

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

by Sophocles

At the end of his life, Sophocles turned once again to the subject of one of his most powerful tragedies, "Oedipus Rex" or Oedipus the King. Although Oedipus had striven all his life to elude the fate predicted for him - that he would kill his father and marry his mother - he discovers at the end of "Oedipus Rex," that he has unwittingly committed the crimes he tried to avoid: patricide and incest. He blinds himself after the suicide of his wife-mother, Jocaste, and asks to be sent into exile. "Oedipus At Colonus" takes up the story twenty years later.

The second tragedy served two purposes for Sophocles: it addressed the question aroused by the first play, "Is Oedipus a criminal or a victim?" It also is a tribute to Colonus, the deme (suburb) of Athens in which Sophocles was born and raised.

The play not only addresses the end of Oedipus' life, but sets the stage for the fate that will befall his children in "Antigone." The tragedy was performed in 402 B.C.E., after Sophocles' death, and was awarded first prize.

"Colonus" is not what you'd call an exciting play. There is conflict in every scene - as there is in all of Greek drama - but only a confrontation between Oedipus and one of his sons generates real friction.

The play's real action is in the mind. Its power resides in the Tragic Messenger's tale at the plays end. The catharsis we experience is a kind of relief and joy that Oedipus' suffering is at a joyful end, and that the gods, in a very small measure, relent, but not repent, their indifferent cruelty.

Before reviewing some comments on the tragedy, let's follow the plot.

SCENE I

Oedipus, blind and beggared, arrives at Colonus, led by his elder daughter, Antigone, who has accompanied her father into exile. They come to a grove where the old man sits to rest. A stranger approaches and warns them that they are trespassing on a sanctuary sacred to the Furies. The stranger hastens away to tell the citizens of Colonus of the old man's sacrilege. Oedipus recognizes that his life is drawing to an end because it had been foretold that he would die in such a place.

CHORAL DIALOGUE (PARADOS)

A band of citizens from Colonus arrives, looking for the man who has violated the sacred precinct. Oedipus reveals himself and agrees to leave the safety of the grove if they promise not to harm him. They ask who he is and when he gives them his

name, they are horrified, knowing his history, and demand that he leave so as not to pollute sacred ground. Antigone begs them to relent.

SCENE II

Oedipus chides the citizens for not observing the rule of hospitality, which is of paramount importance in all Greek society. They tell him they have sent for Athens' ruler, Theseus, so that he may judge what to do about the situation. At this point, Oedipus' second daughter, Ismene, enters with news. Oedipus' sons are contending for the throne of Thebes and the Oracle has prophesied that the welfare of Thebes depends on Oedipus' presence there, living or dead. Oedipus asks the citizens to protect him and he will prove a blessing to their land. They ask that he offer a sacrifice to the Furies and he sends Ismene to do so.

CHORAL DIALOGUE

As they wait for Theseus' arrival, the citizens ask Oedipus to tell them his story. He does so, with great reluctance and pain.

SCENE III

Theseus enters and, after a long, searching dialogue with Oedipus, promises that he will give him refuge and will protect him should anyone try to remove him by force.

CHORAL POEM

The action of the play is interrupted as the citizens chant a celebrated poem praising Athens and Colonus: the land itself; the olive tree which supplies their wants; Athens for its splendor; and Poseidon for the skill of taming horses, something for which Colonus is noted.

SCENE IV

Creon, the present ruler of Thebes, enters with soldiers to take Oedipus back to his city, in order to win the favor of the gods. When Oedipus refuses, Creon tells him that he has taken Ismene captive and proceeds to seize Antigone. The citizens object and try to resist. They are reinforced by Theseus who returns with his guard and orders Creon to leave the land and release his captives. Creon reluctantly obeys, leading Theseus and his men to the place where the girls are held captive.

CHORAL POEM

The citizens imagine the progress of Theseus and his men and their triumph over Creon.

SCENE V

Theseus returns with Antigone and Ismene, restoring them to their father. He tells Oedipus that a stranger from Argos has come to Colonus, asking for him. Oedipus immediately realizes that it is his son Polyneices, come to ask for his aid. When Oedipus went into exile, the two brothers agreed to share the throne, each serving for a year in turn. But Eteocles, with Creon's help, has refused to let Polyneices resume power. Now, Polyneices has raised an army of champions at Argos and plans to lay siege to Thebes to depose Eteocles and win back the throne.

CHORAL POEM

The citizens meditate on the difficulties and disappointments of life and the release offered from worldly anguish by death. They claim that the best fate of all is not to be born; the second, to quickly die.

SCENE VI

Polyneices approaches, in tears, repenting his long neglect of his father. He asks Oedipus to help him kill his brother. Oedipus is furious at the thought of one of his sons wishing to kill the other and, in a rage, curses them both, praying that they will kill each other in the coming civil war. Antigone is heartbroken at the thought of what lies ahead for her brothers.

CHORAL POEM AND DIALOGUE

As the citizens discuss what has just happened, there is a terrific peal of thunder and flash of lightning. Oedipus realizes that his end is near and sends for Theseus to come quickly. The citizens are disturbed at the celestial fireworks and add their voices to Oedipus', hoping for Theseus' prompt arrival.

SCENE VII

Theseus enters and Oedipus bids him follow as the blind man intends to go forward without a guide. He knows that his death is near and promises that it will be a blessing for Colonus and Athens. Oedipus and Theseus exit toward the lightning.

CHORAL POEM

The citizens pray for Oedipus' passing.

SCENE VIII

The Tragic Messenger enters to tell the citizens what he has seen. Oedipus, his daughters, and Theseus entered the sacred ground and heard a voice from heaven summoning Oedipus. The blind man asked Theseus to protect his

daughters. When that promise is given, Oedipus and Theseus enter the depths of the sacred grove, from whence Oedipus is caught up into the presence of the gods.

CHORAL DIALOGUE

Antigone and Ismene enter and are consoled by the citizens. Theseus returns and tells the girls that he cannot show them the place where their father left this earth; it is to be a sacred secret. The girls then ask to be returned to Thebes where they hope to prevent a bloody war between their brothers. The citizens close the play:

Now let the weeping cease;
Let no one mourn again.
These things are in the hands of god.

About the Play

The play deals with the impending death of a great, though not necessarily good, man, who has faced all the trials and challenges of life and now looks forward to the last, his death. Since his exile from Thebes, Oedipus has insisted on his innocence, maintaining that his crimes were the result of the gods' caprice. In summoning him to their midst, the gods tacitly concede their injustice.

In almost his first words in the play, Oedipus lists the three great elements that constitute his moral fibre:

Sufferings, and length of time,
And nobility, teach me content.

One commentator calls the story "a profoundly spiritual tale . . . of prophesied redemption. Sophocles deals with no particular creed or belief. He is more concerned with the general spirituality of every human . . . who faces the conflicts of life and the inevitability of death."

In his analysis of the tragedy, critic Cedric H. Whitman goes to the core of Sophocles' creation:

"The Oedipus at Colonus . . . lacks the daemonic élan of the other two Theban plays; it contains less obvious conflict, save what is concentrated in the scenes with Creon and Polyneices. But in Sophoclean tragedy, action may be defined as the functioning of the hero's will.

"If (the play) fails to exhibit the dramatic alacrity of the earlier plays, it is for a good reason. The play presents the long slow reversal of the Oedipus Rex. Instead of the abrupt plunge down the precipice, the movement here is laboriously uphill, and

endurance is the criterion. . . Oedipus himself sets the tempo for the play in which, hated by the gods and abandoned, he finds his answer to them. The gods who destroyed him earlier make no further move, either for or against him, until they finally acknowledge his dignity with the affidavit of their heavenly thunder and bring to pass the moment in which he is complete."