p. 123). He had told Iocasta about the parricide and the incest (OT 787-93), but he had left this detail untold. The two parts of the prophecy entail two different reactions on the part of Oedipus, involving two different temporalities: the former, concerning the parricide and the incest, has required Oedipus’ desperate use of every available means to prevent its happening. He stayed away from Corinth both before becoming sovereign of Thebes and after the arrival of the Messenger and his announcement of Polybus’ death (OT 1007-13). The latter part has brought about blind Oedipus’ acceptance of being guided by somebody who, like him, relies on the information she may obtain from other wanderers (25). Today Oedipus can only proceed one step at a time (πρὸς ποσί) like the Thebans after the *xymphorai* that had afflicted them (OT 130-1), in the dark as to his next destination. Yet now he can rely on the fact that the last part of that prediction

34 Τερμίαν: αὐτῷ εἰμαρμένην, ἐφ’ ἧς ἔμελλε τὸ τέλος τοῦ βίου εὐρήσειν (de Marco 1952): “*termian*: the appointed day, on which he would have found his end”. εἰμαρμένη is etymologically connected with *moira*, ‘destiny’.

will eventually be fulfilled, and this perhaps represents for him the greatest support after Antigone.

In *OC* the long duration (*makros chronos*) is inextricably intertwined with Oedipus' "sufferings" (7: *pathai*) and with his own sense of guilt for "all that evil" predicted by the god (87: τὰ πολλ' ἐκεῖν[α] κακὰ). The exordium moves well beyond the self-representation of a noble and high-minded man (*gennaios*, see 8) who has learned endurance from old age and "sufferings" (7: πάθαι). At odds with Oedipus, in *OT* Creon affirms that

ἐν χρόνῳ γνώση τάδ' ἀσφαλῶς, ἐπεὶ  
χρόνος δίκαιον ἄνδρα δείκνυσιν μόνος,  
κακὸν δὲ κἂν ἐν ἡμέρᾳ γνοίης μῆ.  
(613-15)

[in course of time (*en chrono*) you (Oedipus) will learn this with certainty, since time (*chronos*) alone reveals the just man, but the traitor you can learn to know in a single day.]

In turn, Oedipus, whose impetuous mind opposes the cautious reflection suggested by Creon, retorts: ταχὺν δεῖ κάμῃ βουλευεῖν πάλιν (*OT* 619: "I also must plan quickly [against the secret conspirator, of whose existence he is convinced]). Yet, the time Oedipus finds himself to belong to, once close to the χαλκόπους ὁδός ("brazen-footed threshold": *OC* 57), is qualitatively different from both the mere succession of years, and the suggested caution with which Creon opposed the urgency and intolerance that goaded Oedipus during the plague. Both temporal dimensions are foreign to him. In his tirade against Creon (*OC* 969-73), he will prove to be fully aware of the whole sequence in which his own existence is inscribed now:

ἐπεὶ δίδαξον, εἴ τι θέσφατον πατρὶ  
χρησιμοῖσιν ἰκνεῖθ' ὥστε πρὸς παίδων θανεῖν,  
πῶς ἂν δικαίως τοῦτ' ὀνειδίζοις ἐμοί,  
ὃς οὔτε βλάστας πῶ γενεθλίους πατρός,  
οὐ μητρός εἶχον, ἀλλ' ἀγέννητος τότε ἦ;  
(*OC* 969-73)

[Why, tell me, if a prophecy (*thesphaton*) came to my father from the oracle that he should die at his children's hands, how could

you justly make that a reproach to me, who no father had begot,  
no mother conceived, but who was still (*tote*) unborn?]

“All that evil”, as Oedipus says in *OC* 87, was already ‘spoken by God’ (*thesphatos*) when Oedipus was still unconceived. It is not only a question of defining juridical responsibility, as is often repeated; what is involved here is the immeasurability of human experience against the temporal design of “the higher powers” (*daimones*), even when they delude us into believing that we may have intercourse (*synallagai*) with them (*OT* 34: the Thebans evaluate Oedipus πρῶτον . . . ἐν δαμόνων συναλλαγαῖς: “the first of men . . . in dealing with the higher powers”).

Oedipus’ towering over Thesesus when he explains to him the effects of time on men (*OC* 607-23) is already inscribed in this perspective. The analogy between these lines and the beginning of Ajax’s ‘deception speech’ has been noticed by Seaford (1994: 136-7) and underlined by Easterling (1999: 101):<sup>35</sup>

ὦ φίλτατ’ Αἰγέως παῖ, μόνοις οὐ γίγνεται  
θεοῖσι γῆρας οὐδὲ κατθανεῖν ποτε,  
τὰ δ’ ἄλλα συγχεῖ πάνθ’ ὁ παγκρατῆς χρόνος.  
φθίνει μὲν ἰσχύς γῆς, φθίνει δὲ σώματος,  
θνήσκει δὲ πίστις, βλαστάνει δ’ ἀπιστία,

...

καὶ ταῖσι Θήβαις εἰ τανῦν εὐήμερεῖ  
καλῶς τὰ πρὸς σέ, μυρίας ὁ μυρίος  
χρόνος τεκνοῦται νύκτας ἡμέρας τ’ ἰών,  
ἐν αἷς τὰ νῦν ξύμφωνα δεξιῶματα  
δῶρει διασκεδῶσιν ἐκ μικροῦ λόγου.  
(*OC* 607-11, 616-20)

[Dearest son of Aegeus, for the gods alone there is no old age and no death ever, but all other things are submerged by all-powerful time! The strength of the country perishes, so does the strength of the body, loyalty dies and disloyalty comes into being. . . . And if now all is sunny weather between Thebes and you, time as it passes brings forth countless nights and days in which they shall shatter with the spear the present harmonious pledges of a petty reason.]

35 Sophocles, *Aj.* 646-92, and especially 646-7. See also Guidorizzi (Sophocles 2008: 277-80) and Sophocles 2018: 350.

Oedipus relies on the gods' promise that he will not be "useless" (627: ἀχρεῖος) to Athens (628: εἴπερ μὴ θεοὶ ψεύδουσί με, "if the gods do not deceive me!"). Also the Chorus of Old Men of Colonus are aware of this: if the Old Thebans in *OT* express their regret at having met him, for the disorder he has produced in their lives and the compassion he has forced them to feel,<sup>36</sup> the Chorus of *OC* defines Oedipus' mundane experience from the edifying perspective of a fully realised life: ὀλβίως ἔλυ-/σεν τέλος, ᾧ φίλοι, βίου ("he resolved the end of life in happiness [ὀλβίως]", 1720-1). Yet *olbos*, it should be recalled, denotes a worldly happiness, and in fact it was meant as such in the words of the Second Messenger in *OT* 1282, when, as we have seen, he remembers the "earlier happiness" of Oedipus and Iocasta. But what *olbos* may await a hero who has deluded himself into believing in his own agency, and then, accused of parricide and incest, must reply that he has 'suffered the deed', not actively been responsible for it? An easy answer would refer to his political role: after failing as "preserver" (*soter*) of Thebes (as the Thebans had asked him to be for the second time, *OT* 48), now Oedipus – in accordance with his destiny – has become preserver of the city whose citizens are attending the theatrical celebration of Oedipus' own death. In this view, the eschatological perspective is one with Athens' ideology, a city torn by "civil strife" (*staseis*: 1234). It is probably an apology of Sophocles himself, appointed *proboulos* after the Sicilian defeat in 413 and promoter of the first tyranny of the Four Hundred, as well as an experiment in political theology. Although this may be argued, it may be more productive to adopt the paradoxical view suggested by archaic wisdom, the same that resounds in the third *stasimon* of *OC*:

μὴ φῦναι τὸν ἅπαντα νι-  
 κᾶ λόγον· τὸ δ', ἐπεὶ φανῆ,  
 βῆναι κείθεν ὅθεν περ ἦ-  
 κει πολὺ δεύτερον ὡς τάχιστα.  
 (1224-7)

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. *OT* 1216-17: ἰὼ Λαίειον <ᾧ> τέκνον, εἴθε σ' εἴθε σε μήποτ' εἰδομᾶν ("Ah, son of Laius, would that I had never set eyes on you!"), and then, slightly differently, at 1348.

[Not to be born comes first by every reckoning, and once one has appeared, to go back to where one came from as soon as possible is the next best thing.]

Soon after the thunder announces his forthcoming end, Oedipus prepares his daughters for it:

ὦ παῖδες, ἦκει τῶδ' ἐπ' ἀνδρὶ θέσφατος  
βίου τελευτή, κούκέτ' ἔστ' ἀποστροφή.  
(1472-3)

[Children, the end of life that was prophesied has come upon this man, and there is no way of putting it off.]

His time has come full circle (ἦκει). *Ouketi* (κ[αὶ] οὐκέτ[ι]) the awesomeness of this temporal adverb consists in expressing an awareness that human time is over, in fact implying that there is a time transcending human time, from which one comes (1226-7: ὄθεν περ ἦκει) and to which one then returns. If compared with this occurrence, the other famous use of *ouketi* in *OC* inescapably sounds limited and ironical: at 389-90 Ismene had referred that, according to the “latest prophecies” (387: τοῖς νῦν . . . μαντεύμασιν), σὲ τοῖς ἐκεῖ ζητητὸν ἀνθρώποις ποτὲ / θανόντ' ἔσσεσθαι ζῶντά τ' εὐσοίας χάριν (“you shall one day be sought by the people [of Thebes] in death and in life for their preservation’s sake”). The oracle contemplates the possibility that he may have this function in his lifetime, and slyly plays upon the memory of his past power (392: ἐν σοὶ τὰ κείνων φασὶ γίγνεσθαι κράτη, “they say that their power will depend on you”). Oedipus’ reply at 391 and 393,

τίς δ' ἂν τοιοῦδ' ὑπ' ἀνδρὸς εὖ πράξειεν ἄν;  
...  
ὄτ' οὐκέτ' εἰμί, τηνικαῦτ' ἄρ' εἴμ' ἀνήρ;

[And who could obtain success through such a man? / . . . / When (*hote*) I no longer (*ouketi*) exist, am I then a man?]

establishes a relation between different temporalities and not, as *hote* . . . *tenikauta* at *OT* 76, between overlapping stages of the same temporality. Here he does not consider his own physical death, but his own symbolic death and the irony of suddenly be-

ing recognised once again as symbolically ‘alive’ after Apollo’s recent prophecy (411-15) about his ‘usefulness’ for the city. This is at the same time cynical and ironical: cynical, in view of the contrast between his exalted *epos* in *OT* and his present condition of ‘no-more-a-man’; tragically ironical with regard to his role as “preserver” he will actually fulfil only when dead and for a different city: Athens. It is especially ironical that the oracle prophesises the need of this no-more-a-man for settling the brotherly contest over Thebes. His statement is a rejection of the acceptance of Apollo’s prophecy and of re-entering a temporality he had belonged to with a foundational function in *OT*, precisely as is required of him now, on the threshold of his physical death. Going back to Thebes would also include the burial of his body within the city and his symbolic reintegration into its temporality. But Oedipus is beyond it. No longer ‘existent’, he is finally ready to move outside time altogether: to the timeless temporality of divine transcendence beyond doing and suffering.

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