

The Tragic Theme in *Oedipus at Colonus*

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Introduction

This research paper has its topic *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles. Sophocles is a classical Greek dramatist. This play is not only his representative work but a supreme work in Greek tragedy. In doing the research I have discovered that most criticism takes a theological approach to this play. Also I have discovered that many critics agree about the meaning of the major ideas in this play. Therefore, in this paper I am taking a theological approach and focusing on the following: first, I will investigate what tragedy is; second, I will look at the relation between God and man; and finally, I will analyze the idea of salvation in the play. Before doing this, however, I will provide the reader with a documented summary of the play itself.

Summary

Oedipus at Colonus is the story of Oedipus after he has blinded himself for having committed incest and parricide. Creon and others order him to leave Thebes. Antigone and Ismene, his two daughters, do care for him and Antigone accompanies him in his wanderings. Finally they arrived at the grove of the Eumenides, the kindly goddesses, which is at Colonus, a small suburb near Athens. At the start of the play the old and blind Oedipus enters, led by his daughter Antigone. They are at the grove of the kindly goddesses.¹ A courteous, but insistent stranger warns him to avoid holy ground (p.80). Oedipus now realizes that he has reached the very place that the gods have arranged to be the place of his death (p.81). Oedipus tells the stranger to tell King Theseus that the land that shows him hospitality will be blessed by the gods (p.82). A prophecy says that the land that banishes him will be cursed, and the land that buries him will be blessed (p.83). Then the Chorus enter and they express horror when they learn Oedipus' identity; and they order him to leave the country at once, though they express pity for Oedipus and Antigone. Finally they say the decision about them staying there is up to Theseus (pp.84-92). Ismene arrives on horseback from Thebes, and tells how her brothers Polyneices and Eteocles had quarreled over the royal power, deposing Creon, and of the Polyneices' expulsion by Eteocles, and of Polyneices' projected attack with the Argos troops on Thebes (pp.93-96). Creon now needs Oedipus near Thebes, for the oracles declare only his

presence can save the city from capture by Polyneices (pp.96-97). Oedipus complains about his neglectful and greedy sons; he hopes that the gods will allow neither to rule Thebes; as for himself, he will never return to Thebes! (pp.97-100) Under the Chorus' direction Oedipus performs rites of atonement to the kindly goddesses because he has trespassed in their sacred grove (pp.100-101).

Theseus arrives with his soldiers. He recognizes Oedipus from stories he has heard. He consoles the old man. He himself has wandered strange lands and confronted danger and death; he commiserates with fellow wanderers. Oedipus is gratified at Theseus' courtesy and nobility (p.106). Oedipus' mysterious promise to bring grace to Athens intrigues Theseus, but Oedipus declines to elaborate. He asks only for burial (pp.107-109). Theseus listens intently to Oedipus' account of Polyneices' treachery, declares Oedipus a citizen, and offers to take him into his own house. Oedipus, however, prefers to remain in the grove (p.110). Theseus promises to protect the old man from Creon (p.111). The Chorus sings an ode of beautiful praise to their city (p.112).

Creon now enters and tries to persuade his brother-in-law to return to Thebes, but Oedipus angrily rejects his offer (pp.114-116). Creon says that Ismene is his prisoner, and he now seizes Antigone and leaves for Thebes. The Chorus tries to rescue her but fails (pp.117-119). Suddenly Theseus and his party enter (p.122). When he learns what happened, Theseus sends soldiers to prevent the escape of the Thebans who have gone ahead with Antigone and Ismene. He threatens to hold Creon prisoner until the women are safely returned to Oedipus (pp.123-129). There is mutual joy and Oedipus thanks Theseus (pp.130-131). Oedipus learns from Theseus that a relative wishes to talk with him. Knowing that it is Polyneices, he refuses to see his hated son, but Antigone persuades him to consent (pp.132-134).

Polyneices enters, professing to be distressed by the sad situation of Oedipus and Antigone (p.136). He tells of his quarrel with Eteocles and his plan to attack Thebes and asks Oedipus' aid, knowing the recent oracles (pp.137-138). He promises to take Oedipus back to Thebes (p.139). Oedipus in a crushing speech reminds Polyneices of his past treatment of him, when he helped exile his father; then he adds a curse that one day he will die at the hands of his own kin and he will in turn slay Eteocles, his brother (pp.139-141). Oedipus orders him to go away (p.141). Before departing, Polyneices begs his sisters to give him a decent burial, if Oedipus' curse comes true and he is killed in the assault on Thebes (pp.141-144).

As the Chorus comments on the Oedipus' problems and the cyclical pattern of his life, thunder is heard (p.144). Oedipus intuitively surmises his imminent death and summons Theseus (p.145). When Theseus arrives, Oedipus tells him that he will reveal to him in secret where he is to die (pp.145-146). The spot is to remain the guarded secret of each Athenian king and it will protect Athens against Theban aggression (pp.146-147). Then a divine summons urges him on, and he moves slowly

and confidently away toward the fated place where he is die (p.147). The Chorus prays to the gods of the underworld that Oedipus may have a painless death.

A messenger enters to announce Oedipus' death (p.148). He relates how Oedipus prepared himself when he reached the fated spot, and said goodbye to his daughters. Thunder was heard and a divine voice called Oedipus not to delay. Before going he asked Theseus to aid his daughters. Only Theseus was permitted to be present as Oedipus mysteriously disappeared (pp.149-151). Antigone and Ismene enter lamenting together with the Chorus. They are apprehensive about the future but are reassured (pp.151-156). When Theseus returns they beg to see Oedipus' tomb, but he relates that Oedipus enjoined him to keep the place secret (pp.156-157). Finally, Antigone and Ismene now decide to return to their native Thebes (p.157).

1. What is Tragedy ?

What is tragedy? I may find the answer in *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Now cease lamentation, nor further prolong
your dirge. All of these matters
have found their consummation. (ll. 2020-2022)

In tragedy, Violi observes, "Life is filled with sorrow, a tragic span on earth."² According to the tragic attitude the existence of man is limited. Meyer Reinhold has the same idea; he says, "Life is tragic and full of suffering."³ Tragedy shows us how to live with nobility in the fullness of a suffering and limited life. The fascination of tragedy is that it is writing about man's eternal drama of suffering. In Mary Ellen Snodgrass' work, *Greek Classics*, she notes that:

Sophocles once wrote : The world is full of wonders but nothing is more wonderful than man. His desire to "paint men as they ought to be" led him to choose some of the most poignant dramatic situations in literature, particularly those from the Oedipus cycle.⁴

This means that the essential ingredient of tragedy is the pursuit of understanding man's behavior. Furthermore Violi observes:

One realizes after reading his [Sophocles'] plays that self-restraint, temperance in all things, and a sense of balance (sophrosyne) are the only personal characteristics that can make life endurable steady, and whole. ... He [Sophocles] is unsurpassed in his dramatizations of man's search for the truth about himself, and the suffering he must undergo in the realization of that truth.⁵

Man should live searching for the truth with suffering. Why is man suffering? About suffering, Reinhold says, "Human suffering is inevitable because of man's imperfection; even the innocent suffer; one must endure suffering with dignity."⁶ In the case of Oedipus, he was clever enough to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, but could not see the problem under his own feet. Oedipus' answer to the Sphinx's riddle, namely "man," seems self-evident and ridiculous. Is it, though? Why could Oedipus alone give the right answer? By committing patricide and incest, however unknowingly, he came to possess a spirit in sympathy with the riddle about man. That was his glory and his misery. "Man" is the correct answer, but that is just the start of another riddle - what is this human being, this suspicious sounding beast whose number of legs changes in the span of its life?⁷ Violi says:

Oedipus' tragic life seems to have been unalterably determined for him by the oracles of the gods. Free will, if it exists at all is an illusion. More than that, the more man tries to lay out a path different than that fixed by Destiny, the more man is sure to follow that path.⁸

Tragedy is written about the riddle of man's life and the path of life. Man is controlled and surrounded by God's power that both harm and give help to man. For this reason, man needs reverence toward God.

2. The Relation between God and Man

What is the relation between God and man in this play? We can conclude this play is a tragedy of fate, for man is controlled by God. In a sense that is true; however, it is not the most important thing. It is important that man should believe in God's existence and have respect for God. If we don't have respect for God that God may become angry with man. In the case of Oedipus that anger results in a curse that causes him to suffer for a long time. He could only fulfill the God's divine purpose. What is that divine purpose? About this, Violi says, "This play teaches true piety is help to your fellow man. The gods who incarnate Oedipus are reconciled. Suffering and adversity have their divine plan."⁹ The essential conflict in the tragedy is between divine truth and man's illusion. Herbert J. Muller indicates about this relationship that:

Finally he [Sophocles] permitted no doubts or criticisms of the gods. "The gods are always right and should not be opposed ... Sometimes indeed they are hard to understand, but none the less men must assume that all is as it ought to be." Tragedy in Sophocles results when men fail to assume this : the heroes

suffer because they “have resisted their destinies,” [and] upset “the divine order of the world.”¹⁰

In short, the main theme of Sophocles’ play is to defend the ways of God to man. Unico thinks that, “Man is basically a weak and limited being who therefore must submit to the wiser guidance of the gods and the state.”¹¹ It is man which causes his own trouble, even more than typhoons or earthquakes. People are not able to control the violent forces of nature inside them to the extent that they can control those outside. Therefore, man must be responsible for himself. John Gassner says about Oedipus that:

a less temperamental one [person] would never have blinded his eyes in horror and so exacerbated his sufferings. Without being morally responsible, Oedipus is psychologically responsible for his sufferings.¹²

Violi also says, “Man is individually and solely responsible for his own behavior.”¹³ “No man can escape personal responsibility for sin, since he will inevitably face retribution.”¹⁴ As for fate, Violi indicates,

“The fate” to the Greeks was an irrevocable, pre-determined fore-ordained scheme of life laid down for all men by the gods. In such a world there can be no free will, no choice between alternatives, no say as to one’s future.¹⁵

Man’s arrogance, pride and sin lead to disaster. Retribution of sin is inevitable.

Reconciliation of Oedipus and the gods is intended to teach trust in divine justice, that man is limited, and must endure adversity, for there is a divine purpose in suffering.¹⁶

Who is God? This play does not say, but only indicates an impression of the nature of the God man feared. God teaches humanity the limitations of man. Man, therefore, should recognize his own weakness and relationship with God.

3. Salvation in *Oedipus at Colonus*

An investigation into the relation between God and Oedipus can be found in Sophocles’ earlier play *King Oedipus*. Oedipus was a proud man, and he stuck to his faith at any cost. God was cruel, and he was going to trample on man’s good intentions. However, in *Oedipus at Colonus* Sophocles writes about Oedipus’s dignity and the reconciliation between God and man. About this change Muller observes:

His [Sophocles'] plays as a whole give a surprisingly vague, confused impression of the nature of the gods he feared. Nor have scholars made much of a possible change that came over his thought as he grew old, reflected in the more or less happy endings of his last plays.¹⁷

For this reason, the reader finds the reconciliation between God and Oedipus in this play announced by the Chorus.

that our stranger friend may pass to his end
untroubled and free of the tears
attendant on a grievous doom;
that he may come to the world below,
that hides all within itself, (ll.1778-1782)

This play is more loosely constructed than the earlier *King Oedipus*. Throughout this play we have only the strong unifying figure of the old, suffering Oedipus. In some ways, however, he is the same Oedipus. He is very proud and haughty; but his suffering has made him more human. He is more submissive and understanding of the weakness of human beings.¹⁸ Violi says, "Suffering only can bring man knowledge and awareness."¹⁹ Also, "Wisdom arrives only through suffering."²⁰ Reviewing Oedipus's own life, he is able to make some pungent comments on the instability of life and fortune. He had once been an admired King in Thebes, but within the matter of a few hours, his life was completely reversed. In this way, he now knows that there is no peace except in God's hands.²¹ This is not the same Oedipus who tried to escape the fate of the oracle. Robert J Milch indicates,

Oedipus, though older and tormented by suffering, is the same man who appeared in the first play. He continues to be proud, impetuous, and hot-tempered, but his philosophical outlook has changed. He accepts his punishment because he has no choice, but now insists on his personal innocence and attributes the ultimate responsibility for his crimes to destiny, in whose hands he was a helpless agent.²²

Oedipus is "transfigured through suffering."²³ Michael Grant says, "Oedipus, whom the gods had struck down" have "now lifted up."²⁴ According to Reinhold's attitude,

The central theme of this play, written by Sophocles in advanced years and produced posthumously, is the transformation in death of an essentially good man into a hero.²⁵

How has Oedipus come to this change? Milch writes that:

Sophocles implies that Oedipus' great suffering has purified him and given him better understanding of his position.²⁶

In the earlier play, Oedipus felt his strong sense of guilt, but now he knows that he was the innocent victim of a terrible oracle. Grant thinks that the dying Oedipus is:

the demi-god, or semi-deified hero ... [Who] transcended the guilt between men and gods.²⁷

At the end of this play, Oedipus is given mysterious salvation by God. Oedipus was suffering a long time, but now that his pain is eased, he arrives at a calm condition. The Chorus says:

Not to be born is best of all;
when life is there, the second best
to go hence where you came,
with the best speed you may. (ll.1410-1413)

Why is death really salvation? According to Frank N. Magill in *Masterpieces of World Literature*, "We are not given to see the gods who receive, but only the God-like element in Oedipus himself."²⁸ Oedipus is not struck dead.

It was no fiery thunderbolt of God
that made away with him, nor a sea hurricane
rising; no, it was some messenger
sent by the gods, or some power of the dead
split open the fundament of earth, with good will,
to give him painless entry. He was sent on his way
with no accompaniment of tears,
no pain of sickness; (ll. 1881-1888)

It is peaceful and gentle. Death means the end of life. Nevertheless, Oedipus achieves salvation after death, because he surely expected it. For that reason he has no sorrow or pain at the time of his death. Hence this play teaches how a great hero like Oedipus, despite his faults and inadvertent sins, is raised to divine immortality by God.

Conclusion

In this paper I have taken a theological approach to Sophocles' important tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus*. In particular I have made a theological study of three major ideas: the nature of tragedy, the relation between God and man, and salvation in the play. I have done this because this is what I found the critics had focused on when I did the research for this paper. On the basis of my investigations of *Oedipus at Colonus* it seems likely that Sophocles was very interested in portraying a complete theological picture of his characters.

NOTES:

1. Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, Volume II, David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds., (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991) All further references will be to this edition.
2. Unicio J Violi, *Greek Classics Notes*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), p.156.
3. Meyer Reinhold, *Essentials of Greek and Roman Classics: A Guide to the Humanities*, (New York: Barron's Educational Series, 1971), p.83.
4. Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *Greek Classics Notes*, (Lincoln Nebraska: Cliffs Notes, 1988), p.125.
5. Unicio J. Violi, *Greek and Roman Classics*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), p.158.
6. Meyer Reinhold, *Classical Drama Greek and Roman*, (New York: Barron's Educational Series, 1959), p.72.
7. Nisuke Matsumoto, *The Study of Greek Tragedy*, (Tokyo: Sekaishisousha, 1991), p.114.
8. Violi, p.178.
9. Violi, p.192.
10. Herbert J. Muller, *The Spirit of Tragedy*, (New York: Alfred a Knopf, 1956), p.87.
11. Violi, p.156.
12. John Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, (New York: Random House, 1940), p.53.
13. Violi, p.181.
14. Violi, p.156.
15. Violi, p.178.
16. Reinhold, *Classical Drama* p.70.
17. Muller, p.86.
18. Zenya Nakamura, *The Research of Greek Tragedy*, (Tokyo: Iwanami Books, 1987), p.41

19. Violi, p.181.
20. Violi, p.156.
21. Nakamura, p.55.
22. Robert J. Milch, *King Oedipus, Oedipus at Colonus, & Antigone Notes*, (Lincoln, Nebraska: Cliffs Notes, 1993), p.48.
23. Reinhold, *Classical Drama*, p.70.
24. Michael Grant, *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*, (New York: New American Library, 1962), p.209.
25. Reinhold, *Essentials*, p.87.
26. Milch, p.44.
27. Grant, pp.208-209.
28. Frank N. Magill, *Masterpieces of World Literature*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1989), p.601.

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