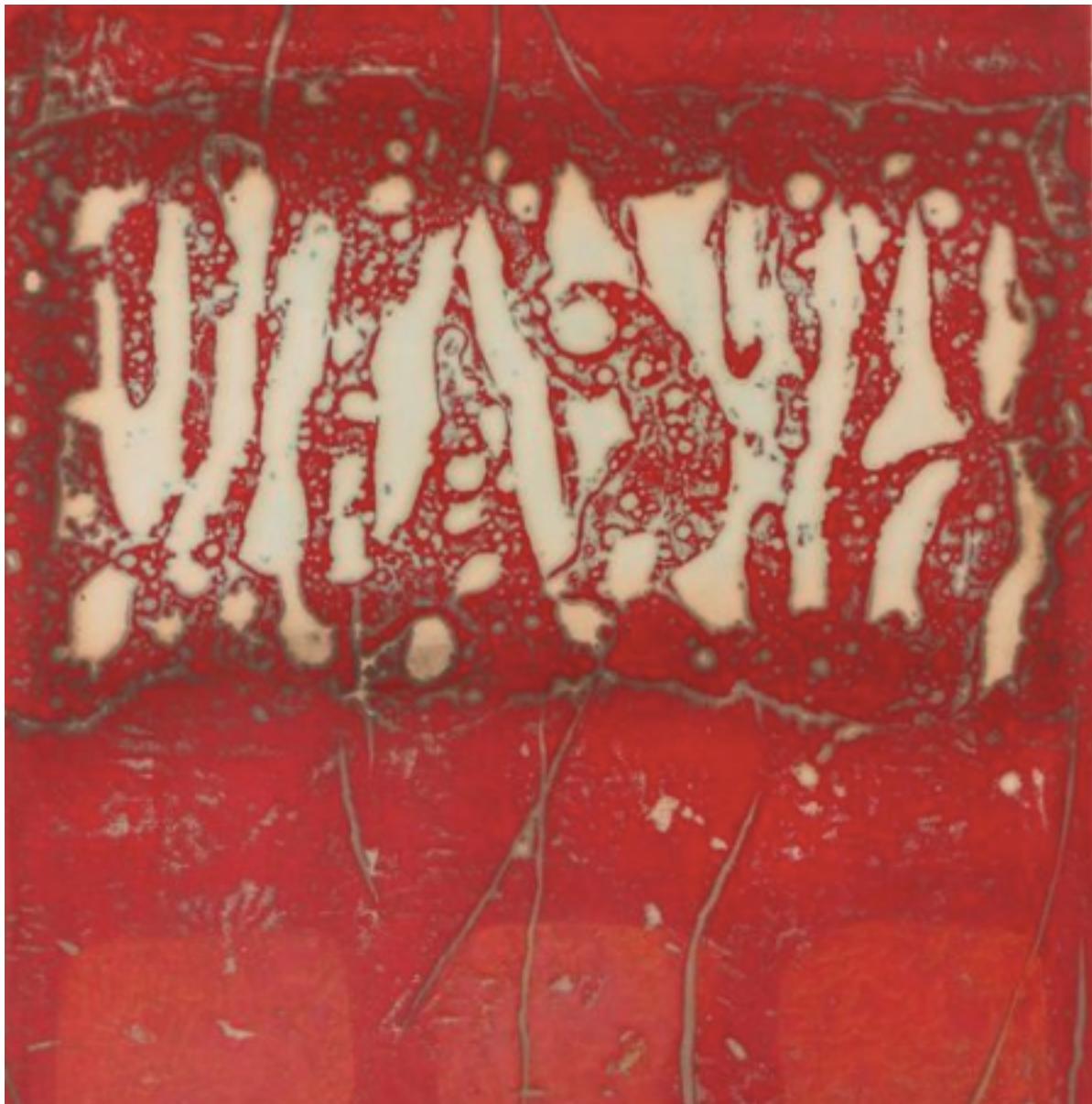

Oedipus at Colonus

Sophocles || Dudley Fitts + Robert Fitzgerald

dramaturgical actor packet 2020



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the theban plays

The Oedipus Cycle or the "Theban Plays" are Sophocles' most popular works. Ironically, the three plays were written in different years for different festivals, therefore are not by definition a true cycle, though they are often grouped together based on the subject matter of the story of Oedipus Rex.

Sophocles' innovations to the theatrical field include expansion of the chorus, painted scenery, and the addition of a third actor which allowed for more possibilities and tensions in drama as a whole. Considered structurally perfect, the Theban Plays' concern with reversal of fortune, hubris, and thematic challenging of the divine continue to render them as masterpieces today.

Sophocles, being one of three tragedians, works to display drama emphatically and with a twist. Like Aeschylus, who wrote a bit earlier, his work concerns itself with ideas of justice. He questions the very nature of humanity, but brings it to a smaller more dissectionable scale in the structure of an ancient family drama. He takes the seemingly simple idea of justice, retribution, fate, heroism, and complicates it. His poetry compliments the disturbing images laid before audiences and works to unravel. Aeschylus may have touched on it and Euripides might have blown it out of the water, but Sophocles begins to show us the inner aptitude of a person and what drives them completely. It is easy to empathize with the characters in Sophocles' plays as he finds a way to truly challenge various notions that appear so familiar and recognizable.

Fitts & Fitzgerald Translations

Fitts and Fitzgerald's translations, as poets themselves, have a great deal of lucidity that complements the original bold images. Unlike some translators who seemingly digest works in piecemeal, both poets are known to take occasional liberties with the words in order to convey the ideas behind them and to evoke the root of the piece entirely.



Mowen Li, "The Persian Princess in Oedipus Rex" (2017)

the historical context



"Entry of Palace of Luxor, formerly Thebes" (1830)

Sophocles in addition to his interest in theatre, held various political and military position throughout his life. He lived a long life, one that provided him opportunity to see the span of the Peloponnesian War and Athen's fluctuation as a rising empire. Sophocles was born in Colonus and apart from his duties in politics and the military, never left home. Despite his activity in various circles, his plays hardly show any direct references to current events making them at time a bit difficult to pin down contextually. Nonetheless, his innate civic mind and presence in domestic affairs mirrors itself in his piece's that often deal with like themes.

Sophocles' patriotic feel for his hometown of Athens

fuels his choosing of Thebes as the setting for the majority of his tragic plays. Thebes in the 5th century was often seen as a military enemy to Athens. The Peloponnesian War kickstarted when Thebes attacked Platea, an ally of Athens in 431 BCE. Athens rushed to defend Platea, and Sparta defended Thebes, as the war began and all cities divided. The invasions of Athens and its dwindling power were becoming more and more prominent during Sophocles' writing. The war had caused many refugees to pool into Athens for safety and resulted in a vast overcrowding. This increase in population lead to a plague that was fed by the constraints and lack of resources from the war. It is no surprise that Sophocles focused on stories that depicted the "fall" of Thebes in the Bronze Age and had Oedipus die in (and according to the oracle, thereby bless) Colonus in order to strike power and hope in his audiences.

Sadly, the play was performed in 401 BCE, a few years after Sophocles' death and after Sparta's defeat of Athens. The story of Theseus as a safeguard and a reformer of Athens matched with Oedipus' heroism continued in death as he brought the city protection and blessings would have haunted the audience at the time.

the myth

Warned by an oracle that his son would one day kill him, Laius, the King of Thebes, leaves his baby to die in the mountains. A shepherd finds the child, rescues him, and delivers him to the King of Corinth who raises him as his own. Once grown, Oedipus visits the oracle at Delphi where he is told he will one day kill his father and marry his mother. Out of protective fear, Oedipus leaves Corinth to spare whom he believes to be his birth parents.

On his travels towards Thebes, Oedipus gets into an argument with a man and kills him, not knowing the stranger was his father, Laius. As his travels continue, Oedipus learns Thebes is plagued by the Sphinx which kills all who try to pass, unless they can answer a riddle. Oedipus successfully answers the riddle thereby eliminating the Sphinx, rescuing Thebes, and as recompense for his heroic acts, becomes king and husband to the queen, and unknowingly his mother, Jocasta.

After many years and four children between them, Oedipus and Jocasta are haunted by the plague that has terrorized the city and the looming proclamation from the oracle that it will last until the murderer of Laius is found. It becomes Oedipus' mission to discover the murderer, and much to his demise, once he learns the entirety of the truth of his existence he blinds himself and Jocasta commits suicide.



Gustave Moreau, "Oedipus and the Sphinx" (1864)



Francesco D'Adamo, "Oedipus Rex"

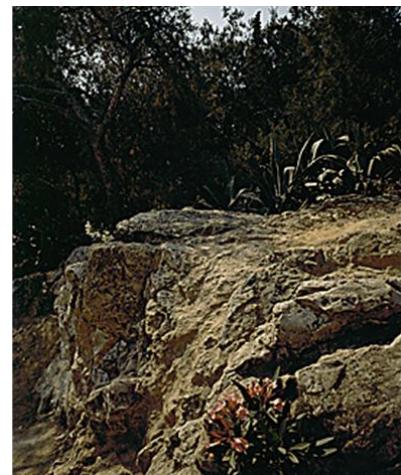
The details surrounding Oedipus' blindness, death, and exile vary depending on the source. Some versions claim he was exiled by Creon, Jocasta's brother, and others say he exiled himself. In some versions of the myth even the blinding was not self-inflicted and instead a servant of the old king, Laius, blinded Oedipus. The blinding of Oedipus was not noted in any version of the myth before Aeschylus' writing. In older versions, like Homer's, Oedipus continues to rule after the discoveries.

the grove of the furies

The Furies were goddesses of retribution whose purpose was rooted in the execution of justice. The trio would destroy anyone who committed a terrible sin, especially one of the blood (like Orestes or Oedipus).



Campedelli, "Oedipus and Antigone at the grove of the Eumenides" (1818)



Hill of Colonus today captured by Erich Lessing

Related to the Titans, the Furies live in the night and are often associated with the underworld or death as a whole, rising only to pursue those who commit crimes. Their presence was often not desired and to speak their name was daunting as it could risk a person's peace of mind. They're described as animal-like, compared to bloodhounds, snakes, lions, goats, or even gorgons.

The fact that Oedipus felt at ease in the grove shows that perhaps he knew he would be exonerated for his past deeds as the killing of his father and incestuous relationship with his mother were not purposeful.

Various sacrifices are made to appease both the Furies and Poseidon within the play. Ismene assists her blind father in making offerings to the goddesses as he trespassed their space and Theseus provides offerings to Poseidon (god of horses) who owns the land surrounding the grove. The grove additionally describes the presence of Prometheus who gave humans the ability to think. The symbolic presence of his mention points at Oedipus final discovery of wisdom and truth for himself.

Today, the grove of the furies has completely disappeared except for a few ruins.

the prophecy

Prophecy can be described as a proclamation of truths that cannot be acquired by an individual in a natural way. Historically in Ancient Greece, human affairs were considered wholly dependent on divine intervention. Religion was naturally embedded in Greek life and often produced the outlay of a person's entire existence. People worked to get in favor with the gods, just as various myths, plays, and epic poems reflected as well.

Oracles were essential tools for mortals (and demigods in mythology) to ascertain how to move forward in their lives. Divination was a way for humans to both navigate circumstances and fill the holes in their imperfect knowledge of the world. In the same way, oracles were used as tools in dramatic texts to perpetuate and solve conflicts.

Sophocles' questioning of divine law mirrored a bit of a revolution occurring in Athens. Socrates began to critique many aspects of Athenian culture, including its focus on religious traditions. These debates along with an upswing of individuals pretending to be prophets for money, led to a growing distrust in the notion of prophecy. Various questions on if the gods existed or not, if they were intended to care for the people, and if they ever truly shared their knowledge with mortals arose in conversation.

The role of a seer was to understand the past and decipher how it roots itself in the present and influences the future. It was expected for a divine figure to take on this role of "seeing", though with various philosophical thoughts emerging the idea that perhaps an individual can look at the cause and effects of circumstances in their lives and become morally responsible for their own actions arose.



The Oracle at Delphi

*"True wisdom comes to each of us when we realize
how little we understand about life, ourselves,
and the world around us."*

— Socrates

the city

Colonus, a suburb of ancient Attica (which contains the city of Athens), refers to Hippius Colonus meaning “Colonus of Horses” to distinguish it from Colonus Agoraeus in Athens. Colonus was considered a very wealthy part of ancient Athens and a staple of rising aristocracy. It was under the care of Poseidon mainly, and the play’s setting of the grove references the altars of Poseidon and Athena, the god and goddess of horses.

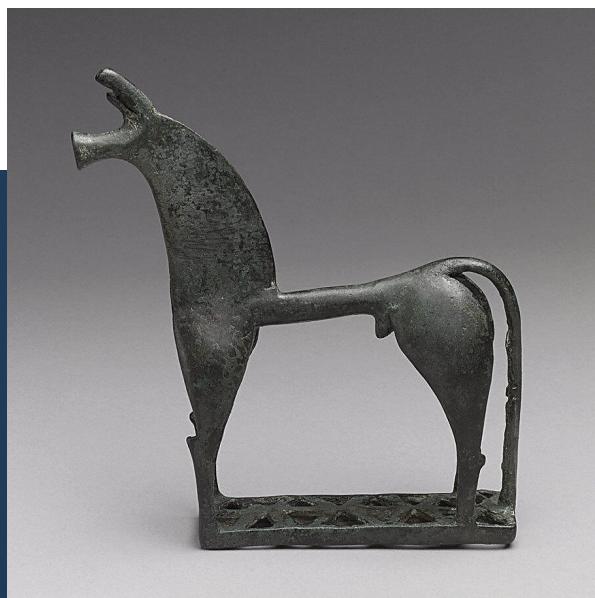


Ödipus auf Kollonos [Oedipus at Colonus], 2006, Anselm Kiefer
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Anselm Kiefer, "Ödipus auf Kollonos" (2006)

Horses were considered symbols of wealth, power, and status in ancient Greece. They are frequent in pieces of art as emblems of grand transportation such as in chariots and races. They're also characterized as mythological beings such as satyrs and the Pegasus. As a whole, they're critical to everyday life and extensive tools for combat.



Bronze horse, 8th century BC

the role of gender

Athenian women were considered entirely unequal to men and had no independent existence. Like many past and current societies, they were property to the patriarchal systems that controlled them. In Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone and Ismene are the only female characters and exist primarily as tools for Oedipus' survival.

Antigone, as Oedipus' travel companion, assists her father through the journey and his blindness. She acts as the caregiver trope that all women were expected to depict. Both daughters are referred to in the cycle as "props" to Oedipus and, in turn, Creon, who utilizes them as pawns to manipulate power. Antigone has a voice in the play, though it is not her own, she speaks only to describe the world around her for her father's benefit.



Hugues, "Oedipus at Colonus" (1882)

"To move from active shaper to passive sufferer is to shift – in the Greek view and (still) in ours – from a masculine to a feminine mode of being; to embrace voluntarily the feminine...is to turn to imperil the boundaries of the autonomous self, the sources of meaning in a heroic masculine life"

Thomas Van Nortwick

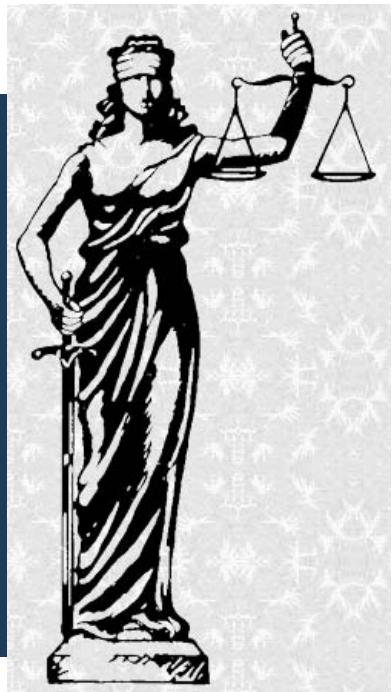
On the same note, this could be seen as an example of female power entirely. Antigone and Ismene are women who are completely in control of their patriarchal fate. They are the root of strength and guidance which renders them an integral piece both to the dramatic development and the course of the story's power unveiling. Following the gender stereotypes described in Ancient Greece, however, Oedipus' disability renders him weaker and therefore more feminine. His downfall from a strong king to a blind man completely dependent on his daughters mirrors the taking on of feminine qualities both by nature of his circumstance and by his constant proximity to female bodies. The play, originally performed by an all-male cast, would give little room for women in Athenian culture to have a say on how they were being projected. Though the writing of the characters of Antigone and Ismene may allow for possibilities of agency and strength, the fact that their actors were always male rendered a controlled lens of how they were seen, mostly as accessories to the plot.

this moment

Oedipus at Colonus deals with issues of exile, of religion, and of the harrowing nature of truth. The world today is rooted in fear, of the past, the present, and future. Billions of people seek to aid their concerns with the unknown in various methods, religions, and forms of art. We use the term “blind faith” to describe our own situations and how we move through life with hope. We also use it in terms of the political hands we sit within.

All people answer to a greater power, whether it be a religious belief, a president, a king, a prime minister, or a parent. Arguably, at all times our fate is in another’s hands. The politics and wellbeing of our countries and livelihoods are dependent on a small group of people who make decisions hopefully in our favor. We hope.

The first renditions of Lady Justice depict her with a sword, scale, and eyes uncovered. Starting in the 16th century with Hans Gieng’s statue in Berne, Justitia was shown blindfolded. This original blindfold was supposedly pointing at the ignorance and abuses the law tolerated, though today is meant to be a symbol of impartiality.



When faced with globalized tensions, the issue of empathy arises. How we deal with fear of the unknown, how we cope accordingly, and how we act on individual and systematic levels perpetuates our way of life. In the United States, there is a multitude of anti-refugee policies that permeate the structure of our politics and our heart as a nation.

There’s a moment to learn from in this play. Theseus’ voice and stature gives him power over Oedipus’ fate. His recollection of his own past and compassion for Oedipus’ circumstances allows him to take action in favor of protecting the blind king. It is a moment of reflection, of acknowledging another’s story, of not taking pity, but taking into consideration the value of beings, and stepping through the world with an understanding, even if at times we succumb to the notion of “blind faith”.