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

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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

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Oedipus at Colonus as a Reflection of the *Oresteia*: The Abomination from Thebes as an Athenian Hero in the Making

Anton Bierl

Abstract

Sophocles bases his posthumous *Oedipus at Colonus* on the famous treatment of the transformation of the Furies to the Kindly Ones in *Eumenides*, the last play of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* that has gained the status of a master-play. Accordingly Sophocles shapes the plot and its main character on a cultic reality and on the ritual concept of chthonic heroes and gods. The Erinyes/Eumenides, to whose grove Oedipus arrives, function as the model for Sophocles' most questionable hero. Their quintessential polarity between the dreadful dimension of death and euphemistic names to veil it, between mythic scenarios of anger, curse, hate as well as cultic blessing and plenty is the basic pattern of a play that stages Oedipus as a chthonic hero in the making. He acts right from the beginning as the hero he is going to become. Sophocles makes Oedipus oscillate between staging a real mystic miracle and a problematic manipulation of religious facts in order to take revenge on his Theban homeland by finding support from his new city of Athens. This open perspective involves the audience in thinking about what really happened and reflecting about the relation between ritual, religion, politics, and their manipulations by men for their own purposes. In this way it comes quite close to Euripides' *Bacchae* written about the same time. *OC* is thus in many respects like a metatheatrical exploration of the constitutive gap of signifier and signified to be gradually closed by the blind director who gathers, like the blind and unwitting audience, the piecemeal information divulged as the play progresses.

Keywords: Oedipus; Sophocles; Erinyes; Eumenides; *Oresteia*; chthonic polarity; heroization; cultic hero in the making; Kolonos as tumulus; metatheatre; oracles; manipulation; curse; blessing; military support; indeterminacy; narratological strategy; mimesis; politics; mystery; religious and metatheatrical exploration

Introduction

Oedipus at Colonus is a very special play. The oneiric and almost musical quality of the episodic sequence about the old, blind vagrant, the banished *miasma*, and his mysterious end on Attic soil makes the play a choral oratorio with little tragic action or suspense, an example of a pre-dramatic poetics (see Bierl 2010). This dreamlike atmosphere has led to many influential interpretations in the 19th century, when the play was regarded as the culmination of tragedy, transcending the tragic. Hegel and many followers read *OC* as a solemn reconciliation of tragic tensions or even an almost Christian transfiguration as the debased hero in *Oedipus Tyrannus* is slowly raised to a heroic status that ends in an apotheosis (summary in Bernard 2001: 11-21; Lefèvre 2001: 217-18; Billings 2013; on the intertextual model Seidensticker 1972; Van Nortwick 1998; Bernard 2001: 58-83; Kelly 2009: 45-50). Even Nietzsche regarded Oedipus in *OC* both as a serene, still almost romantic transfiguration and even more as an embodiment of the heroic superhuman, the *Übermensch*, enduring all the evils of humanity and standing above them (1972 [1872]: 62 = KSA 1.66). Some saw in the tired old man a second Lear defeated by sufferings and human ingratitude since both fall from the pinnacle of power to a very low status (e.g. Pratt 1965; Shatro 2014; Lucking 2017: 103-24). Oedipus in *OT* has been long seen as a man in the maw of destiny, the emblem of human existence, the embodiment of human endeavour to know or the emblem of a man driven by his instincts in Freudian terms. He then served as a model for structural analysis. Finally critics detected his *hamartiai* in an Aristotelian sense: he is unable to recognize himself (Flashar 2000: 108-9; Lefèvre 2001: 119-22; Bernard 2001: 21-38). His negative traits are increasingly more emphasized culminating in the characterization of an egocentric *tyrannos* in a political and psychological sense (Flaig 1998). This pejorative characterization has, of course, also some bearing on his image in the second play in which Sophocles, shortly before his own death, takes up the theme after a quarter of a century. After this Wolfgang Bernard (2001) represents the extreme position, arguing that Oedipus is driven by totally negative forc-

es; nothing remains from the picture of a final transfiguration and heroization. The protagonist is simply a negative character who finally leads his campaign of hatred against his Theban family. Even the oracles seem to be dubious. Men have their free will, the gods do not order him to die in Colonus this way, but only predict this end in a neutral form. Therefore his motives, enforced by the sophistic means of rhetoric, would have to be judged as entirely negative. So, for this reason, he manipulated the oracles for his own evil purposes (Bernard 2001: esp. 83-103).

Although this harsh judgment is too extreme, the most ambivalent features of Oedipus' character are rather obvious (on *OT*, see Vernant 1990; on the in-between status in *OC*, see Vidal-Naquet 1990).

1. Oedipus' Heroization in Colonus

Be that as it may, neither humanist nor psychological readings in positive or negative keys seem to be appropriate to do justice to this late play. In the following I wish to focus on the religious and cultic as well as on the political background and the narrative realisation by Sophocles. Heroization is a dominant theme of *OC* acknowledged by many critics.[1] As Bruno Currie says: "*OC* is forthcoming on 'thick' description of Oedipus' heroization (what it meant to the parties concerned), but reticent on 'thin' description (the external trappings of the cult)" (2012: 339). There is a veil of mysterious secrecy about betraying too many details. Sophocles is not interested in staging a sacred play about a hero comparable to a Christian saints' play (Currie 2012: 343), but in showing how cultic and ritual elements have political underpinnings and consequences. He departs from the fact that Colonus, his home deme located three km north of the centre of Athens, on the outskirts close to the Academia, hosts a cult of Oedipus. He shares the sacred space with Poseidon Hippios, Athena, Adrastus, and the heroes Peirithous and Theseus (Paus. 1.30.4). Oedipus has also a cul-

1 See e.g. Rohde 1898: 2.244-5; Vidal-Naquet 1990: 350 and 490n69; Edmunds 1996: 95-100; Currie 2012: 337-42; Calame 1998; Kowalzig 2006: 82; Kelly 2009: 79-85; Nagy 2013: 497-524.

tic dwelling on the famous Areopagus in the centre of Athens together with the Semnai (The Revered Ones), the positive side of the Erinyes (Paus. 1.28.5-6).[2] We know about the Erinyes as Semnai Theai from Aeschylus' famous treatment in *Eumenides*. In the Sophoclean scenario, Colonus, the Hill of Horses (Hippeios Kolonos), is a holy grove, the entrance of the Underworld where most importantly the Semnai/Eumenides possess a cult. The connection with the Erinyes, here called Eumenides, the Benevolent or Kindly Ones – the conflation of the Semnai with the Erinyes turned to Eumenides, which were not explicitly named in the last play of the *Oresteia*, is Aeschylus' ritual construct based on Greek religious thought (Sommerstein 1989: 11; Henrichs 1994: 46-54) – seems not fictitious or invented by the author (Scullion 1999-2000: 231-2), but is based on the cultic reality of the deme as well. The cult in the deme mirrors the constellation of the cult on the Areopagus in the city. Perhaps the cult on the Hill of Colonus was imported from the Areopagus. Nonetheless, Sophocles makes use of the religious idea that chthonian demons are working on the principle of polarity and are thus highly ambiguous. This was also the basis of Aeschylus' dramatic construct (Henrichs 1983; Lloyd-Jones 1990; Henrichs 1991; Henrichs 1994: esp. 46-58; Geisser 2002: 381-90; see also Brown 1984, however neatly and artificially he separates the Erinyes from the Eumenides/Semnai). Oedipus is notoriously associated with wrath and Erinys (Aesch. *Sept.* 914, 1004; Soph. *Ant.* 899-902), which, particularly in the plural form Erinyes, also originally functioned as the personification of the abstract concept of revenge. Moreover, Herodotus reports that the Spartan Aegeidai dedicated a sanctuary to the Erinyes of Laius and Oedipus as ordered by the priests of Delphi (4.149.2). The Eumenides share their sacred grove in Colonus not only with Demeter and Poseidon, but also with Prometheus, Dionysus, the Muses, and Aphrodite (39-63, 668-719).

Sophocles displays Oedipus arriving at his final destination of Colonus and stage-managing his own heroization. After the expulsion from Thebes the blind and vagrant beggar, the emblem

2 Henrichs 1994: 39-46; on the parallelism between Oedipus and the Erinys, see Edmunds 1981: 225-9.

of abomination, continues to act in the way he did in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, like an egocentric and polluted tyrant. *Kolonos*, having the meaning of 'tumulus', is the ideal place of his burial. As shining White Rock (cf. 670) and 'landmark', the 'tumulus' Kolonos is personified by the eponymous hero Kolonos (59). It also becomes a deme (Nagy 2013: 497-506). The Bronze-Step Threshold (χαλκόπους ὀδός, 57) is another landmark, the entrance, foundation, support, and bulwark (*ereisma*) of Athens (ἔρεισμ' Ἀθηνῶν, 58) and, in extension, of all Attica. Theseus, the idealized king, unified the different demes into a political entity in the so-called *synoikismos*. It is evident that Colonus is a utopian sacred space (Rodighiero 2012; Saïd 2012; Reitzammer 2018: 113-19 [as a 'theoric' space]) to reflect upon Athens and Attica in their mythical past in an ideal manner. It combines different cults and opposing religious powers. Chthonic gods of the Earth – all having to do with vitality, power, death, and renewal in vegetation – possess a common dwelling with Olympian gods. In particular, Poseidon and Athena share the sanctuary, their rivalry for the control of the city being resolved in harmony on the Acropolis. Colonus is mostly a place of galloping horses (Nagy 2013: 502-5), the animals of death and cosmic power (Malten 1914). Poseidon and Athena who are associated with them (Burkert 1985: 138, 221) also personify the military strength of Athens, its cavalry, fleet, and standing army.

In the period of *OC*'s composition shortly before 406 BCE, Athens was in a desperate situation at the end of the Peloponnesian war. After the successes in the aftermath of Alcibiades' return (411-408), especially in Cyzicus (410), followed by the defeat of the fleet in Notion (407), which led to his second exile, and the problematic victory at the Arginousae (406) Athens was exasperated. Only miracles could help.

One inspiration for the topographical scenario and the conflict with Thebes was a miraculous victory by the Athenians over the Theban cavalry at Colonus in 407. Moreover, in this case autobiographical facts could also have influenced the choice of Colonus. At the close of his life, Sophocles, himself associated with a hero cult of Dexion (*Bios* 17; Currie 2012: 343), probably identified and conflated himself notionally with Oedipus, the emblem of his career since *Oedipus Tyrannus*, ending his life in the sacred

soil of his deme of birth. Moreover, as many scholars, among others William Calder III (1985) (see Rodighiero 2012: 74-5; Ugolini 2000: 65-82, esp. 216-20) attempt to argue, he perhaps alludes to the events of 411 when Sophocles as *proboulos* convened a decisive meeting at Colonus in which important decisions were made that led to the oligarchic rule of the Four Hundred. Perhaps feeling guilty and defending himself against the charges of having helped abolish democracy between 413 and 411, he partially reflects these events and his upcoming end on this mythical scenario at a very sublimated level. Somehow, as is argued, he could be of service for his country even after his death. However, this would be more a cynical hope. The atmosphere of the "absurdity of violence" (Burkert 1974) was dominant in the last years of tragic representation on the stage of the Theatre of Dionysus. Sophocles staged a similar scenario of the outcast recalled in service of society in *Philoctetes* (409). The cynical violence came even more to the fore in Euripides' *Phoenissae* (411-409) where at the very end Oedipus' death at Colonus is announced (1705-7),[3] and in *Orestes*, where the fusion of the Eumenides with the Erinyes is vital. Therefore a total idealization in *OC* is barely conceivable and so a biographical reading is rather unlikely. Sophocles, on the contrary, seems to stage Oedipus' heroization by associating him and his Theban opponents with scenarios of evil manipulations, rhetoric sophism, and violence. To some degree, Oedipus' self-declaration of his magic powers appears as if Athens fell prey to a vain last hope.

It becomes evident that Sophocles is not staging a tragedy about heroization in the faithful manner comparable to that obtaining in saints' plays (Currie 2012: 343) but rather as a possibility of triggering reflections about the larger political and social situation in the audience on the level of myth and ritual. Sophocles uses a familiar pattern – supplication and asylum combined with final heroization – to display tensions, ambivalent intentions, questionable motivations, and their dire consequences. *OC* is thus not a tragedy which intends to stage heroization for its own sake,

3 The authenticity of Eur. *Phoe.* 1703-7 is not secure at all; see Kamerbeek 1984: 2; Mastronarde 1994: 626; Edmunds 1996: 98; Ugolini 2000: 217; Kelly 2009: 144n16.

to idealize and stylize Oedipus, or, in an allegorical manner, perhaps its author Sophocles or Athens. The tragedian clearly displays Oedipus in his progress towards heroization after death. However, the hero in the making is showcased in a rather controversial manner, since he becomes the chthonic hero of dual forces, that is to say blame and blessing (Hester 1977: esp. 32-3; Blundell 1989: 226-59). Moreover, to reach this goal of harming his enemies and becoming a saviour, he needs Theseus, the saviour and he too uses manipulation.

Sophocles, in addition, uses the quintessential dichotomy between Thebes and Athens. Thebes as the Other is the tragic location par excellence, whereas Athens serves as the Self and is rarely used as the scenario (Zeitlin 1990). One exception is Aeschylus' famous *Eumenides*, the last part of his *Oresteia*. This trilogy has become something like the founding and master-play of later Greek tragedy. There is evidence for a re-staging of the trilogy in the 420s (e.g. Newiger 1961: 427-9), a unique exception in the competitions where a tragedy was only performed for a single occasion in a specific year. These re-performances may possibly have inspired Euripides to write his *Orestes* (408 BCE), exactly half a century after the *Oresteia*. In this vain, I argue that the transformation of the Erinyes to the Semnai and their integration into the clefts of the Areopagus, where Oedipus too has a cultic dwelling, serves as the principal model for Sophocles. Aeschylus' Athena makes use of the polarity of the dual chthonic forces and manipulates them to use their benevolent aspect for the blessing of Athens, and their malignant capacity to curse and harm to deter enemies. Aeschylus thus neatly splits their ambivalent effect along the friend-foe axis, using the benevolent aspect for the well-being of Athens in association, the malevolent for defence against the enemy in dissociation (Meier 1980: 207-22). Oedipus as Erinys and the power to curse suits the Erinyes perfectly. Scholarship has appreciated Sophocles' metapoetic awareness and intertextual play with the tragic tradition in *OC* (Ringer 1998: 90-9; Dunn 2012). It is as if the mastermind of tragedy plays with and alludes to many tragedies: to mention only a few, Aeschylus' *Septem* and the *Oedipodeia*, the *Oresteia*, his own *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Antigone*, and *Aias*, and Euripides' *Phoenissae*, *Orestes*, and *Iphigenia among the Taurians*;

moreover, we should not forget the suppliant plays, in particular Aeschylus' and Euripides' *Suppliants*.

Sophocles thus uses local religious traditions, cult reality, and the inherent polarity of any chthonic god, here especially of the Semnai Theai (The Revered or August Goddesses) situated on the Areopagus (Henrichs 1994: esp. 46-50; Kelly 2009: 71-4). At the same time he departs from Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and the short allusion to Apollo's announcement of Oedipus' end in *Phoenissae* (1703-7). The presence of Semnai Theai in Colonus, not mentioned in Pausanias (1.30.4), is not an invention of Sophocles either, as new epigraphical evidence demonstrates. The missing link is a terracotta roof-tile (*SEG* 38, 1988: no. 265) found at Colonus with the inscribed letters ΣΕΜΝΩΝ ΘΕΩΝ (Catling 1989: 13).

The decisive marker for an intertextual allusion to Aeschylus' *Eumenides* is the fact that the Goddesses in the grove will be addressed as the Benevolents (Eumenides, 42-3), perhaps an unofficial designation both in Colonus and on the Areopagus for the Semnai. Actually this cult name does not appear anywhere in *Eumenides* – although many critics believe the explicit renaming of the Erinyes to Eumenides took place in the lacuna of Athena's final words (after *Eum.* 1028; see now West 1998: 396, after the hypothesis, ibid.: 341, and Harpocration 140.13 Dindorf) – and is introduced only in the title and additional information through the manuscripts. The title thus does not seem to be Aeschylean (Sommerstein 1989: 11-12; *pace* Lloyd-Jones 1990: 209). I assume that it was introduced in the 420s, when the re-performance took place, influencing the reception through Sophocles and Euripides. However, it is obvious that Aeschylus himself had the polarity of Erinyes/Eumenides already in mind (Henrichs 1991: 167n13; Henrichs 1994: 52 with n. 124; see also note 4).

2. The Use of Chthonic Polarity in *OC*: A Reading of the Play

Let us take a glance at the beginning of *OC*: Sophocles, using the polarities of the Furies in *Oresteia*, conceives his Oedipus as if he has stumbled on this great idea of becoming a chthonic hero himself, on the model of the Furies/Benevolent Ladies-dichotomy

(see Lardinois 1992).[4] I argue that at first Oedipus is not following a plan Apollo made previously and then ordered him to carry out. Yet as Lowell Edmunds (1981: 229) with many others has seen rightly – and it must be emphasized even more – we can detect a "proleptic" tendency in regard to Oedipus future status as a hero. "Oedipus is already the chthonic hero he will become". From the very beginning he assumes traits of the cult which he cannot possibly know. Somehow this comes close to a metatragic reflection about Oedipus' obsession with knowing. He is a blind, vagrant beggar, a *planatas* (πλανάτας, 124) and *aletes* (ἀλήτην, 50; cf. 949), without orientation. No information is given to him or to the audience in advance, e.g. in the form of a prologue by a god. Yet Oedipus already asks Antigone, who leads her old father, about a seat either in profane territory (βεβήλοις from *baino*, "allowable to be trodden" [LSJ, s.v.], that is, it is appropriate for uninitiated persons [Burkert 1985: 86, 269]) or in sacred groves of Gods (ἄλσεσιν θεῶν) (9-10). It is, as Francis Dunn (2012: 368-74, esp. 371) rightly argues, like a metatheatrical exploration of how space can gradually assume meaning. The sacred space is later defined as an *alsos* of Goddesses (θεῶν), that is to say the Eumenides, and therefore it is *astibes* (ἀστιβές, 126) and *abaton* (675), not to be trodden. Antigone answers that she sees a sacred location nearby (χῶρος δ' ὅδ' ἱερός, 16). She realizes this from its appearance, laurel, oil, wine, and from the sound of the nightingales (16-18) – the bird of lamentation, death, of the Athenian Procne, associated with tragic murder due to sexual offence against her sister. Indeed, there is a seat of rock where he can rest. Antigone recognizes Athens from afar, but she does not know the specific place where they

4 See also Kelly 2009: 72 citing Winnington-Ingram 1980: 275: "is it too much to say that Oedipus earns his status as a chthonian power by acting like the unpersuaded Furies of the *Oresteia*?". As a 'separationist' – the Eumenides/Semnai are not identical with the Erinyes (Brown 1984: 276-81; *pace* Lloyd-Jones 1990: esp. 203-4, 208-9, 211; Henrichs 1991: 167n13; Henrichs 1994: 52 with n. 124) – Brown (1984: 276) denies the influence. See also Sommerstein 1989: 12. On the relation Erinyes-Eumenides in *OC*, see Winnington-Ingram 1980: 264-8; Edmunds 1996: 139-40. On an intertextual relation of *OC* with the *Oresteia* in general, see Markantonatos 2007: 201-2 and Haselswerdt 2019: 633, on differences: 634-5.

have stopped (24). Oedipus is in fact trespassing on a sacred space without observing the ritual prohibitions. After his expulsion from Thebes, the blind, vagrant beggar, emblem of abomination, continues to act like a self-centred and polluted tyrant full of *hybris*. Just as he is in *OT* he is eager to know: in this case the name of the place that he had entered. He calls the Stranger "a scout of what we are in doubt to solve and speak . . ." (σκοπὸς προσήκεις ὧν ἀδηλοῦμεν φράσαι, 35). The Stranger interrupts him: "Now, before you question me at length, leave this seat. You occupy ground which is unholy to tread upon (χῶρον οὐχ ἁγνὸν πατεῖν)" (36-7). It is a sacred place of purity, an *alsos agnon*, as it is in Sappho fr. 2 V. (Bierl 2019: 41-55, esp. 45). It is thus ritually forbidden to trespass on it, as a taboo boundary is drawn around the pure. *Hagnon* is the opposite of *miaron*, defiled and abominable. It implies the inviolate boundary of a "field of forces" or "a protective cloak which no indignity can penetrate", thus an inner psychic attitude against sexuality, blood, and death (Burkert 1985: 271). *Agos*, the defiled, is the opposite of *hagnon*. To exclude and drive out *agos*, the abominable murder, means to be *hagnon* (Burkert 1985: 81).

Oedipus continues questioning (38-43):

ΟΙ. τίς δ' ἔσθ' ὁ χῶρος; τοῦ θεῶν νομίζεται;
ΞΕ. ἄθικτος οὐδ' οἰκητός. αἱ γὰρ ἔμφοβοι
θεαί σφ' ἔχουσι, Γῆς τε καὶ Σκότου κόραι. 40
ΟΙ. τίνων τὸ σεμνὸν ὄνομ' ἂν εὐξαίμην κλυών;
ΞΕ. τὰς πάνθ' ὁρώσας Εὐμενίδας ὅ γ' ἐνθάδ' ἂν
εἴποι λεώς νιν· ἄλλα δ' ἀλλαχοῦ καλά.

[OEDIPUS And what is this ground? To which of the gods is it sacred? STRANGER Ground inviolable, on which no one may dwell. The dread (40) goddesses hold it, the daughters of Earth and Darkness. OEDIPUS Who are they? Whose awful name might I hear and invoke in prayer? STRANGER The all-seeing Eumenides the people here would call them: but other names please elsewhere.][5]

Oedipus, eager to know and to rest, does not obey. The answer

5 All translations are after Jebb 1889, the Sophoclean text is cited after Lloyd Jones and Wilson 1990.

repeats the taboo; one should neither violate nor dwell on this ground. Oedipus will soon dwell on it, i.e. in a cultic union with the Goddesses. They are called ἔμφοβοι (39), frightful, and they are daughters of Earth, Night, and Darkness. These attributes recall the Erinyes in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. First the Stranger leaves them as anonymous beings. Out of caution of their chthonic dark aspect people avoid addressing them with any name. In Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians* (944) Orestes speaks about the Erinyes indeed as ἀνώνυμοι θεαί. As such they cannot receive any cult (Henrichs 1994: esp. 37-8). Anonymity will be an issue as well, having to do to with awe, silence, and secrecy. However, another strategy is to address the dreadful divine beings with euphemistic names so that the negative dimension cannot affect one. Sophocles plays out the intrinsic polarity of these chthonian goddesses who can be worshipped in their positive aspect (Lloyd-Jones 1990: esp. 209; Henrichs 1991: esp. 176-8; Henrichs 1994: esp. 36-9). Thus Oedipus demands to know "the revered name" (τὸ σεμνὸν ὄνομ', 41). By doing so he again implicitly alludes to their name Semnai (Henrichs 1994: 48-50). At this point, as a surprise, the Stranger calls them Eumenides, as the people here do (42). The use of this name is a clear reference to Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. It is the euphemistic side of the dual polarity. Sophocles understands the religious principle of chthonic gods. They are dreadful, but for the purpose of euphemism one addresses them in positive terms (Lloyd-Jones 1990: 207, 209; Henrichs 1991: 176-8). In other places they have other good, euphemistic names, especially on the Areopagus, as they are usually called the Semnai. By alluding so directly to the *Oresteia*, I contend, the dual nature of the Furies comes to the fore. Athena's strategy consisted in placating and appeasing the negative chthonic forces by making them aware of their positive side: it is the famous shift from curse to blessing, from anger to benevolence, from ruin to growth, from hunger to plenty. Moreover, I argue that – at least the opposite is not otherwise explicitly stated – this polarity between the dreadful Furies and the Benevolent Ladies taken from the *Oresteia* provides Oedipus with the idea of becoming a chthonian hero just like the Semnai and sharing with them a common cult. Trespassing on the sacred space of the Eumenides, he experiences their other

side as terrible Furies against the intruder from outside. Realizing this ambivalence, in my opinion, Oedipus does everything to install himself as a similar power in Athens. Antigone's mentioning Athens (24) serves as a signal for him to stop his long period as wanderer. It is like stumbling onto the right path. He perhaps remembers Apollo's long-ago prophecy that he would die in Athens (Eur. *Phoe.* 1703-7, esp. 1705), although it is debated whether it had been added on the basis of Sophocles (Kamerbeek 1984: 2). In this case Sophocles would perhaps have Oedipus make up the oracle.[6] Antigone's reference to πύργοι (14) perhaps alludes to *pyrgos Atthidos*, the Attic citadel (Eur. *Phoe.* 1706), or, if the passage in Euripides' *Phoenissae* is added later, it is taken from *OC* (14). In *Phoenissae* Oedipus then vaguely mentions holy Colonus, the dwelling of the horse god (Eur. *Phoe.* 1707) as the endpoint of his wanderings without saying anything about his cult. We can only speculate about who would be able to recognize this allusion in the audience. Be that as it may, in *OC* Oedipus feels his end approaching, perhaps having somehow Athens and Colonus in mind. Or the idea may simply have come to him spontaneously. Hearing about the holy nature and the cultic owners of the sanctuary he could have suddenly been inspired to become a chthonic hero and to join forces with the Erinyes/Eumenides. Unconsciously penetrating their sacred space, he is already, to some extent, part of them. Therefore he decides not to leave the place, his future cultic seat (*hedra*), anymore, but to supplicate them to grant him asylum by integrating him into their cult (44-6):

ΟΙ. ἀλλ' ἵλεῳ μὲν τὸν ἱκέτην δεξαίατο·
ὡς οὐχ ἕδρας γε τῆσδ' ἂν ἐξέλθοιμ' ἔτι. 45
ΞΕ. τί δ' ἐστὶ τοῦτο; ΟΙ. ξυμφορᾶς ξύνθημ' ἐμῆς.

[OEDIPUS Then graciously may they receive their suppliant! (45) Nevermore will I depart from my seat in this land. STRANGER What does this mean? OEDIPUS The watchword of my fate.]

6 However, I would not subscribe to Scullion's thesis that Sophocles even invented the existence of the sanctuary of Oedipus in Colonus, "linking Sophokles' greatest tragic hero with his home town" (1999-2000: 232). Bernard (2001: 83-97) believes in the existence of the oracle, but argues that Oedipus manipulates it against Apollo's good intentions.

Oedipus stylizes this auditory information as the *synthema* (ξύνθημ', 46; cf. 1594), the mystic password to end his misery (see also Haselswerdt 2019: 617-20). He has discovered the ticket to his new cultic status as hero. The pious stranger knows that he cannot oppose this without consent of the polis (47-8). And finally Oedipus receives a more detailed introduction to the place (53-63). He learns the place is called Colonus (59) after his eponymous horse-rider. And he wishes to see the king of the land, promising a benefit for the small service (72). His speech becomes increasingly riddling. To the question what gain could come from a blind man, Oedipus replies: "All that I speak I will speak as all-seeing" (ὅσ' ἂν λέγωμεν πάνθ' ὁρῶντα λέξομεν, 74), taking up the attribute "all-seeing" of the Eumenides (42) that the Stranger had used. He is like them: seeing everything, they can punish all crimes and bestow blessing as positive justice. Alone on stage, he finally addresses a prayer to the "Ladies of dread aspect" (πότνιαι δεινῶπες, 84) (84-110). Now we finally hear for the first time about Apollo's oracle of Oedipus' end at Colonus (87-95).[7] But we cannot be definitely sure that Apollo had really predicted his cultic integration into the cult of the Semnai. *Hedran labein* (cf. 90) is an ambivalent expression, since it refers to a seat in his final destination, but also, in a mystic sense, to a cult common with the Goddesses. Oedipus starts addressing them as follows (84-95):

ὦ πότνιαι δεινῶπες, εὖτε νῦν ἕδρας
πρώτων ἐφ' ὑμῶν τῆσδε γῆς ἔκαμψ' ἐγώ,
Φοίβῳ τε κἀμοὶ μὴ γένησθ' ἀγνώμονες,
ὅς μοι, τὰ πόλλ' ἐκεῖν' ὅτ' ἐξέχρη κακά,
ταύτην ἔλεξε παῦλαν ἐν χρόνῳ μακρῷ,
ἐλθόντι χώραν τερμίαν, ὅπου θεῶν
σεμνῶν ἕδραν λάβοιμι καὶ ξενόστασιν,
ἐνταῦθα κάμψειν τὸν ταλαίπωρον βίον,
κέρδη μὲν οἰκήσαντα τοῖς δεδεγμένοις,
ἄτην δὲ τοῖς πέμψασιν, οἵ μ' ἀπήλασαν·
σημεῖα δ' ἥξειν τῶνδέ μοι παρηγγύα,
ἢ σεισμόν, ἢ βροντήν τιν', ἢ Διὸς σέλας.

7 On the oracle in a narratological, proleptic perspective, see Markantonatos 2012: 118-19.

> [Ladies of dread aspect, since your seat is (85) the first in this land at which I have bent my knee, show yourselves not ungracious to Phoebus or to myself; who, when he proclaimed that doom of many woes, spoke to me of this rest after long years: on reaching my goal in a land where I should find a seat of the Awful Goddesses (90) and a shelter for foreigners, there I should close my weary life, with profit, through my having fixed my abode there, for those who received me, but ruin for those who sent me forth, who drove me away. And he went on to warn me that signs of these things would come, (95) in earthquake, or in thunder, or in the lightning of Zeus.]

It seems as if Oedipus draws on the first introduction about the goddesses' dichotomy (39-43), but he bends the argument in a new direction. He redirects the friend-foe relation, according to Carl Schmitt (1932), in respect to how people receive him (Meier 1980: 207-22). With the prayer based on Apollo's word Oedipus underlines his supplication with the typical promise of profit and the threats in case the *hiketeia* were unsuccessful. He is already almost certain that Athens will incorporate him. But in his dual chthonic power he recognizes now a means for a late revenge against his Theban family who drove him as a *miasma* out of Thebes many years ago. He starts organizing and manipulating the double-edged potential along the Thebes-Athens axis. Therefore he will not only be a power in family matters but a factor of political and military significance. The exiled Theban will harm his former motherland and his enemies and bestow blessing on his new home and friends who gives him asylum (Hester 1977; Blundell 1989: 226-59). Oedipus adds that Apollo predicted signs of earthquakes, thunder, and lightning to indicate the heroization (94-6). As perfect rhetorician Oedipus knows how to impress the audience – the chorus is approaching – with religious miracles. After all it remains ambiguous whether the entire progressive heroization is a divine plan from the beginning or whether he spontaneously fabricates the oracle in order to make his voluntary integration really happen. He praises the Ladies as if they led him into their *alsos* on his dream-like walk. Assimilating himself with the marginality of the Eumenides/Erinyes, Oedipus highlights how he

could find them almost automatically, coming in sobriety to the Wineless Goddesses (100);[8] again the poor beggar who cannot afford to drink wine anticipates his status of cult hero who will receive wineless libations (Guidorizzi 2008: 223-4). Thus he reinterprets all he did as divine providence.

The entering chorus judge Oedipus, whom they cannot yet see, as a sacrilegious intruder from abroad, a "wanderer, not a dweller in the land" (πλανάτας . . . οὐδ' / ἔγχωρος, 124-5), into a "grove not to be trodden" (ἀστιβὲς ἄλσος, 126). The choral members of Colonus highlight the opposite view of the polarity: Oedipus is a criminal, and the chthonic Goddesses are dreadful, terrible, "maidens with whom none may strive" (127).

Accordingly they stress their fear to get in direct contact with them. They are afraid to call them by their chthonic name as Erinyes (ἃς τρέμομεν λέγειν, 128). They pass by without looking at them (παραμειβόμεσθ' ἀδέρκτως, 129-30), "moving their lips, without sound or word (ἀφώνως, ἀλόγως, 131),[9] emitting a sound that utters good-sounding thought (τὸ τᾶς εὐφήμου στόμα φροντίδος ἱέντες, 132-3)" (translation changed). This expression also implies both the appropriate attitude towards them and the avoidance of calling them by their dangerous names as well as the potential utterance of their names in euphemistic tones as Eumenides (128-33) (Gödde 2011: 203-34, esp. 208-9).

When Oedipus comes out of his hiding place to have his epiphany, they are terrified of the man "*deinos*, fearful, to see and hear" (δεινὸς μὲν ὁρᾶν, δεινὸς δὲ κλύειν, 141). The chorus view him as the emblem of terror and fear, not a man to be blessed (εὐδαιμονίσαι, 144). He should not add *arai*, curses, to his suffering (154-5).[10] They warn against intruding further into the holy, silent landscape (Rodighiero 2012; Saïd 2012) that is a *krater*, a mixing

8 On this correlation, see Henrichs 1983. On the wineless libations for the Erinyes, see Aesch. *Eum.* 107.

9 For the peril that lies in simply uttering the names of dangerous chthonian forces, see Guidorizzi 2008: 230; therefore they are addressed with euphemistic names, see Henrichs 1991; Henrichs 1994.

10 The Erinyes are personified Curses, *Arai*, see Aesch. *Eum.* 417; as "embodied curse of the wrong parent", see *Il.* 9.454, 571, and Sommerstein 1989: 7; Geisser 2002: 242-52; Zerhoch 2015; Dorati 2018: 107n4, in general 103-14.

bowl, not of wine, but water and honey (κρατὴρ μειλιχίων ποτῶν, 159) (155-60).[11] The sacred space, so to speak, is identical with the cultic offering, the libation to the chthonic goddesses. Oedipus should leave the place that is forbidden to enter (ἀβάτων ἀποβάς, 167).

The intruder must retreat from the sacred space: only at this point Oedipus starts to obey, but not very willingly. When he has been led out by Antigone to the edge of the grove (170-202) the chorus, who are also outside the sacred place, question him further (203-36). Once he reveals his identity – his story is well-known all over Greece – his *hiketeia* seems to have come to an unsuccessful end. They vehemently order him to step further away and leave, ἔξω πόρσω βαίνετε χώρας (226): still from the standpoint they would have had in *OT* they banish him from the country as a source of *miasma* (233-6): just as would have been the case in the negative scenario that happened to him much earlier in Thebes (93).

At this critical point Antigone, his guide, tries to mediate, pleading for mercy. But the chorus cannot be moved, fearing the anger of the gods (256). Only his abominable name implies danger and should be substituted by *euphemia*, just as it happens in the case of the Eumenides to whose grove he had arrived. Oedipus, still not obeying, intervenes (258-65):

τί δῆτα δόξης, ἢ τί κληδόνος καλῆς
μάτην ῥεούσης ὠφέλημα γίγνεται,
εἰ τάς γ' Ἀθήνας φασὶ θεοσεβεστάτας
εἶναι, μόνας δὲ τὸν κακούμενον ξένον
σῴζειν οἵας τε καὶ μόνας ἀρκεῖν ἔχειν
κἄμοιγε ποῦ ταῦτ' ἐστίν, οἵτινες βάθρων
ἐκ τῶνδέ μ' ἐξάραντες εἶτ' ἐλαύνετε,
ὄνομα μόνον δείσαντες;

[What help comes, then, of repute or fair fame, if it ends in idle breath; (260) seeing that Athens, as men say, is god-fearing be-

11 On the performance of the libation as *nephalia* (without wine, cf. 481 resuming 100) as part of a detailed ritual purification on stage, see 466-92, esp. 469-81; see also Graf 1980; on the *krateres*, see 472; on the landmark called Mixing Bowl (*Krater*), see 1593.

> yond all, and alone has the power to shelter the outraged stranger, and alone the power to help him? And where are these things for me, when, after making me rise up from this rocky seat, you then drive me from the land, (265) afraid of my name alone?]

It is now gradually becoming clear: when Antigone mentioned the fact that they were in the vicinity of Athens, Oedipus was visited by a sudden inspiration. Renowned for being a liberal city well-known for granting asylum to strangers, Athens served as the key-word to put his spontaneous plan in practice. The fact that he should end his life had perhaps also been announced by Apollo long ago, probably nothing more. Oedipus, however, must realize that his bad fame of being a *deinon* throughout the Hellenic world could prevent the people to give him asylum in this case. Therefore he starts performing the ritual of supplication (Burian 1974; Kelly 2009: 75-9) against the fear of *miasma* (275-83) and opens his apologetic campaign using oratory, repeated with variations several times in the play (258-74; 510-48; 960-1013; Kelly 2009: 53-9); over and over again he argues that he is not guilty, the murder was in self-defence, the incest happened unwittingly, and the murder of his father was not premeditated, as he could not know. By exonerating himself of any guilt (270-4) and as *hiketes*, who must be under the protection of the gods, he stylizes himself as *hieros* and *eusebes* (287), sacred and pious.

In respect of the ritual duality between *miasma* and saviour he aligns the forces on the Thebes-Athens axis. The *miasma* expelled from Thebes as *pharmakos* has a cathartic effect as something *katharsion* (Burkert 1985: 82-4) that he transfers to Athens now. Therefore, based on the polarity of the chthonian model that mediates between the abominable and the benign, he promises to bring profit, benefit (ὄνησιν, 288), and comfort for the people of Athens (287-8), if they receive him as suppliant, rescue, and protect him. The time-gap until Theseus, as saviour, arrives to integrate the new saviour (Kelly 2009: 79-85) as chthonic hero in the making is bridged by the scene of Ismene bringing news from Thebes.

Sophocles dramatically condenses the situation through a new oracle of Apollo (Kelly 2009: 39-40, 65-8; Easterling 2012; Markantonatos 2012: 120-1; Dorati 2018: 114-20): due to his chthonic

power the Thebans will once again wish to lay hands on Oedipus living or dead, εὐσοίας χάριν (390), for their safety's sake (389-90). Oedipus has long wished to return to his home. Now the news is surprising even to him (391). Ismene makes clear that the political power in Thebes is now in his hands (392). He thus becomes aware again of the great power of his body since the oracle echoes his own enigmatic promises of a benefit (ὄνησιν, 288) (Slatkin 1986: 212). Ismene, moreover, announces that Creon will soon come "to plant [Oedipus] near the Cadmean land, so that they may have [him] in their power, while [he] may not set foot within their borders" (ὥς σ' ἄγχι γῆς στήσωσι Καδμείας, ὅπως / κρατῶσι μὲν σοῦ, γῆς δὲ μὴ 'μβαίνῃς ὅρων, 399-400).

Thebes must make sure to secure Oedipus as an apotropaic *sema* under her control. The Thebans mainly see the negative potential of his body. Because of the capacity he retains as the source of anathema and harm they are still not ready to integrate him totally, installing him at the centre of Thebes. Despite all negative chthonic potential Oedipus' body is of vital importance for Thebes to maintain her political power and to ward off foes. Oedipus is outraged about becoming an instrument for his personal enemies without receiving honours in his homeland. Therefore he refuses to comply with these plans: The consequence for Thebes is told through a reworking of the second oracle. Envoys from Delphi reported that this would mean grief for the Cadmeians, since Oedipus' anger will strike them from afar (408-15). Although his sons know about it, they have not yet managed to bring him back to Thebes (416-19). While these facts are disclosed, Oedipus becomes increasingly aware of his dual force. Listening to the voices from Delphi he feels himself empowered: he thus recognizes that his tomb at Colonus could safeguard the existence of Athens, especially against Theban attacks. The future gain of his body that Oedipus had invented for rhetorical reasons materializes and now becomes his trump card in the *hiketeia*.

The transfer of Oedipus from Thebes to Athens means that the latter would receive in him the magical instrument that helps preserve power and avert military defeat. Through this measure he could simultaneously take revenge on his own Theban people. Oedipus, as chthonian power of curse – the Erinyes are *Arai*

(Aesch. *Eum.* 417) –,[12] can put now the loathing execration of his sons on stage.[13] He foresees the struggle over his body. Combining all the Apollonian allusions Oedipus recognizes that, if Athens in alliance with the Semnai as deme goddesses will defend him, the inhabitants will exalt him as a saviour for themselves and cause grief for their and his enemies, his own people in Thebes (457-60). It becomes clear that Oedipus is about to use circulating Delphic voices regarding his dual potential in order to finally take revenge on Thebes and his own family for having expelled him as *miasma*.[14] At the same time he will return to the defence of Athens that can profit from him in military terms. It is a win-win situation: the Athenians will be secure against Thebes, perhaps possessing a magic joker in all future wars – a utopian promise in the desperate situation of 406 BCE –, while he will gain the necessary protection and support to become the angel of revenge, the Erinys himself, against his family and his polis of birth. It all looks to be the same cynical play of power as the audience had witnessed in other contemporary tragedies, especially in Euripides' *Orestes* in 408 BCE.

With these arguments Oedipus achieves a change of attitude in the chorus towards him: from being determined to expel him out of fear of pollution their feelings alter to pity for him (461). In the end the rhetoric of supplication, its immanent threat and promise of profit, was successful. But the chorus leader now advises Oedipus to appease the *daimones* with a complex chthonic ritual of wineless libations and almost silent prayer (466-502) "to make atonement to these divinities (cf. θοῦ νῦν καθαρμὸν τῶνδε δαιμόνων, 'to whom [he has] come first, and on whose ground [he has] trespassed', 466-7)". We remember that he had trespassed on their sacred *alsos* as Oedipus constantly breaches taboos. In Sappho fr. 2 V. the sacred space of a grove symbolizes the female body (Bierl 2019: 45-52). In the same way as Oedipus, famous for his "foot" (*-pous*), violated the prohibition of incest – he is still

12 On the Erinyes' quintessential association with *arai*, see Dorati 2018: 107n4 with further secondary literature.

13 On the logic of curse, see Edmunds 1996: 138-42; Dorati 2018: 103-14; on the reciprocal link with destiny, see ibid. 120-38.

14 On different premises, but partially similar results, see Bernard 2001: 83-97.

too close to Antigone – so he intruded into the goddesses' territory. The polluted *pharmakos* should now perform a purification ritual to placate the demons (θοῦ νῦν καθαρμόν τῶνδε δαιμόνων, 466). It anticipates his own cult as heroic hero as well. The chorus leader orders Oedipus to pray to the goddesses as they are called the Eumenides, the Benevolents, so that "from benevolent breasts (ἐξ εὐμενῶν στέρνων) they may receive the suppliant as his saviours (δέχεσθαι τὸν ἱκέτην σωτηρίους)" (486-8) (Gödde 2011: 211). The marked signal of the etymologically applied name Eumenides highlights again the reference to the *Oresteia*. In clearly alluding to Eumenides, a name that was probably attributed only later to the last part of the trilogy, Sophocles can stress the famous transformation of the dreadful Erinyes into the Semnai/Eumenides. By performing the ritual in the right attitude Oedipus should practically become equal with his hosts in the sacred grove, changing from his negative to his positive aspect.

However, Oedipus as hero in the making is not yet at this point. He receives the possibility to delegate the prayer to another person (488), but not the entire practice (490-2). Yet Oedipus, the person we witnessed as the most skeptical about religious practices in *OT*, who failed to observe any ritual taboos, still does not seem to care much about the necessary *katharmoi*, the prerequisite to become the chthonic hero. Excusing himself he orders again that one of his daughters should carry out the libation for him (495-502) (Henrichs 2004: 195-6). The polluted man feels that he is not yet an *eunous psyche* (cf. 499) – a "benevolent soul" departed from the body (Nagy 2013: 235-54). Thus Ismene accepts the task of performing the rite for him (503-7). But the execution of this will be delayed since she will be abducted by Creon. Only close to the mystic end, at line 1598, Oedipus will send the girls out to bring the *choai* of water, for him to pour libations into the ground, less for the Eumenides than for himself, for his own purification (1598-602) (see Nagy 2013: 509). In the meanwhile, he is still only on the way to his progressive heroization, still acting mainly focused on the negative, cursing side and within the myth (also in the Aristotelian sense of *mythos* as tragic action, *Po.* 1450a4-5), and not yet in his positive cultic aspect. Accordingly, the first choral ode, an *amoibaion* between the chorus and Oedipus (510-48), re-

volves around his crimes.

At this point Theseus arrives. Oedipus does not even perform the supplication in front of the Athenian king, but presents his body as a gift whose gain will materialize after his death (576-85). But Oedipus also makes clear that from this decision a great struggle (*agon*, 587) will arise, an *agon* for life and death, since his sons wish to bring him to Thebes (587-9). Theseus cannot understand Oedipus' excessive hatred and anger toward them – from his humanistic perspective he states that too much of it is not good (592). Oedipus explains that he is so angry with them since they expelled him, the murderer, forbidding him to return (599-601). Theseus asks why they should come to get him then (602). Oedipus explains the reason with another oracle from Apollo that seems almost as if it were an invention on his part: they do it out of fear because otherwise they are destined to be defeated in Athens (604-5). Thus Oedipus seems to make up an oracle that we at least have never heard of: by constructing and recombining, thus "dealing with" (Easterling 2012: ch. d) Ismene's oracular information in selective bits, he only focuses on a war with Athens, reinterpreting the utility of his body, alive or dead, in respect to and along the Athens-Thebes axis. It is well known that in the myth of the Seven Athens does not play any role. Theseus is also quite surprised that the war between the brothers Polyneices and Eteocles, Oedipus' sons, should be considered his and Athens' business (606) (Kelly 2009: 67). The reason lies in Oedipus' body politics, i.e. in his strategic plan to take revenge on Thebes, since it is simply because of him that a great war will start. Furthermore, the remark about the necessity of a Theban defeat probably alludes to and is drawn from Athens' actual victory over the Theban cavalry in 407 BCE. To Theseus' indignation Oedipus can only reply with a general reflection on the eternal change between polar extremes (607-15). Also Thebes will witness a transformation from a peaceful accord to a dreadful war (616-20). Then "his sleeping and buried corpse (εὕδων καὶ κεκρυμμένος νέκυς), cold in death (ψυχρός ποτ'), will drink the [Thebans'] warm blood (θερμὸν αἷμα πίεται)" (621-2). By switching his alliance Oedipus will do extreme harm to his enemies, his own family and people, and help his new friends in Athens, and in this case the Olympian gods, especial-

ly Apollo, will not deceive him (cf. Hester 1977; Blundell 1989: 226-59). Oedipus thus manipulates Theseus with an imaginary will of the Olympian gods, promising his blessing for Athens as a chthonian hero who drinks the enemies' blood. The announcement to drink the Thebans' blood is identical with the Erinyes' vampire behaviour as they threaten to suck blood from their victim Orestes in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* (184-5, 230, 254, 264-6, 302, 365) (Geisser 2002: 394n50). On the cultic side it corresponds to the special blood *choai* that chthonic heroes and gods can receive. Pouring blood into a pit (*bothros*) and downward into the earth implies the idea of satiating heroes and the souls of dead men (*haimakouria*) in order to revitalize them and to gain some profit from them (Burkert 1985: 60). After all, Theseus soon recognizes the strategic benefit for Athens by giving him asylum. Theseus' benevolence (εὐμένεια), characteristic of Athens, cannot "expel", that is, reject, Oedipus' benevolence (εὐμένειαν ἐκβάλοι, 631), typical of the transformed Eumenides (cf. Guidorizzi 2008: 281), especially since as *hiketes* he is under the special protection of the Goddesses, addressed as chthonic *daimones* (634). At this point Oedipus' *mechane* to have a new secure basis for revenge on his own city has been put into practice very effectively. The rest of the play will mostly focus on the staging of the war over his body and Oedipus' curse of his enemies as a new Erinys/*Ara*.

After the new ally Theseus has left the stage and before the battle is enacted, the chorus sings its first stasimon, the famous praise of idyllic Attica (668-719). Behind the positive utopia lies a chthonic subtext. In the following songs we witness a symbolic and concrete reflection about Oedipus' progress towards death, the goal of the action also in the dialogic parts of the play (Del Corno 1998: 59-85; Rodighiero 2000: 115-41). The grove of Colonus, in its meaning as tumulus, the future burial place, is again praised as *abaton* (τὰν ἄβατον θεοῦ / φυλλάδα, 675-6). Remarkable is the presence of Dionysus, the god of mystery and afterlife as well as of the tragic performance (Bierl 1991: 100-3), and of Aphrodite. The reason for this is that the paradisiacal garden has also a symbolic meaning in regard to sexuality, alluding to the female body. Oedipus trespasses on the grove, as he tends to violate the taboo of incest. He had married his mother and he is still transgressing

the norms and cultural codes in being too close to his daughter Antigone. Poseidon then anticipates the war with horses.

Creon arrives and appeals to Oedipus to return with him to Thebes. Oedipus, already warned, is outraged and makes clear that Creon does not intend "to bring him home but to plant him near the borders (ἀλλ' ὡς πάραυλον οἰκίσῃς), so that [Thebes] might be relieved uninjured from evils that come from Athens" (784-6). Oedipus again, now from the complementary perspective, only focuses on the military gain for Thebes against Athens, but Thebes plans the apotropaic measure as a general defence against all possible attackers. He should serve as a vengeful *sema* against external enemies. Yet in Thebes he would live only as his *alastor* (ἀλάστωρ, 788) (Geisser 2002: 132-6, 152), the vengeful spirit and Erinys against his native soil, revenging the crimes done to him. As such he predicts the fatal end of his sons (789-90), pretending to know it from Apollo and Zeus (793).

The parallel with the Eteonus cult at the border of Boeotia, reported by Lysimachus of Alexandria (*FGH* 382 F 2), has been accepted for a long time (Robert 1915: esp. 1.8-9; Edmunds 1981: esp. 221, 223-4, 232-3; Lardinois 1992: 325-6; Edmunds 1996: 95-100; Kelly 2009: 43, 82; Nagy 2013: 512). The Thebans regarded the burial of the polluted Oedipus as a source of danger. His own family thus could not entomb him in Theban soil, but went to Keos. They were then forced to remove the body again and buried it secretly in Eteonus, a sacred place of Demeter and located at the frontier far from Thebes, later named Oidipodeion. When people found out, they did not want him either and consulted an oracle. But it ordained they must not disturb, that is, "move" him, since he was the suppliant of the goddess (μὴ κινεῖν τὸν ἱκέτην τῆς θεοῦ).

In *OC* we witness, as anticipated by Oedipus, a war about moving and transferring Oedipus' body towards the borders of Theban territory, before his death (815), because of the positive, blessing effects as predicted by the oracles. Ismene has already been kidnapped and Antigone is being seized as well. At this point the conflict is being acted out before the audience and the war will then be waged behind the scene. Kidnapping is a most cynical mode, reminding us of Euripides' famous *Orestes* (408 BCE). By capturing the old king's daughters Creon intends to force Oedipus

to come to Thebes with them. Yet, determined not to comply and to call Theseus for help, Oedipus becomes, as a quintessential cursser, the personified *Ara* on stage. He appeals to the demons of the place, the Arai, to let him utter a curse against his enemy and his family (864-5) expressing his desire that they too suffer a wretched old age just as he himself had to endure (868-70). Of course, on the other hand, Theseus comes to his new friend's aid. At Theseus' indignant question how Creon could dare to kidnap Oedipus and his daughters in the land of Law, Creon replies (939-50):

ἐγὼ οὔτ' ἄνανδρον τήνδε τὴν πόλιν λέγω,
ὦ τέκνον Αἰγέως, οὔτ' ἄβουλον, ὡς σὺ φής,
τοὔργον τόδ' ἐξέπραξα, γιγνώσκων δ' ὅτι
οὐδείς ποτ' αὐτοῖς τῶν ἐμῶν ἂν ἐμπέσοι
ζῆλος ξυναίμων, ὥστ' ἐμοῦ τρέφειν βίᾳ.
ᾔδη δ' ὀθούνεκ' ἄνδρα καὶ πατροκτόνον
κἄναγνον οὐ δεξοίατ', οὐδ' ὅτῳ γάμοι
ξυνόντες ηὑρέθησαν ἀνοσιώτατοι.
τοιοῦτον αὐτοῖς Ἄρεος εὔβουλον πάγον
ἐγὼ ξυνῄδη χθόνιον ὄνθ', ὃς οὐκ ἐᾷ
τοιούσδ' ἀλήτας τῇδ' ὁμοῦ ναίειν πόλει·
ᾧ πίστιν ἴσχων τήνδ' ἐχειρούμην ἄγραν.

[It is not because I thought this city void of men, (940) son of Aegeus, or of counsel, as you say, that I have done this deed; but because I judged that its people could never be so zealous for my relatives as to support them against my will. And I knew that this people would not receive a parricide and a polluted man, (945) a man whose unholy marriage – a marriage with children – had been found out. Such wisdom, I knew, was immemorial on the Areopagus, which does not allow such wanderers to dwell within this city. (950) Trusting in that, I sought to take this prize.]

This passage is very significant in the argument of the immanent functioning of chthonic polarity which Sophocles uses so aptly for his dramatic purposes. Creon cannot imagine that Athens would be so eager to feed a criminal from Thebes. *Trephein* (943) also implies the cultic nourishment of libation. Ironically Sophocles makes Creon argue that he was certain that the Areopagus, the Athenian court for homicide, as chthonic institution (χθόνιον ὄνθ', 948) – perhaps also in the meaning of "autochthonous" (Guidorizzi

2008: 322) –, would not permit such vagrant beggars (*aletas*, 949, cf. 50) (and murderers) to become inhabitants in the city of Athens. As we have learnt, the Areopagus, however, so well-known from the *Oresteia*, hosted the chthonic Erinyes as Semnai (= Eumenides) and indeed integrated Oedipus as a chthonic hero in the making with his own *mnema* in a common precinct (Paus. 1.28.6-7).

Again and again we detect that specific words allude to a deeper meaning, the truth, in a riddling form. Athens thus will indeed give the hero in the making a cult in a sanctuary that he will share with the Semnai. On the one hand, one fears the dreadful, on the other hand, it can become benevolent and positive by deterring the external enemy. Creon argues that he has acted on legitimate claims to hunt Oedipus (950), since Oedipus had cursed him and the entire city of Thebes (951-3). Creon argues there is no limit to danger until death puts an end to it (954-5) – yet, indeed, Oedipus will act as a cursing force, that is as Erinys, even after death, from his grave. Moreover, Oedipus reacts with fierce curses again, providing a new apology (960-1013) – the third after the one given in lines 258-74 and 510-48, both addressed to the chorus. In this defence Oedipus does all he can to diminish his status of *miasma* before cultic heroization, while praising Athens (esp. 1006-7) (Kelly 2009: 52-9, esp. 56-9). To tear him, the suppliant, away from Athens also means an outrage against his new home famed for its worship of the gods (1006-9). Finally, Oedipus supplicates the Goddesses, the Eumenides in the grove, to come as helpers and allies (ἐλθεῖν ἀρωγοὺς ξυμμάχους θ', 1012) (1010-13). They will indeed become military allies of the chthonic hero to support his case after his death, helping defend the sacred territory full of chthonic landmarks against external enemies, particularly Thebes.

In the second stasimon (1044-95) the chorus project themselves on to the battlefield, making the war, the pursuit, and the fierce battle fought to free the girls present before the inner eyes of the audience. Theseus as king of a pious land (1125-7) has saved them (cf. 1103, 1117, 1123), while Oedipus progressively acts as cultic saviour from beneath the earth. On his way back Theseus heard that a relative, not from Thebes – Polyneices – came as suppliant still sitting on the altars of Poseidon, where he himself prayed when he

was called by Oedipus (1156-9). Polyneices' position thus mirrors his father's who now vehemently rejects the ritual duty. Oedipus, as emblem of anger, hates his son so much that he even refuses to listen to him (1173-4). Theseus, as incarnation of humanistic and pious values, reminds Oedipus of the seat of the gods that obliges him to grant them respect (1179-80) and do his son this favour. His guide Antigone pleads as well that he should give in (1181, 1184, 1201) as a father. Bad anger can only result in a bad end (1197-8). Thus Oedipus must yield and also slowly move toward his benign dimension, but he will later burst out in uttering curses again.

The third stasimon (1211-48) with its famous "Not to be born is, beyond all estimation, best" (μὴ φῦναι τὸν ἅπαντα νι-/κᾷ λόγον, 1224-5) moves the perspective towards Oedipus' end. In full repentance of his errors Polyneices asks for help. The reason for the *stasis* with his brother, so he argues on the basis of another instance of an oracle, is Oedipus' nature as an Erinys, the personification of Curse (1298-300). The son begs his father to forgo his fierce anger and to help him against Eteocles who has driven him out of the country. Oracles say again that whomever Oedipus joins in alliance will win the war and the power in Thebes (1331-2). Polyneices could then make his father return again to his city (1342). But Oedipus refuses to help and renews his fierce curse (1354-96). He even styles his son, since he had expelled him, as his murderer (1361) on whom he must take revenge now as a sort of Erinys. The *daimon* of revenge looks upon Polyneices (1370), it is actually Oedipus in alliance with the Erinyes, the δεινῶπες, the dreadful looking (84), who are all-seeing (42; cf. 74, for Oedipus). He adds *arai* to old ones (1375), and he invokes the curses that stand emblematically for him and the Erinyes to come as allies (1376; cf. 1013). The curses should have the power over his seat and throne (1380-1), if Justice stands side by side with the ancient law of Zeus (1381-2). This means that he has finally reached a cultic dwelling where curse, *dike*, and the archaic rule of law of Zeus in the sense of the first two plays of the *Oresteia* will be united. After all, he will become an Erinys in the grove of the Eumenides.

In the *amoibaion* (1447-504) the chorus finally resume the situation: "Behold, new ills of heavy fate have newly come from the blind stranger, unless, perhaps, fate is finding its goal" (νέα τάδε

νεόθεν ἦλθέ μοι / <νέα> βαρύποτμα κακὰ παρ' ἀλαοῦ ξένου, / εἴ τι μοῖρα μὴ κιγχάνει, 1447-50). The play assumes a more serene and celebratory tone in the finale when the progressive heroization comes to its end in his miraculous death enriched with associations full of mystery (Calame 1998). The frightful signs, thunder, and lightning announce his death (cf. Easterling 2006). The chorus as transmitter of emotions expresses fear, or better, terror: "The hair of my head stands up for fear, my soul is dismayed (δεῖμ' ὑπῆλθε κρατὸς φόβαν; / ἔπταξα θυμόν, 1465-6); for again the lightning flashes in the sky" (1464-7). They ask the *daimon* of the locality, the Erinyes, to be merciful (1480). Repeatedly alluding to the secrecy of the Eleusinian Mysteries he will finally show his burial place only to King Theseus.[15] Secrecy will prevent others from further attempts to secure him. Despite the plethora of topographical names there is also the feature of anonymity and indeterminacy characteristic of chthonian places. Oedipus' *sema* will provide Athens with protection and security (1518-38). Oedipus' union with the earth and the local Semnai are stylized as the secret of mysteries, the *aporrheton* (cf. Gödde 2011: 226-32; Nagy 2013: 514-18). It is all a *thauma*, a wondrous miracle, reported by the messenger. The heroization has finally materialized. He is a man, "beyond all mortals wondrous" (ἀλλ' εἴ τις βροτῶν / θαυμαστός, 1664-5). The report ends with a strangely ambiguous tone as if people in the audience could have doubts of the story that Oedipus might have made up the circumstances to execute his own agenda: "And if in anyone's eyes I seem to speak senselessly, I would not try to win his belief when he counts me senseless" (εἰ δὲ μὴ δοκῶ φρονῶν λέγειν, / οὐκ ἂν παρείμην οἷσι μὴ δοκῶ φρονεῖν, 1665-6). The *thauma* is so great that it sounds almost unbelievable. Like Euripides in the *Bacchae*, Sophocles leaves the question open as to whether he adheres to the religious content or whether he reveals its cynical mechanism (Dunn 2012: esp. 360-1 with other literature).

The rest of the play (1670-759) focuses on the dreadful consequences for Oedipus' family; his daughters are left behind and

15 Calame 1998: 349-51 and Markantonatos 2002: 201-8 discuss the relation of the topographical names in Colonus with Eleusis.

abandoned. Although everything is focused on matters of ritual, they cannot perform the burial rites and lament at a grave. In their wild *goos* as *kommos* (1670-750) both desire to join their father in death. Theseus, responsible for the welfare of his city, keeps to his promise not to reveal the site where Oedipus disappeared. In doing so he can avoid all dangers to his city (1751-67). In resignation Antigone finally begs Theseus to send them to Thebes to stop their brothers from bloodshed (1768-72).

Conclusion

We have seen that neither humanist nor psychological readings in positive or negative keys seem to be appropriate to do justice to this late play. Sophocles builds his tragic plot on a cultic reality and on the ritual concept of chthonic heroes and gods. Their quintessential polarity between the dreadful dimension of death and euphemistic names to veil it, between mythic scenarios of anger, curse, hate as well as cultic blessing and plenty is the basic pattern of a play that stages Oedipus as a chthonic hero in the making. He acts right from the beginning as the hero he is going to become. Due to his self-centred and tyrannical behaviour he trespasses on sacred ground where he learns about the dual forces of its cultic and demonic inhabitants, the Erinyes-Eumenides. Sophocles makes Oedipus oscillate between staging a real mystic miracle and the problematic manipulation of religious facts in order to take revenge on his Theban homeland by finding support from his new city of Athens. This open perspective involves the audience in thinking about what really happened and reflecting about the relation between ritual, religion, politics, and their manipulations by men for their own purposes. In this way it comes quite close to Euripides' *Bacchae* written at about the same time. *OC* is thus in many respects like a metatheatrical exploration of the constitutive gap of signifier and signified to be gradually closed by the blind director who gathers, like the blind, and unwitting audience, the piecemeal information gradually being disclosed to reach his goal: to reach a safe haven, from where he can harm the enemy and help his new friends. This is achieved by

assuming the status of a chthonic hero and elevating his existence though ritual and mythic discourses. Playing out the indeterminacy of signs and experimenting on the process of meaning, he can perform his new role within the polarity constitutive of chthonic heroes and thus gradually gain control over his situation (cf. Dunn 2012: 368-74). This indeterminacy achieves an atmosphere of religious mystery, while the author and the audience share a complicity with the internal actor in construing sense. Sophocles goes hand in hand with his theatrical hero, feeding him with narrative information in scattered oracular elements of indeterminate prediction at the right moments. Thus Oedipus on the basis of his drive for knowledge can gradually perform the role that he is going to become, while the audience must take the supplemented religious sense at face value and accept that Oedipus is somehow associated with this. The role he takes on as a chthonic cult hero in the making in whose reality Oedipus himself and the audience increasingly believe is gradually enacted qua mimesis. The mimetic process coincides with its final religious result when Oedipus reaches his death by disappearing in the chthonic sacred space beneath the earth and being engulfed by the Earth, since, as a matter of the fact, men can turn to heroes only after their death. The effect is increased by mystifying their tombs as *semata* (Nagy 2013: 32-3, 514-24) and even associating it with the sublime (Haselswerdt 2019: esp. 626-30). However, the mimetic performance at the same time remains incomplete since it can be reported only through messenger-speech (1586-665). The once again widening gap of disbelief is supplemented by an overdose of mysterious and religious signs that hint at the actual transformation of a human beggar, murderer, and *miasma* to a chthonic cultic hero, and thus the suspension of disbelief.

Whereas Thebes as the tragic place of the Other wants to regain Oedipus in order to use his dead body as an apotropaic *sema* on its borders without granting him a burial place inside the city, his tomb in the Attic deme of Colonus, the emblematic 'tumulus', will have this dual force, to help his friends, Athens, and harm his enemies, Thebes. *OC* showcases Oedipus as a hero in the making on his way toward death, ending with Oedipus' mystical disappearance in this sacred landscape of Attica, assimilating with its

main agents, Demeter as Erinys (Demeter Erinys at Thelpousa in Arcadia as mentioned by Paus. 8.25.4-7) as well as goddess of fertility, prosperity, and blessing mysteries, Poseidon Hippios, the tremendous shaker of the earth and power of the horse, and, most of all, the Semnai Theai, the Eumenides who act as Erinyes against enemies. In this regard the last surviving tragedy of the fifth century reflects Aeschylus' *Oresteia* that has become a canonical master-model, playing with and alluding to its political and religious themes and subtexts as well as zooming-in on Athens in the actual *hic* and *nunc*.

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