

**Skenè Studies I • 2**

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

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi

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# Revisiting *Oedipus at Colonus*

LAURA SLATKIN

## Abstract

This essay pursues the perennial question raised by *Oedipus at Colonus*: what to do about and with Oedipus. In previous work I explored the play as navigating the possible assimilation of the past by the *polis*; this essay offers a different consideration: the play's enactment of active revisiting, and revising, of the past (including Oedipus's status as parricide), not least through a kind of juridical inquiry undertaken by both Oedipus and the chorus. I conclude by suggesting that in *OC*, Oedipus appears ultimately not as a challenge to the political but as the a priori of.

KEYWORDS: benefit; chorus; polis; metic; Eumenides; anger; political

Many years ago I wrote a short article on *Oedipus at Colonus*, at the invitation of the political theorist Peter Euben, for a collection of papers in a volume entitled, *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Slatkin 1986).<sup>1</sup> My contribution was written in the context of the principal scholarly concerns of that moment, which had primarily to do with the ending of the play – specifically the heroization of Oedipus and the establishment of his cult.<sup>2</sup> In the pages that follow, I would like to sketch, in a preliminary way, some additional questions the play raises.

<sup>1</sup> My thinking about the play was originally launched by Pat Easterling's article, "Oedipus and Polynices" (1967), and has been indebted to her illuminating scholarship ever since. This essay is for her.

<sup>2</sup> See, among others, Edmunds 1981, and Birge 1984. For a discussion of earlier researches on Oedipus as cult hero, including Festugière 1975, Winnington-Ingram 1954, see Lardinois 1992.

My earlier discussion focused on the question of how to understand the unspecified benefit that Oedipus announces he will provide to Athens, before Ismene ever arrives to tell him that the oracle has prophesied that his tomb will have cult power (ἥκω γὰρ ἱερὸς εὔσεβής τε καὶ φέρων / ὅνησιν ἀστοῖς τοῖσδ'. . .).<sup>3</sup> In that essay, I suggested that the benefit Oedipus will confer is that which he offers the Athenians while he is alive – not after he is dead: namely, the opportunity, by rescuing him, to live up to their reputation as *xenodokoi* and protectors of the vulnerable, hospitable to the beleaguered stranger:

. . . ικνοῦμαι πρὸς θεῶν ύμᾶς, ξένοι,  
ώσπερ με κάνεστήσαθ', ὥδε σώσατε,  
καὶ μὴ θεοὺς τιμῶντες εἴτα τοὺς θεοὺς  
μοίρας ποιεῖσθε μηδαμῶς: ἡγεῖσθε δὲ  
βλέπειν μὲν αὐτοὺς πρὸς τὸν εὔσεβη βροτῶν,  
βλέπειν δὲ πρὸς τοὺς δυστεβεῖς, φυγὴν δέ του  
μήπω γενέσθαι φωτὸς ἀνοσίου βροτῶν.  
ξὺν οἷς σὺ μὴ κάλυπτε τὰς εὐδαίμονας  
ἔργοις Ἀθήνας ἀνοσίοις ὑπηρετῶν.  
(275-83)

[. . . I implore you by the gods, strangers; just as you raised me up, even so preserve me, and in no wise honour the gods, but then consign them to darkness! But believe that they look upon the mortal who shows reverence, and look upon the impious, and that no unholy fellow has ever yet escaped! With their aid do not cloud the fame of fortunate Athens by lending aid to unholy actions]

That essay tried to think about what it meant to dramatize the *polis* accepting the living Oedipus: for the play to represent the crucial dialogue, *qua* dialogue, as the exchange between Oedipus and the chorus (the demesmen of Colonus as representing Athens); that is, for Oedipus to need to make his case to the citizens first of all – rather than, first of all, to the leader.

<sup>3</sup> *Oedipus Coloneus* 287-88 (“I come sacred and reverent, and I bring advantage to the citizens here”). Text and translations are by Lloyd-Jones (Sophocles 1994a).

ἀλλ’ ὥσπερ ἔλαβες τὸν ἵκέτην ἐχέγγυον,  
 ρύου με κάκφύλασσε: μηδέ μου κάρα  
 τὸ δυσπρόσοπτον εἰσορῶν ἀτιμάστης,  
 ἦκω γὰρ ἴερὸς εὐσεβῆς τε καὶ φέρων  
 ὄνησιν ἀστοῖς τοῖσδ': ὅταν δ' ὁ κύριος  
 παρῇ τις, ὑμῶν ὄστις ἐστίν ἡγεμών,  
 τότ' εἰσακούων πάντ' ἐπιστήσει: τὰ δὲ  
 μεταξὺ τούτου μηδαμῶς γίγνουν κακός.  
 (284-91)

[. . . as you received the suppliant under a pledge, so protect and guard me, and do not dishonour me when you behold my unsightly face! For I come sacred and reverent, and I bring advantage to the citizens here; and when the man with power comes, whoever is your leader, then he shall hear and know all; but until then do you by no means be cruel!]

Among the first of his many questions about the place to which he has come, Oedipus asks his first interlocutor, identified as the *xenos*,<sup>4</sup> “Does someone rule the people, or do the people (the *plēthos*) have the say?”<sup>5</sup> (66: ἄρχει τις αὐτῶν, ή 'πὶ τῷ πλήθει λόγος); to which the *xenos* replies, “This place is ruled by the king in the city” (67: ἐκ τοῦ κατ' ἀστυ βασιλέως τάδ' ἄρχεται). Oedipus’s question raises the question of political form, and implicitly establishes a horizon, so to speak, for the chorus to function as the *plēthos* or *dēmos* over the course of the play.

Oedipus challenges the chorus’s conventional piety and asks them to reconsider their assumptions about him, which are based on his reputation. Proud of their name and frightened by his name, the Athenians are asked to come to terms with the disparity between what is said about them (their noble reputation) and who they show themselves to be – based on the mirror image (or inverse symmetry) of coming to terms with the disparity between what is said about him and who he in fact is. Consider how Oedipus addresses the chorus regarding the discrepancy between their reputation and their hostile reception of him:

<sup>4</sup> Notably, the local citizen is the *xenos*, rather than Oedipus, as we might have expected.

<sup>5</sup> Slightly modified by the author.

τί δῆτα δόξης ἡ τί κληδόνος καλῆς  
 μάτην ρέούσης ὠφέλημα γίγνεται,  
 εἰ τάς γ' Αθήνας φασὶ θεοσεβεστάτας  
 εἶναι, μόνας δὲ τὸν κακούμενον ξένον  
 σώζειν οἵας τε καὶ μόνας ἀρκεῖν ἔχειν;  
 καῦμοιγε ποῦ τοῦτ' ἐστίν, οὔτινες βάθρων  
 ἐκ τῶνδέ μ' ἔξαραντες εἴτ' ἐλαύνετε,  
 ὅνομα μόνον δείσαντες; οὐ γὰρ δὴ τό γε  
 σῶμ' οὐδὲ τάργα τάμι': ἐπεὶ τά γ' ἔργα μου  
 πεπονθότ' ἐστὶ μᾶλλον ἡ δεδρακότα.  
 (259-67)

[What help comes from fame, or from a fine reputation that flows away in vain, seeing that Athens, they say, has most reverence for the gods, and alone can protect the afflicted stranger, and alone can give him aid? How is this the case with me, when you have made me rise up from these ledges and are driving me away, simply from fear of my name?]

In this sense they can recover and make good on what is said about them by refusing (to accept) what is said about him (that he is a polluted criminal) – instead, they are invited to see him for what he is, as Oedipus himself strenuously presents himself. Here we have Oedipus stringently and passionately accounting for himself:

. . . οὐ γὰρ δὴ τό γε  
 σῶμ' οὐδὲ τάργα τάμι': ἐπεὶ τά γ' ἔργα με  
 πεπονθότ' ἵσθι μᾶλλον ἡ δεδρακότα,  
 εἴ̄ σοι τὰ μητρὸς καὶ πατρὸς χρείη λέγειν,  
 ὃν οὕνεκ' ἐκφοβῇ με. . .  
 . . . καίτοι πῶς ἐγὼ κακὸς φύσιν,  
 ὅστις παθὼν μὲν ἀντέδρων, ὕστ' εἰ φρονῶν  
 ἐπρασσον, οὐδὲ ἂν ὥδ' ἐγιγνόμην κακός;  
 νῦν δ' οὐδὲν εἰδὼς ικόμην ἵν' ικόμην,  
 οὐφ' ὃν δ' ἐπασχον, εἰδότων ἀπωλλύμην.  
 (265-74)

[For it is not my person or my actions that you fear; why, know that my actions consisted in suffering rather than in doing, if I must speak of the matter of my mother and my father, on account of which you are afraid of me! This I know for sure! Yet in my na-

ture how am I evil, I who struck back when I had been struck, so that if I had acted knowingly, not even then would I have been evil? But as it is I got to where I came to in all ignorance; but those who have ill used me knowingly destroyed me.]

In my earlier discussion of the play, I took this problem – what to do about and with Oedipus – to be in part a question of how to assimilate the past. But I would suggest now that especially significant in this play is the element of revisiting the past – reinterpreting what took place years ago: revisiting the past so as to reconsider the meaning of “what happened”. Sophocles makes a polemical choice to use Oedipus – to return to Oedipus, the man whose name is always already known. One strong imaginative wager of the play is to reopen the case of Oedipus: Oedipus is always already Oedipus, but what does that mean? Oedipus will never not have killed his father, married his mother, fathered his grandchildren; but the meaning of Oedipus cannot be deduced from these ‘facts’ – indeed the whole play is a negotiation of this, so that the meaning of Oedipus for and at Colonus is perhaps not to be found solely in his posthumous transformation into a cult benefit.

Oedipus’s self-accountings present him as a self-reviser, one who has been through cognitive, emotional, and ultimately ethical arcs, reinterpreting the meaning of past individual (and collective) actions and reactions, and individual (and collective) traumas. The play, that is, represents Oedipus both as having undergone that process of reassessing himself and as making this reassessment central to his challenge to the Athenians to align their past with their future. In this sense, Oedipus in his self-representation – as thinking again, living through emotional intensities and ethical judgments in time – is modelling a trajectory for the chorus.

In “Getting to grips with the oracles: *Oedipus at Colonus*”, Pat Easterling writes:

It is through putting together what Ismene has told him of new prophecies (385-420), and reflecting on the meaning of his arrival at the grove of the Semnai Theai in relation to what Apollo prophesied to him in the past, that he is able to understand the present situation and know how he must react. His stress on ‘reflecting’,

συννοῶν, is important, emphasising the fact that Oedipus does not understand everything in advance, but is actively interpreting the meaning of fresh news in relation to what he knows already. (2012: n.p.)

We may see this process of reevaluating as parallel to, and indeed a powerful reminder of, the trial that is the *telos* of the *Oresteia* – in the sense that what the jury of citizens formed by Athena (and every jury) is asked to do is to look back at, and reassess, the circumstances and import of a transgressive act and its meaning for and within a community. The end of Aeschylus' trilogy must be moved to Athens and specifically to the Hill of Ares, because only there can Orestes get a fair hearing and revaluation – unbiased and community-minded. In its function as a homicide court, the authority of the Areopagus lasted through the fifth century, and into the fourth;<sup>6</sup> Sophocles and his contemporaries saw it become a defining institution (however vexed) of the Athenian democracy.<sup>7</sup>

But *Oedipus at Colonus* gives the Athenian citizen-chorus a role that both evokes the Oresteian jury and confounds its operating principles. As is well known, Athenian law viewed some kinds of killing in self-defence as justifiable, if the defendant could prove that the person he killed had struck the first blow.<sup>8</sup> There is a crucial distinction in Athenian law regarding ‘unlawful’ homicide cases, however, which is the distinction between intentional and unintentional action. Douglas MacDowell in his work on Athenian homicide law notes,

In other areas of law (and of religion too) it often strikes a mod-

6 See, for example, Lycurgus 1.12; Aeschines 1.92.

7 For a discussion of the reforms of the Areopagus (and ancient and modern debates about them), see Fornara and Samons (1991), esp. ch. 2, and Raaflaub (2007); on responses to them in the *Oresteia*, see Podlecki (1966), Braun (1998).

8 In a discussion of “the three basic categories of homicide in Athenian law: intentional, unintentional, and lawful”, Michael Gagarin writes: “the evidence (such as it is) supports the view that a killer who pleaded self-defense argued his case in a regular trial for (intentional) homicide before the Areopagus” (1978: 112).

ern reader that the Athenians seem to take notice only of actions, disregarding the intentions that gave rise to them. This makes it all the more interesting that intention plays such a crucial part in their law on homicide . . . There is also some evidence that an act was counted as intentional homicide if the offender intended to harm his victim and death resulted, even if he did not intend to kill. (1978: 115)

Unlike the unambiguous case of Orestes, then, the Athenians are confronted with Oedipus, whose actions, as he himself argues, fall somewhere in between deliberate and involuntary.<sup>9</sup> This in-between condition is one way to describe how the play positions Oedipus across several domains. Such a perspective differs from, but is perhaps not incompatible with, readings that are principally interested in the structure of reversal, by which the preeminent man becomes a *pharmakos*,<sup>10</sup> the “pollution” becomes a blessing – and as Jacques Derrida points out in his essay on hospitality, the guest, as it were, holds the host hostage (2000: 107). But the both/and of such a reading is also a neither/nor: Oedipus is neither initiate nor hierophant; so that it may be useful to think of his story as showing the limits of any fixed positioning or locating.

Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1988), in a discussion of the ways in which the play raises and complicates the question of Oedipus’s political status, considers the problem of the meaning of ἔμπολιν (637) and views him as neither excluded nor fully included. Vidal-Naquet makes the point that tragedy uses juridical language in a (so to speak) mobile way: “One of the constant features of Greek tragedy is its ambiguous play upon juridical categories in its exploration of the bounds of impossibility” (348). He writes: “It is hard to say just what Oedipus does become in Athens” (*ibid.*) – but that is the question those representatives of Athens, the demesmen of Colonus (and subsequent to them, Theseus), are put in a position to decide. Is Oedipus in fact assimilable, and if so, how?

<sup>9</sup> Here we might think of his explanation of his self-blinding in *Oedipus Tyrannos*: “It was Apollo, Apollo, my friends, / who accomplished these cruel, cruel sufferings of mine! / . . . But the hand that struck was my own” (1329–33; trans. Lloyd-Jones in Sophocles 1994b, slightly modified by the author).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Vernant 1988.

Some scholars have viewed the chorus and Theseus, especially in their defence of Oedipus against Creon, as incorporating him as a full-fledged member of the citizenry (and this was my earlier assumption). Vidal-Naquet, on the other hand, suggests that the play represents Oedipus as ultimately belonging in the in-between category of *metoikos* – belonging as an in-between presence, a *metic*: not a *xenos* or outsider/foreigner, but not an insider – not fully a member of the citizenry and so not endowed with full citizen rights, but entitled to certain privileges and summoned to duties on behalf of the *polis*.<sup>11</sup> There is always a problem of where Oedipus belongs (as *Oedipus Tyrannos* earlier made clear). As Vidal-Naquet writes, “He is not Οἰδίπους Κολωνῆθεν or ἐκ Κολωνοῦ, Oedipus of Colonus, but Οἰδίπους ἐπὶ Κολωνῷ, Oedipus at Colonus” (353).

This adds a further dimension of appropriateness to Oedipus’s recognition of affinity with those unnamed divinities to whose grove he has finally made his way when the play opens. In having Oedipus come to the place where his wanderings will cease at the grove of the Eumenides, Sophocles reminds us that those divinities are the metics par excellence, as the *Oresteia* had established, dramatising their incorporation into Athens and even dressing those transformed figures in the official red robes worn by metics in the Panathenaic procession. The appropriateness of the conjunction of Oedipus and these chthonic deities has of course not only to do with their shared civic status and the benefits they offer the *polis* as *euergeteis* – and Theseus refers at line 631 to the *eumeneia* of Oedipus – but also with their relation to the irreducible, inescapable power of blood bonds, and with the latent but ever-ready wrath that the violation of those bonds calls forth. In this sense, we might say that in the *Oedipus Tyrannos*, Oedipus was his own fury, but that in *Oedipus Coloneus* he revisits that role and visits it on others.

On the position of these figures as metics, however, it is useful to be reminded that, as Paul Cartledge has written,

Athenian ideology as regards the *metoikoi* remained ambivalent,

<sup>11</sup> On the complexities of *metoikia*, see now Kasimis 2018.

in spite of – and doubtless in part owing to – their economic and military significance. The expectations of Athenians in respect to *metoikoi* are clarified by an extract from the *Hiketides* of Euripides; here it is said of the Arcadian Parthenopaeus, who had lived in Argos as a *metoikos*, that he was never resentful or quarrelsome, that he had fought in the army and defended the country like an Argive, always rejoiced at the victories of Argos and lamented its defeats (Eur. *Suppl.* 889–900). This portrayal describes the behavioural norm for *metoikoi*: the *metoikos* must above all cause no strife in the community and be loyal to the *polis*. (2006: n.p.)

The anger of Oedipus, his retaliatory power, will be immanent in his tomb after his life is over and will protect the community as heroes' tombs do. But the tragedy also represents him as wielding it – in life – in such a way as to display the tensions between, or incompatibility of, the demands of the *polis* and the demands of the family – the divisions between which cannot be resolved in the court or the *ekklēsia*. In punishing his sons for their abuse of their father, he unleashes catastrophic strife for Thebes; his legacy is the destruction of family – and although we may read this as a lesson for the Athenians, rather than a direct blow to them, it is not entirely clear how they are to apply it. As Danielle Allen has forcefully argued in her book, *The World of Prometheus*, Athenian tragedy (in part drawing on and reconfiguring Homeric concerns) is everywhere an investigation of what to do with anger in the *polis*. Anger may be the political emotion *par excellence* but is also the most difficult to re-channel (Allen 2000).

How then can Oedipus be integrated into the *polis*, as the *polis* looks to what it is and could become? If the *Oresteia* offers an aetiology of the Athenian court, might we take *Oedipus at Colonus* as offering an aetiology of democratic strife and its aspiration toward integration? There will always be a tension between kinship structures (of affinity) and democratic part-taking.<sup>12</sup>

In this sense, it is not simply that Oedipus is bi-valent, or both/and, in and out: it is that he represents the ongoing challenge which is the political itself: how to assess, take part. Here Oedipus

<sup>12</sup> See Nicole Loraux's far-reaching study of civic discord, *La Cité Divisée* (1997).

appears ultimately not as a challenge to the political but as the a priori of: the agonistic testing of who shall count and how.<sup>13</sup>

This matter of parts and provisional or persisting wholes is saluted by Pindar's *Pythian 4*, which enjoins the audience to "Learn now the *sophia* of Oedipus":

γνῶθι νῦν τὰν Οἰδιπόδα σοφίαν·  
 εὶ γάρ τις ὅζους ὀξυτόμῳ πελέκει  
 ἐξερείψειν μεγάλας δρυός, αἰσχύ-  
 νοι δέ οἱ θαητὸν εἶδος,  
 καὶ φθινόκαρπος ἐοῖσα δίδοι ψᾶφον περ' αὐτᾶς,  
 εἴ ποτε χειμέριον πῦρ ἐξίκηται λοίσθιον,  
 ἦ σὺν ὄρθαις κιόνεσσιν  
 δεσποσύναισιν ἔρειδομένα  
 μόχθον ἄλλοις ἀμφέπει δύστανον ἐν τείχεσιν,  
 ἐὸν ἐρημώσαισα χῶρον.

(Pindarus 1971: 263-9)

[Now come to know the wisdom of Oedipus: if someone with a sharp-bladed axe should strip the boughs from a great oak tree and ruin its splendid appearance, although it cannot bear foliage, it gives an account of itself, if ever it comes at last to a winter's fire, or if, supported by upright columns belonging to a master, it performs a wretched labor within alien walls, having left its own place desolate.]  
 (trans. Race, see Pindar 1997)]

I had previously thought of Oedipus as Pindar's oak, and had read this passage as dwelling on the cost of integrity: the oak displays its power and value, but is consumed or enslaved (Slatkin 1986: 221). Revisiting the political challenge and opportunity that Oedipus presents has led me to consider that Oedipus might be understood as both the axeman and the tree: he who cuts into the body politic (even as he gouged himself). He asks us to consider just how integral the body politic is, and for whom: whether the

<sup>13</sup> Here I find my reading aligns with some aspects of Jacques Rancière's thinking about the political as an agonistic part-taking (2001).

political is the *dēmos* yet giving witness of itself, or might also be a doing of sad labour in a stranger's house. The arbitration of these futurities, the question of incorporation, is precisely what the *Oedipus at Colonus* invited the community to undertake.<sup>14</sup>

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