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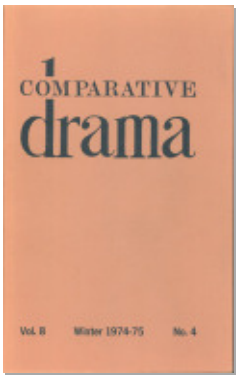

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The living nerve of Sophoclean tragedy is man's heroic endurance of irrational and uncontrollable evil. The Sophoclean hero typically labors beneath an intolerable burden of cruelties which rolls and grinds upon the hero until his need to throw it off becomes an inner necessity. He must continually justify a life that is offensive to others. The festering wound of Philoctetes represents such an offensiveness which the gods inflict upon him as a punishment, though he has committed no crime. His comrades abandon him on a desert island where, like Oedipus in his wanderings after his banishment from Thebes, he must live in isolation from his fellow men. Thus do both suffer stigmatization by the gods. Each claims that his suffering confers certain rights upon him, and that their fulfillment alone constitutes an adequate justice. Sophocles focuses his lucid vision on the unwanted fate and the quest for justice in order to evaluate the moral and spiritual authority of such rights to which the suffering lays claim.

Perhaps the events of the latter half of the fifth century, when Sophocles wrote, partially explain Sophocles's preoccupation with the tensions between man's desire for justice and the uncontrollable aspects of life shaping his destiny. Athens, at the height of her power on land, had consolidated her empire. But the prolonged Peloponnesian war demoralized the city and finally ended in her defeat at Sparta's hands two years after Sophocles's death. Tyrants arose, arbitrary rule prevailed, and men questioned the past notion of justice inherited from the Eliatic philosophical tradition. The Eliatic philosophers had developed a teleological view of life that explained everything according to a divine plan which was rationally comprehensible and universally applicable to all men.[1] The famous saying of Anaximander is often quoted

to summarize this view of justice: "It is necessary that things should pass away into that from which they are born. For things must pay one another the penalty and compensation for their injustice according to the ordinance of time."[2] This notion, that an unalterable justice is built into the very nature of things, emerged alongside the rise of the Greek city-state. The early city-state was in fact an effort to give social-political expression to this eternal order of justice.[3]

The sophists, however, challenged this inherited framework of moral-religious thought. Not only did they argue that divinity is a human projection; given this nihilistic presupposition, they also argued that "justice" is only a convenience of language, a catch-all term for pragmatic expressions of self-interest and power.[4] Might makes right, said the sophists, and therewith they tersely summarized the prevailing political cynicism of an era in which city-states fought and tyrants (like Creon in *Antigone*) made their personal whims the arbitrary standards of right and wrong. The teachings of the sophists are a kind of intellectual barometer. They indicate the Athenian's rising despair as he witnessed his city's failure to preserve the ideal of social justice which Athena exacted from Athens in its worship of her. In the midst of political intrigues and war, the individual's fate was closely linked to the unpredictable caprices of power, and the question of how to survive an unwanted victimization must have been driven home to the individual with painful urgency.[5] Perhaps, as Werner Jaeger suggests, the fact that survival daily required the individual to compromise his best qualities eroded the Greek character and thereby facilitated the collapse of society.[6] In any case, the anarchic social, political, and philosophical forces were driving Greek society toward the tragic.

Such at least is the testimony of many Greek tragedies, particularly those of Sophocles. The anarchic cultural milieu of the latter half of the fifth century comprises the moral universe which surrounds the Sophoclean hero. It is actively hostile toward him, and thus leads him—as it does Oedipus—into tragic conflict with it. Not only is the anarchy of the age mirrored in the unwanted fate which the gods arbitrarily impose upon Oedipus; this situation also becomes in *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus* a metaphor for reality which questions the spiritual adequacy of inherited moral and religious ideals. Indeed *Oedipus at Colonus* is a most forceful expression of that crisis

over the true nature of deity which men experienced in fifth-century Greece, and which Plato and Aristotle treat extensively in their philosophical writings.[7]

Certainly the religious doubts and the most frightening intuitions about the nature of deity to which the age gave rise achieve a living urgency in the tragic career of Oedipus. In *Oedipus Rex* the divine oracles predict that incest and parricide are his inescapable fate. Oedipus's efforts to avoid this prophesied predetermination to evil are futile. The oracle is fulfilled, and, seeing that he has blindly murdered his father and married his mother, his unrelieved despair, repugnance, and anger at how appearances have deceived him erupt in the terrifying spectacle of gouging out his eyes.[8] The issue is joined: Are these past actions expressions of his deepest self, or revelations of an evil reality external to his will?

In *Oedipus at Colonus,* a much older Oedipus defends himself against Creon's charge that he is "an unholy man":

> I suffered [the fulfillment of the prophecies],
> By fate, against my will! It was God's pleasure,
> And perhaps our race had angered him long ago.
> In me myself you could not find such evil
> As would have made me sin against my own.
> And tell me this: if there were prophecies
> Repeated by the oracles of the gods,
> That father's death should come through his own son,
> How could you justly blame it upon me? (ll. 963-71)[9]

Sophocles uses Oedipus's unmitigated sense of injustice in *Oedipus at Colonus* to dramatize the felt absence of a trustworthy theodicy.[10] This play, like the earlier *Oedipus Rex,* suggests that the gods, far from being concerned and equitable arbiters of justice among men, predetermine men to evil and arbitrarily heap inhuman burdens upon them. Sophocles seems in fact in his last play to be exploring the inner dictates which emerge from Oedipus's past condemnation to evil—and which shape his final use of power before his death—as a possible analogy for achieving a clearer vision of evil, divine power, divine justice, and their interrelationships.[11]

Sophocles makes all issues in the play hinge on Oedipus's claim that his unwanted suffering grants him certain rights to vengeance. David Grene rightly suggests that "the play is made to turn—as far as the plot goes—on the salvaging of something,

on the right of the wronged to his human concept of vengeance. . . . Thus, special weight rests on the interview with Polyneices and the vividness of the hatred that flares for the last time."[12] The issue at stake here is what constitutes adequate justice. Sophocles gives moral and dramatic impact to this issue by exploring it from the perspective of a figure whose extremities of suffering could plausibly legitimatize a retaliatory act of vengeance. In this regard, Oedipus's apotheosis at his death becomes a problematical element for any reading of this play. For Oedipus's deification seems to put a divine stamp of approval on his final act of vengeance, as if to settle with chilling finality any ethical or religious questions regarding the moral rightfulness, or spiritual acceptableness, of his vengeful action. Yet, through the play's structure, Sophocles makes such questions rise at the very end like an oncoming wave which carries us back through the play with something more than a human perspective, but with something less than an unambiguous answer.

A brief consideration of the radically different stances Oedipus takes toward divine oracles in *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus* will help us derive our bearings for approaching these questions. In both plays oracles significantly influence the dramatic action and its outcome.[13] But in the last play Oedipus relies upon oracles as tenaciously as he seeks in the earlier play to avoid the realization of one. In *Oedipus Rex* the emphasis falls on how Oedipus, by his very efforts to avoid parricide and incest, commits these prophesied deeds that are abhorrent to him. But in *Oedipus at Colonus* Oedipus uses oracles to destroy his sons, and justifies his action in terms of these destructive consequences. Oedipus's vindictive actions are conditioned, perhaps even evoked, by his awareness that, regardless of his actions, the gods have prepared a divine "consummation" for him.

The memory of an early oracle predicting this auspicious death has perhaps sustained Oedipus during his twenty years of wandering. For when *Oedipus at Colonus* opens outside Athens with Oedipus trespassing upon sacred ground where the Furies are worshipped, Oedipus repeats this oracle in his prayer to the "Ladies whose eyes / are terrible":

> . . . be mindful of me and of Apollo,
> For when he gave me oracles of evil,
> He also spoke of this:

> A resting place,
> After long years, in the last country, where
> I should find home among the sacred Furies:
> That there I might round out my bitter life,
> Conferring benefit on those who received me,
> A curse on those who have driven me away.
> . . . .
> Grant me then, goddesses, passage from life at last,
> And consummation, as the unearthly voice foretold;
> Unless indeed I seem not worth your grace. (ll. 87-93, 102-04)

Thus, before the action begins and human motives are brought into conflict, the gods are already a presence to contend with. For the oracle clearly confers on Oedipus a power of undefined limits. In contrast the gods never appear in *Antigone* until its tragic culmination. "By letting [the gods] speak only after the action [of *Antigone*] is complete," Cedric Whitman writes, Sophocles

> carefully divorces them from any suspicion of causation or interference. . . . Thus no responsibility is removed from the actors, and their psychology is not violated but magnified by reference to figures out of eternity. Such divine or semi-divine persons, who are themselves outside the action, picture it for us whole. They show no more than the action has shown, but they give it a cosmic setting.[14]

The gods are, so to speak, a divine flashlight shining into the darkness created by man. Such might plausibly be the case in *Oedipus at Colonus* were we to ignore the early introduction of a second oracle, and were we to focus our attention solely on the way in which men grasp at the oracles in self-serving ways. But we cannot neglect the subtle way in which Oedipus, Polyneices, and Creon are grasped by the oracles. Thus, even though the gods themselves remain outside the action, their role is nevertheless problematical throughout the play.

Oedipus's daughter, Ismene, travels from Thebes in search of her father to tell him that Polyneices has been banned from Thebes by his younger brother, Etocles, and is now making military preparations to recapture the throne for himself. She also tells of a recent oracle which proclaims lasting benefit to that land which gives Oedipus a decent burial. The gods are, by implication, putting at his disposal the power to decide the outcome of the Theban conflict: ". . . the gods who threw you down," Ismene tells him, "sustain you now." As a consequence

of this oracle Thebes sends Creon to fetch Oedipus back to the city where he will be held until his death so that Thebes can reap the promised benefits from his proper burial. However, it will be no honored burial in Thebes; for the city will abide by the curse on his family which denies him that privilege. Upon hearing this, Oedipus angrily vows that Thebes "shall never hold me in [its] power!" But another revelation follows that is even more dispiriting for Oedipus: his sons, fully understanding the import of the oracle, nevertheless still seek the throne for themselves rather than return it to their father. His anger breaks into a chilling prayer for vengeance:

> Gods!
> Put not their fires of ambition out!
> Let the last word be mine upon this battle
> They are about to join, with the spears lifting!
> I'd see that the one who holds the sceptre now
> Would not have power long, nor would the other,
> The banished one, return!
> These were the two
> Who saw me in disgrace and banishment
> And never lifted a hand for me. (ll. 421-29)

> For lack of a little word from that fine pair
> Out I went, like a beggar, to wander forever! (ll. 444-45)

> Well, they shall never win me in their fight!
> . . . .
> I am sure of that; I have heard the prophecies
> Brought by this girl; I think they fit those others
> Spoken so long ago, and now fulfilled. (ll. 450, 452-54)

Oedipus recognizes that the gods have given him the freedom to act with impunity. At this point in the action, however, the nature of deity is by no means a foregone conclusion, nor is it until the play is finished. The point to be made here is that divine oracles overarch the action from beginning to end, and, though absent, the gods still seem to stir up the inner shufflings and caprices of human motives, as if to make them the hidden agencies secretly working out some incomprehensible divine purpose. In this play, Sophocles stretches the resources of his craft toward making it accommodate or express a religious psychology which probes the expressions of Oedipus's darkest impulses as possible eruptions of the very nature of reality itself.

However, Antigone and Theseus show human nature in its more appealing aspects, even though Theseus is no stranger to

exile and Antigone shares her father's banishment. Sophocles seems to be asking whether shared experiences or the experience of similar situations can heal the duality of human nature.

Theseus, the Athenian king, incarnates the ideal of justice which Athens originally represented to the Greek mind, and which the Chorus later celebrates in its beautiful paen to Athens, the "nurse of men" (ll. 668-719). When Oedipus requests his protection, he suggests that Theseus will reap "advantage" by accepting his "beaten self," but warns him that he will thereby also risk war with Thebes. Theseus feels a spiritual kinship with Oedipus: "It would be something dire indeed/ To make me leave you comfortless; for I/ Too was an exile" (ll. 560-62). Not only does Theseus declare the suppliant Oedipus a citizen of Athens; he also invites Oedipus to live in the royal household. Theseus here flaunts the formidable authority of the Areopagus, which proscribed the sheltering of a polluted man.[15] The Chorus expresses fear that such pollution can work them harm; and their treatment of Oedipus before Theseus's arrival, when they press him to recount his crime and then order him to leave Athens, illustrates the cruelty of their conventional attitude toward pollution. Both the Chorus and Theseus believe that Oedipus and his pollution are one. For the citizens this belief requires complete rejection of the man. For Theseus this belief requires full acceptance of both the man and his pollution if Athens wants the benefit Oedipus can confer upon it. The contrasting treatments which Theseus and Thebes accord Oedipus illustrate opposing views regarding how the city-state could most effectively deploy and limit man's freedom for the collective welfare. To accept the benefits of human freedom is, for Theseus, also to accept its hazards. His beneficence, unlike the grasping attitude of Thebes, divests the city's interest in Oedipus of all cruelty and exploitation.

Creon's arrival initiates the conflict of interests. Oedipus resists Creon's summons to return to Thebes, scathes his hypocrisy, and Creon—seeing that argument with Oedipus is futile—kidnaps Antigone and Ismene. The citizens cry for help. Theseus, no stern legalist, interrupts his sacifice to the gods and rushes to the scene. When informed of Creon's action, Theseus promises his protection to Oedipus, since he is now an Athenian citizen. Creon threatens Theseus with war and reproaches him for violating the authoritative decree of the Areopagus which forbids

his protecting "an unholy man, a parricide." The memory of his past deeds is like an exposed nerve in Oedipus, and, having already twice defended himself against these accusations by the Chorus and having similarly rebuked Theseus himself, Oedipus once again protests his innocence in one of his longest speeches. Oedipus now makes good the long years of his frustrated silence. He exposes Creon's deceitfulness, but Theseus already sees that Creon's actions express a warped nature which Theseus says is its own punishment (ll. 907-08). Theseus thus affirms a universal law of justice which transcends all legal definitions of guilt and punishment. Theseus orders Creon, at peril of his life, to lead him to where he has hidden Antigone and Ismene, even if they must go to Thebes itself. To Oedipus he says: "you stay here, and rest assured/ That unless I perish first I'll not draw breath/ Until I put your children in your hands" (ll. 1039-41).

Theseus's rescue of Antigone and Ismene deserves and evokes Oedipus's gratitude. But as he reaches for Theseus's hand, Oedipus recoils in fear of polluting him. "How can a wretch like me/ Desire to touch a man who has no stain/ Of evil in him? No, no; I will not do it." But Oedipus also expresses a pride of suffering which, given the circumstances, is unbelievably insulting in its arrogance toward Theseus and forgetful of Theseus's own exile.

> And neither shall you touch me. The only ones
> Fit to be fellow suffers [sic] of mine
> Are those with such experience as I have.
> Receive my salutation where you are.
> And for the rest, be kindly to me still
> As you have been up to now. (ll. 1135-38)

Though taken aback, Theseus's reply is a restrained affirmation that his actions speak for themselves. Theseus refuses a subtle temptation to assert his power over Oedipus. The contrast between Theseus and Creon is here fully driven home. "Creon would try to take the extreme advantage of someone whom circumstances put into a disadvantageous position; Theseus would stretch compassion a point or two beyond what is safe in a conventional course."[16]

Oedipus's reunion with his daughters is disrupted by his "hated" son, Polyneices, who is marching toward Thebes with his army. He requests an interview with his father, but Oedipus refuses. Despite Theseus's rebuke that Oedipus now has "a duty

to the god [of Athens]" to give ear to the suppliant as Theseus gave ear to him, Oedipus remains unyielding until Antigone speaks. She tells her father that if Polyneices has "ill intentions" he will betray them, suggests that Oedipus can now break the curse on their family by foregoing his desire for revenge, and recalls the parricide and incest abhorrent to Oedipus in order to remind him that he himself all too well knows the irrevocable consequences of his "terrible wrath": "You have, I think, a permanent reminder/ In your lost, irrecoverable eyes" (ll. 1181-1203). Her advice is painfully ironic: "Reflect, not on the present, but on the past." Oedipus can, in fact, see himself and others only in his image of the past, and his interviews with Creon and Polyneices demonstrate his desire to destroy this image.

Polyneices is a soldier; military values shape his very being; and in his pride as commander we see the once proud King Oedipus stand forth. He has heard of the oracle which confers power on his father, and he now seeks that paternal blessing which would assure him victory in his campaign against Thebes. Like Oedipus, Polyneices is bent on avenging his own banishment from Thebes no matter what it will cost others. Polyneice's opening words perhaps express genuine repentance for having contributed to his father's misery. In any case, he asks Oedipus to forgive him:

> Only, think:
> Compassion limits even the power of God;
> So may there be a limit for you, father!
> For all that has gone wrong may still be healed,
> And surely the worst is over! (ll. 1267-70)

The last six words, so cavalier in their casual sweeping aside of the wasted years, must have sealed his doom. Oedipus remains silent; and he perhaps detects in Polyneices's anxious response little sense of guilt for his father's plight.

> Speak to me, father! Don't turn away from me!
> Will you not answer me at all? Will you
> Send me away without a word?
> Not even
> Tell me why you are enraged against me?
> (ll. 1271-74)

Again silence, and Polyneices pleads with his sisters to make their "implacable father" speak. But Antigone says that he himself must speak so that Oedipus can judge his intentions.

In his second speech, Polyneices goes to the heart of the matter as if ignorant in matters of the heart. This speech offers very little, if anything, that would mollify his father's anger. A good half of this speech describes his military expedition against Thebes. There is irreverence, if not malice, in the way he twice taunts Oedipus about the family curse (ll. 1299-1300, 1322-25). And his closing words are suspiciously ambiguous regarding the issue which most deeply touches Oedipus:

> If you will stand by me in my resolve,
> I'll waste no time or trouble whipping [Etocles];
> And then I'll re-establish you at home,
> And settle there myself, and throw him out.
> If your will is the same as mine, it's possible
> To promise this. If not, I can't be saved.
> (ll. 1339-45)

Oedipus gives Polyneices a blistering answer, a scourge which breaks the very back of his political ambitions. Oedipus disowns Polyneices, charging him with irreverence, faithlessness, making false claims to the throne—and parricide. ". . . I regard you as a murderer!/ For you reduced me to this misery,/ You made me an alien. Because of you/ I have begged my daily bread from other men" (ll. 1362-64). Oedipus here voices the outrage of an old social order against an emerging anarchy which rejects past sources of authority. He vindictively strikes back in the name of the old order, as though revenge were now the only way to reaffirm the worth of its violated values.

> You cannot take that city. You'll go down
> All bloody, and your brother, too.
> For I
> Have placed that curse upon you before this,
> And now I invoke that curse to fight for me,
> That you may see a reason to respect
> Your parents, though your birth was as it was;
> . . . .
> And so your supplication and your throne
> Are overmastered surely,—if accepted
> Justice still has place in the laws of God.
> (ll. 1373-82)

"Here, at some level of mystical ambiguity, Sophocles presents the union of a totally human being suffused with the color of a god, a Greek god, whose incomprehensibility is momentarily comprehensible."[17] In Oedipus divine power becomes a form of

tyrannous hatred which denies Polyneices that personal value which Oedipus wants others to recognize in himself. Oedipus "sweeps away . . . all those human considerations which he had urged on his own behalf when dealing with the Chorus and Theseus," considerations which quickly move Theseus to accept him.[18] The contrast here between Oedipus and Theseus is crucial; for their separate responses reveal the element of risk which attends any demand for mercy.

The differences between these two men hinge on their divergent stances toward the uncertainties of an ambiguous world. Theseus accepts Oedipus partially because Oedipus promises to confer "a favor" upon Athens in return for this mercy. Theseus risks much. Not only does he defy the authority of the Areopogus; he also refuses to make Oedipus define his "favor." Theseus simply trusts Oedipus, and expects his actions to evoke from Oedipus a commensurate trust. Society for Theseus is essentially an expression of men's confidence in each other, and he bristles whenever Oedipus doubts him. Oedipus, however, will not take the risk which granting clemency to Polyneices would require of him. Rather than act on the precarious possibility that Polyneices has changed, or that Polyneices will change with his parental blessing, Oedipus prays that Polyneices's heart remain hate-filled so as thereby to assure his, and his brother's, death. These diametrically opposed actions of Oedipus and Theseus bring the following issue into sharp focus: Does the achievement of justice rest on the belief that only the fear of punishment by death can limit human evil, or on the belief that mercy might enable men to change and act for the better—that this possibility itself warrants risking the belief? Oedipus's action toward Polyneices—with its destructive consequences for others and its reinforcement of Polyneices's determination—questions the validity of the former belief, while Theseus's action toward Oedipus reveals the limitations of the latter belief.

Two other elements in the play further complicate this issue. There is first the sympathetic portrayal of Polyneices as he speaks with Antigone, who responds to him as a person of great value.[19] She warns him that he is only playing into his father's hands by marching against Thebes, and begs him to quit his campaign. "But that is impossible," he tells her. "How could I command/ That army, even backward, once I faltered? . . . It is shameful to run; and it is also shameful/ To be a laughing-stock to a younger

brother" (ll. 1418-19, 1422-23). Polyneices is trapped into death by his own unswerving commitment to his society's ideal model of manhood. Sophocles here dramatizes not only how the Greek relied on this model to resolve a conflict of wills, but also how it tragically contributes to the fulfillment of Oedipus's vengeance, as though for Sophocles the two express the same values.

Antigone's grief over his imminent death touches Polyneices. His last words are a benediction on Antigone and Oedipus: "You two—I pray no evil comes to you,/ For all men know you merit no more pain" (ll. 1445-46). Sophocles shows that in Polyneices Oedipus has a better son than he thinks—that there exists in Polyneices an essential integrity which, in response to more humane urgings from Oedipus, might have altered the entire course of events. To the extent which Sophocles makes his audience feel and respond to this possibility in Polyneices, it will question the adequacy of Oedipus's notion of justice.

A second element bears down more insistently upon this issue of how to re-establish justice: Antigone herself. She, too, has suffered the long years of exile with her father, a victim by choice of her brothers' political ambitions; she, too, has watched the unnecessary wastage of her life; she, too, speaks from the depths of that shared suffering on which Oedipus bases his right to revenge. Antigone feels neither bitter nor superior toward others because of her suffering, and only once, when she implores Oedipus to grant Polyneices an interview, does she use her suffering as a means to gain power over another: "Ah, yield to us! If our request is just,/ We need not, surely, be importunate;/ And you, to whom I have not yet been hard,/ Should not be obdurate with me!" She boldly reprimands her father's willingness to suspend any human obligation to his son. "You sired him; even had he wronged you, father,/ And wronged you impiously, still you could not/ Rightfully wrong him in return!/ Do let him come!" (ll. 1201-04, 1189-92). Antigone's preoccupation with how the curse on her family might be lifted finally leads her to conclude that only that compassion which defies all wrathful use of power can end the curse.[20] Indeed Antigone sees in the blood bond of family kinship a true image of the spiritual ties between all men, for she presents parental mercy toward children as the normative model for all human relationships. In her earlier plea to the Chorus not to turn her father away, Antigone says:

> Take pity still on my unhappiness,
> And let me intercede with you for him.
> Not with lost eyes, but looking in your eyes
> As if I were a child of yours, I beg
> Mercy for him, the beaten man! O hear me!
> (ll. 241-46)

Antigone moves the citizens, but she cannot reach Oedipus in the labyrinth of his aroused hatred. In this play legitimate constraints on the use of power emerge from human relationships as do the unanswerable rights to use power destructively, and these contradictory dictates erupt in tragic conflict. Sophocles has thus pushed the action toward two alternative resolutions of such conflicts. Men must either seek or devise a model of justice which can heal this duality in human nature, or else conclude that man's will is so irreparably divided against itself that it requires a healing power beyond justice. The apotheosis which ends the play perhaps indicates the direction of Sophocles's thought on this matter.

The deification of Oedipus is the one event in the play clearly initiated by the gods. Hence it may be viewed as an expression of their stance toward the action. But any such approach to the apotheosis must carefully assess the nature and role of the oracles. They are an assertive presence perhaps best described as an indefiniteness of purpose: they invite their being used, even manipulated, for either good or ill. Not only do the oracles not specify when, where, or why Oedipus's transfiguration will occur; they also do not define what the curse and blessing are—though the reason for each is clear—nor do the oracles say that Oedipus must destroy some and benefit others. They only confer these powers upon him. Hence, whatever blessing or curse he bestows, it will express more the inevitability of character than of situation. The oracles thus accent, even trigger, human psychology so that dramatizing human motives and their outcome becomes, in this context, a portrait of the effects which the gods have upon men—effects which, for Sophocles, reveal the nature of deity.

In death, Oedipus regains the kingly authority denied him in life. Blind though he is, Oedipus unerringly leads his daughters and Theseus to the place where he must die. The scene is a disquieting vision of death in which the gods speak, and will not be denied, their imperative of death. Oedipus bestows his blessing on Athens, bathes himself, and, after telling his daughters

that his love for them is unsurpassable, "They [cling] together/ And [weep], all three." The gods repeatedly call: "Oedipus! Oedipus! Why are we waiting?" Oedipus delays: and therewith his desire to live, simply to live, discloses a new sense of life's sacredness which undermines, indeed denies, all of his prior sanctions for gaining revenge. Oedipus embraces his daughters in the same spirit which shapes Antigone's lamentation for his death:

> One may long for the past
> Though at the time indeed it seemed
> Nothing but wretchedness and evil.
> Life was not sweet, yet I found it so
> When I could put my arms around my father.
> O father! O my dear! (ll. 1697-1700)

For Antigone, the meaning of death is the ultimate value that it confers on living in spite of its miseries.

Oedipus quickly orders everyone to leave except Theseus, who alone can witness the apotheosis to learn its mysteries. A blinding light forces Theseus to shade his eyes "as if from something awful,/ Fearful and unendurable to see," and he bows in worship of the gods. Sophocles perhaps means by this scene to affirm that Oedipus is divine by virtue of his heroic endurance of unbearable suffering.[21] But it would require both an unfaithful rendering of the play's structure, and the slighting of Antigone's forcefully expressed sense of injustice and its dramatic function, to say further that Sophocles offers the apotheosis as an adequate and fully acceptable model of justice.

For the apotheosis is also disquieting because it immediately follows upon Oedipus's vindictive triumph over Polyneices. The enjambment of these two scenes creates the disturbing impression that the god's recognition of Oedipus is, if not contingent upon, at least directly related to his retaliatory use of power. Since the gods initiate Oedipus's deification, they seem to be radically disjoined from the spiritual possibility Antigone expresses in her demand for unconditional mercy.[22] In fact, the gods provide no answer at all in the death scene that would adjudicate, let alone heal, human conflicts. Their intervention displays not a concern to make possible a fresh beginning for everyone concerned, but only an awesome power over human life. The gods simply suspend the human condition rather than cure it.[23] Antigone's sad declaration of injustice rings out the apotheosis:

"Now we may weep, indeed./ Now, if ever, we may cry/ In bitter grief against our fate,/ Our heritage still unappeased" (ll. 1670-73). The healing which Antigone demanded from Oedipus has now become for her the most urgent and basic necessity of life. She finds an answer to her despair in a suasive imperative to act: she could safely stay in Athens, but she chooses to return to Thebes on the hope that she can still swerve her brothers from killing each other. Antigone fully grieves her father's death; but she is still among the living, where she commits herself to Polyneices and Eteocles for their sake. Oedipus is deified; yet the actions of this traditional hero make him seem something less than an adequate cultural model. But in Antigone Sophocles offers the Greek a new spiritual definition of heroism. It is a cautious, but nevertheless hopeful, vision of man's capacity for growth into more humanizing spiritual possibilities.

Thus, in Sophocles's treatment of Oedipus's apotheosis, the gods are no longer a trustworthy source for defining man's best spiritual resources. Rather, the deification implies a flaw inherent in existence itself. Paul Ricoeur has called this flaw a "guiltiness of being," by which he means "a sort of fundamental badness in the nature of things."[24] This flaw is best illustrated in Oedipus's relation to the oracles. They essentially function as agents of temptation to evil: their promise of impunity (that is to say, the deification) lures Oedipus to gratify his hate through the vindictive use of his power. Oedipus greedily welcomes this assurance of divine protection (see lines 421-60). Sophocles boldly suggests here that the gods insidiously use their offer of power to fan that deep sense of injustice which infects Oedipus's entire being. The gods are absent, but their presence is felt in his stirrings to revenge. And by thus abandoning Oedipus to his own resources, the oracles become an effective means of removing all obstacles to the irrevocable fulfillment of the original curse the gods laid upon his family.[25] The oracles are, to borrow Ricoeur's fine phrase, like a "drop of transcendent perfidy" falling upon Oedipus and his sons.

This reading of the play becomes more plausible to the extent we are convinced that, although Oedipus chooses revenge, his destructive nature dooms him to this choice. That is to say, "The oracular prophecy . . . becomes an intensifying symbol of the necessity that was really given with [Oedipus's] personality."[26] The issue seemingly at stake here for Sophocles is that the gods

have so shaped the character of Oedipus that he perhaps is not free to act as Antigone would have him act—just as, in *Heracles,* Heracles is not free in his madness not to murder his family. Like Euripides, Sophocles links his protagonist's uncontrollable demonic impulses to the mysterious workings of deity. And Sophocles also dramatizes the interaction between these impulses and society, each having repercussions on the other. To exist as a social being in *Oedipus at Colonus* is inevitably to take on a personal guilt through participation in a larger social guilt. Both the gods and men are thus shown to create a rampant "guiltiness of being" which offers no relief from its snowballing pressures.

Sophocles thus effectively creates the sense of being helplessly locked within a reality which has little, if any, redemptive impact upon men. The moral universe of *Oedipus at Colonus* constitutes a boundary situation wherein justice and injustice necessarily imply one another, and thus we must walk the edge of paradox in this play in order to understand the ambiguous reality to which its contradictions point. Oedipus's belief in his own innocence shapes his quest for justice which, when finally completed, becomes an act of injustice; for the curse upon his sons also imposes an unconscionable suffering upon Antigone, Ismene, and Thebes. Oedipus is sinned against; but for Sophocles, Oedipus's belief in his innocence is itself a form of guilt. Even the mercy of Theseus unwittingly makes injustice possible; for his protection of Oedipus gives Oedipus the means to get revenge. The world of *Oedipus at Colonus* is one in which even the intention to mitigate the injustices of suffering becomes a path for the realization of injustice. Yet the imminent death of Oedipus's sons is a form of justice: they are judged, as Theseus says of Creon, according to their self-serving nature. In brief, the moral universe of this play can be described as an unbreakable and vicious circle where the tail of injustice is in the mouth of justice whose own tail is being swallowed by injustice. This cannibalistic process is the image of human existence in *Oedipus at Colonus.* More so than Oedipus, this unrelieved human condition is itself the irreparably flawed tragic figure.[27]

Thus does *Oedipus at Colonus* make us feel the destructive human consequences of reliance upon those gods who support Oedipus's quest for justice. Sophocles dramatizes how the inherited framework of religious belief, which found its ultimate source of redemptive power in the demand for retaliatory justice,

has become a power of entrapment and destruction. In an age when tyrants justified the expression of their worst impulses in the name of justice, Sophocles shows the necessity for a religious vision of redemptive power which transcends all demands for justice. The logic of the play's moral universe points toward the kind of power necessary to redeem it: a deity who takes man's guilt upon himself, much as Theseus and Antigone do in their separate ways. Certainly I do not mean here to suggest that Sophocles is some kind of Greek Isaiah. Rather, my argument is that Sophocles is doing nothing more nor less than using the resources of his art to push men of his generation toward feeling the necessity for new religious models of power that appeal not to man's baseness, but to his best impulses. For the essentially tragic point of *Oedipus at Colonus* is that Antigone and Theseus are already capable of a higher spiritual possibility than Oedipus, but the gods back Oedipus. Certainly Sophocles takes the gods to task through Antigone's moral presence, which questions all sanctions for conferring unlimited power upon Oedipus.

It is along these lines that *Oedipus at Colonus,* as suggested at the outset, gives expression to a crisis in the Greek notion of deity. Sophocles points the way toward a solution—a new spiritual ideal—but also keeps before us the heavy odds that render it helpless, but not useless.

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NOTES

1 Werner Jaeger, *Theology of the Early Greek Thinkers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 164.

2 Werner Jaeger, *Paideia* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), I, 159.

3 H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1958), p. 76. See also Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 110-12, 117-18. According to the myth of Protagoras in Plato, Zeus sent justice and reverence to men by Hermes in order thereby to make possible the creation of political community. See Plato, *Protagoras,* 322a-322c. Athens, for example, was founded on the worship of Athena, the protectress of peace and justice. See William F. Lynch, *Christ and Prometheus: A New Image of the Secular* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1970), pp. 89-95.

4 See Jaeger, *Theology,* pp. 174ff. and Jaeger, *Paideia,* I, 286-331 for an analysis of the sophist's emergence from, and transformation of, the tradition of the natural philosophers. See also John A. Moore, *Sophocles and Aretê* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1938), pp. 11-28, for remarks regarding the cultural implications of the sophist's ideas.

5 However, a keen sense of life's precariousness pervades Greek religion and is memorably expressed in the Homeric epics and Pindar's poetry. The second stanza of Pindar's "Olympian Ode XII" is a good example:

No man of the earth has ever encountered
a sure sign from God of the things to come. The future
is blind to him. It teases
his judgment: as the reversal of delight;
or as after suffering a surge of pain
the sudden turning from gloom to meadows of joy.

See Willis Barnstone, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1967), p. 159.

6 Jaeger, *Paideia,* I, 336.

7 Jaeger, *Theology,* p. 190.

8 The gouging out of his eyes is no act of expiation for past wrongs. Rather, it is a tragic expression of an ultimate rejection of his past belief in the trustworthiness of appearances. However, see *Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism,* ed. Laurence Michel and Richard Sewall (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 267-68. Gerald Else there argues that Oedipus's self-blinding is an act of purification which assures the audience of his "purity," and thereby justifiably releases the audience's pity for Oedipus.

9 All passages cited in this essay are taken from David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds., *Sophocles,* The Complete Greek Tragedies, II (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), 79-155.

10 Cedric Whitman notes that it was the aim of the long tradition of Greek religious rationalism "to achieve a scheme of theodicy whereby the evil in experience could be rationalized and adjusted to the idea of Divine Justice" (*Sophocles* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966], p. 226). Whitman argues that Sophocles's answer to this religious dilemma, given the lack of any trustworthy theodicy, is that man becomes divine by his heroic endurance of a purgatorial suffering that is unending.

11 "Human 'power'," writes Charles Hartshorne, "we know something about, but what sort of analogy enables us to speak of 'divine power'? Until we have this analogy straight, there is no clearly defined problem of evil" (*A Natural Theology for Our Time* [LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1967], p. 119).

12 David Grene, *Reality and the Heroic Pattern* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 156. Three conflicting views of Oedipus can be discerned in the critical literature on *Oedipus at Colonus.* They rest upon different evaluations of Oedipus's moral culpability, especially in his treatment of his son, Polyneices, who banished Oedipus from Thebes after he blinded himself and forced Oedipus to become a homeless wanderer for twenty years. One critic maintains that "Time . . . has taught Oedipus the breadth of vision and the flexibility of character which allow him to look for good in the ways of others and to bear his misfortunes with resignation and even humility." See Robert M. Torrance, "Sophocles: Some Bearings," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology,* 69 (1965), 287. According to this view, Oedipus "judges men justly and exactly, knows fully, sees clearly." See Bernard Knox, *The Heroic Temper* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1964), p. 157. Torrance acknowledges his affinity with Knox, and their interpretations of the play are quite similar. Others present a diametrically opposed picture of Oedipus. David Grene sketches a clear outline of this characterization: "Oedipus has been wronged by Creon and his sons. Given the opportunity he will destroy them, with no differentiation in their degree of guilt or any subjective consideration" (*Reality and the Heroic Pattern,* p. 165). Still a third viewpoint emphasizes that Oedipus seeks to make the world and the gods recognize and confirm the truth of "the value that he has set upon himself through years of suffering . . ." (Whitman, *Sophocles,* p. 193).

13 Heinrich Weinstock also views the oracles as shaping the dramatic action in both plays. "Aber," he adds, "wie wir im ersten Stuck [*Oedipus Rex*] schon sahen, dass mit der technisch kunstlerischen Wertung des Orakels und seiner widerspenstigen Krafte der tiefere Sinn dieses Baumittels noch gar nicht beruhrt war, so ist es auch hier: Das Orakel ist notwendiges Kunstmittel—von ihm lebt das Drama—, aber es ist zugleich und wesentlicher bedeutendes Wort, in dem der Sinn ruht" (*Sophokles* [Darmstadt: Hergestellt bei L. C. Wittich, 1937], p. 206).

14 Whitman, *Sophocles,* p. 95. These remarks are representative of Whitman's more general interpretation that in Sophoclean tragedy the gods are mere symbols, their sole function being the illumination of how things are in human affairs. For example, he rejects the "common assumption" that, in the Teiresias scene in *Antigone,* divine justice asserts itself. If this were so, he argues, "the conclusion inevitably follows that the gods, who are supposed to be justifying their existence, are either malign or hopelessly incompetent" (ibid., p. 94). In this regard, it is significant that in his analysis of *Oedipus at Colonus,* Whitman is silent about both the old oracle in the opening scene and the subsequent intrusion of a new oracle with the appearance of Ismene. These two scenes do not bear out Whitman's categorical assertion that Oedipus's triumph emerges from his moral independence of the gods. See ibid., pp. 199, 206, 213-14.

15 Euripides's powerful drama, *Heracles,* suggests that this taboo still held a strong influence over the Greek mind. Theseus's action, as in the Euripidean drama, is a striking example of a man willing to cut through conventional morality in his recognition of human value. Regarding the influential moral authority of the Areopagus, see Anthony Podlecki, *The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1966), pp. 127-29.

16 Grene, *Reality and the Heroic Pattern,* p. 163.

17 Ibid., p. 165.

18 Ibid., p. 164.

19 Whitman also notes that Sophocles "has deliberately given [Polyneices's] cause some justice by making him the elder, instead of the younger brother" (*Sophocles,* p. 211).

20 Søren Kierkegaard makes Antigone's preoccupation with this curse central to his re-creation of her story. See *Either / Or,* trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson, ed. Howard A. Johnson (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), I, 151-62.

21 Whitman, *Sophocles,* pp. 215-16.

22 It is even more apparent that Sophocles deliberately sought to achieve this effect when we consider that Sophocles rejected an optional ordering of the events. The confrontation with Polyneices could have as easily stood before Creon's arrival, and the apotheosis would then have occurred after Oedipus's reunion with his daughters. Oedipus's curse on his sons, now in the far background, would thereby lose much of its dramatic impact upon us. This sequence of scenes would thus create a strong impression that justice prevails in human affairs, and that the gods unambiguously support it. In brief, Sophocles refuses to link the apotheosis with that occasion wherein the helplessness of Oedipus evokes—and Theseus fulfills—our own sympathetic demand that the injustice committed against him be righted, and by a stern use of power if necessary.

23 Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil,* p. 229.

24 Ibid., p. 220.

25 Hence Ricoeur argues that "Sophocles is more purely tragic than Aeschylus" because Sophocles's "doubly tragic view bars the way to the solutions sketched by Aeschylus" (p. 228). See also the comparison of Aeschylus and Sophocles in Whitman, *Sophocles,* pp. 38-40.

26 Susanne Langer contends that the conception of fate or destiny in Greek tragedy "usually centers in the mysterious predictability of *acts* someone is to perform. The occasions of the acts are not foretold; the world will provide them. . . . The oracular prophecy, then, becomes an intensifying symbol of the necessity that was really given with the agent's personality" (*Feeling and Form* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953], p. 353).

27 Grene, *Reality and the Heroic Pattern,* p. 166.