Here was shelter for my head
yet the rainy squalls came in
and Hermes' mountain sent me back
the voice of my lamentation,
the echo of the storm in my heart.

Now stream from which I drank
now I must leave you, it comes at last
this parting I never thought to see.

Farewell, sea-circled island,
do not begrudge my leaving
send me a wind
to where destiny transports me
destiny, the wisdom of friends,
and the all-conquering divinity which shaped this decree.

# VI

# Oedipus at Colonus

It is the last play, written just before the poet's death, and not performed until five years after it. He died in 406 B.C., two years before the destruction of the Athenian fleet at Aegospotami; he did not live to see the Spartan galleys, their oarsmen paid by Persian subsidies, sail into the Piraeus and force the surrender of Athens. But he knew already, as all the world must have known, that Athens had lost the war,[1] that it faced certain defeat and, possibly—so greatly was Athens hated—extinction.[2] In the last terrible years of mounting despair, the dream of the Funeral Speech had turned into a nightmare. The government of the democracy was in the hands of violent, ignorant demagogues, the Attic soil beleaguered by a Spartan garrison at Decelea, a short day's march from Athens, the flower of Athenian manhood lost in Sicily and a score of indecisive battles on the Aegean. In the last months of his long life, Sophocles, born in the village of Colonus ninety years before, turned back to the figure of Oedipus, whom he had once portrayed as the ideal type of Athenian intelligence and daring, and wrote this strange play about the hero's old age, about the recompense he received for his sufferings, and also about Athens.

The recompense Oedipus is to receive is death—death as a human being, but power and immortality as something more than human, in fact as a protecting hero of the Attic soil. The close association of Oedipus with Athens is full of significance.

Oedipus *tyrannos* was the Athenian ideal of the days of the city's greatness, but his courage, energy, and intelligence were set in a tragic framework where their heroic impetus brought about his fall. The old Oedipus of this play is like the exhausted, battered Athens of the last years of the war, which, though it may be defeated and may even be physically destroyed, will still flourish in immortal strength, conferring power on those who love it.[3] It is no coincidence that this play contains the most moving and beautiful ode in praise of Athens that was ever written, a poem which celebrates Athens' strength, power, and beauty in images which suggest death and immortality in the same breath. The city, like Oedipus, may die, but only to become immortal.

The play is a worthy last will and testament. All the great themes of the earlier plays recur; it is as if Sophocles were summing up a lifetime of thought and feeling in this demonic work of his old age. The blind man who sees more clearly than those who have eyes is now not the prophet Tiresias but Oedipus himself, who prophesies, first in the name of Apollo and then in his own. As in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Trachiniae*, the action unrolls against the background of the oracular prophecies of the gods, those cryptic, partial revelations of the divine knowledge which the human intellect cannot accept or understand until they are fulfilled. The heroic creed of Ajax, to reward friends and punish enemies, and that mutability of human fortune which mocks such a creed, reappear in this last play, but with a different emphasis. The theme of the *Philoctetes*, the hero's compense for unmerited suffering, is used again; like Philoctetes, Oedipus, the despised and rejected, turns out to be the one man his enemies cannot do without, and they come to take him away. And death, that death Ajax and Antigone proudly claimed as their own, which Electra and Oedipus at Thebes wished for in their moments of despair, which Philoctetes preferred to the life among men which he had come, with good reason, to fear—that death is



Oedipus' declared goal from the first: he is a wanderer looking for the place where it awaits him, his promised rest.

And the play uses again the familiar situation and formulas of the heroic will and its victory over attempts to turn it aside. This is all the more astonishing because the beginning of the play seems to exclude such a possibility entirely. Oedipus is not only a blind beggar, he is also a very old man. And old men, in Greek tragedy, are not treated too kindly. With the single conspicuous exception of the prophet Tiresias (and even he is treated with a certain measure of cynical irreverence in the *Bacchae* of Euripides),[4] they are always portrayed with a keen eye for the foibles of old age. Officious and complacent like the Corinthian messenger in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, weak and pathetic like Amphitryon in the *Heracles* or Peleus in the *Andromache*, cynical and selfish like Pheres in the *Alcestis* or Cadmus in the *Bacchae*, garrulous like Tyndareus in the *Orestes*, filled with impotent, bloodthirsty spite like the old servant in the *Ion*—they are usually either slightly ridiculous or sinister.[5] To cast an old man in the role of the hero was a bold step, and of all old men in the world this Oedipus is surely the least likely candidate. When we first see him on stage he is a repulsive sight. His son Polynices describes him for us later. "Dressed in clothes whose old disgusting filth has settled on his old man's body, irritating the flesh. On his eyeless head the hair blows uncombed in the wind. And in keeping with all this he carries what appears to be food for his wretched belly" (1258–1263). Sophocles spares us no detail of the hero's sordid condition; it is a salutary reminder, if Philoctetes' unbearable cries of agony did not suffice already, that the modern distinction between Euripidean realism and Sophoclean 'classic restraint' is, like so many such clichés, based not so much on the texts as on an ancient literary tradition which in this case owes more to Aristophanes than to Aristotle.

But this is not all. Not only is the blind, dirty, old man visually an unpromising subject for heroic treatment, he also

opens the play with a speech which is total renunciation of the heroic temper: "Who will receive the wanderer Oedipus with paltry gifts today? I ask little and get less, but it is enough for me. I have been taught acquiescence (*στέργειν* 7) by my sufferings, by my constant companion, long time . . ." (*χρόνος* 7). "We are come to learn (*μανθάνειν* 12), strangers from citizens, and to perform what we hear (*ἀκούσωμεν* 13) from them." This is the mood which all through Sophoclean tragedy the advisors have tried to produce in the heroic soul, acquiescence in the lesson of time. The humility of this speech was not to be expected from the blinded but still demanding Oedipus we saw at the close of the first play. The imperious figure who had to be sharply reminded that he was no longer *tyrannos* in Thebes has with time become humble almost to the point of self-effacement. He is waiting, patiently and in submission, for death.

That death, though he does not know it, is to be his recompense for his suffering. Not that he claimed or expected any recompense, but we feel that it is his due. In the first play, he served the gods as an example, a paradigm (*παράδειγμα*) as the chorus calls him in the great ode which follows his self-recognition (1193);[6] he was a demonstration, through his predicted destiny and his heroic action, that man's keenest sight is blindness, his highest knowledge ignorance, his soaring confidence and hope an illusion. So Job served as the subject of a divine demonstration, which was beyond his understanding, and was in the end recompensed for his sufferings. "And the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before; the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than he had the beginning. For he had fourteen thousand sheep and six thousand camels and one thousand yoke of oxen and one thousand she-asses. He had also seven sons and three daughters. And after this lived Job an hundred and forty years and saw his sons and his sons' sons, even four generations" (42.12 ff.). This is a reward which speaks for itself; it needs no explanation. But the reward of Oedipus includes no camels or she-asses, no long years of life, in fact no



life at all. It is death, but a death which Job and the author of *Job* could never have understood, something which the strict monotheism of the Hebrew would have regarded as an abomination. For Oedipus in death becomes a *heros*, a superhuman being, a spirit which lives on with power over the affairs of men after the death of the body. His tomb is to be a holy place; the city in whose territory he lies buried will win a great victory on the site of his grave. By his choice of a burial place he thus makes history, becomes a presence to be feared by some and thanked by others.

"We beg you," said the priest, in the earlier play, "regarding you not as one equated to the gods" (*θεοῖσι . . . οὐκ ἰσούμενον* 31). The *tyrannos* was not indeed equal to the gods (though he acted as if he were), but in this last play there is a sense in which he is. For at the end of it the gods call him to join them. "Equated to the gods." They do not show their face often in Sophoclean drama but we know by now what the gods are. They have knowledge,[7] that full, complete knowledge which Oedipus *tyrannos* thought he had. He was proved ignorant;[8] such knowledge is precisely what distinguishes god from man. Since the gods have knowledge, their action is confident and sure; they act with that swift certainty which was characteristic of Oedipus *tyrannos* but which was, in him, misplaced. Only a god can be sure; a man, never. And their action is just. Like the justice of Athena towards Ajax,[9] of the gods towards Creon in the *Antigone*, it is exact and appropriate, and therefore allows no room for mercy, though it can be angry. This full, angry, merciless justice is what Oedipus *tyrannos* tried to deal out to Creon in the earlier play, but it was based on ignorance, and was injustice. These attributes of divinity—knowledge, certainty, and justice—are the qualities Oedipus *tyrannos* assumed, and that is why he was the perfect example of the tragic inadequacy of human knowledge, certainty and justice. In this last play he assumes the attributes of divinity once again, but this time he *is* made equal to the gods. This old Oedipus, before the play is over, seems to be once more the young Oedipus we

knew, fiercely angry in his administration of justice, utterly sure of himself, but this time he is justified. Now he does know surely, sees clearly; the gods give Oedipus back his eyes, but they are the eyes of superhuman vision. Now in his transformation (which is the action of this play), as then in his reversal (which was the action of the first), he serves still as the example, *παράδειγμα*. The rebirth of the heroic Oedipus in this tired, blind, old man emphasizes the same lesson, defines once more the line drawn between man and god, states again in images of overwhelming beauty and terror, that the possession of knowledge, certainty, and justice is what distinguishes god from man.

He has been promised, he tells us, 'rest' (*παῦλαν* 88) in a country which will be the end of his wanderings, where he will find a home and a welcome among the August Goddesses, the Eumenides. He is to find rest, but the rest must be won by great effort.[10] To win it he must summon all the qualities of heroic persistence which once were his; his road to it is to be a heroic achievement like his earlier fall. But this time the hardening of the heroic temper has a strange new meaning. In the last hours of his life as a man Oedipus gradually assumes the attributes and powers of the *heros* he is to become; the play puts on stage the mystery of his transition from human status to something greater.[11]

His opening speech shows us a man who seems to be at the end rather than the beginning. He has learned acquiescence; there is nothing more to learn. The nearby city, whose walls he cannot see, is merely one more temporary stop in his wandering existence, another place to beg for bread. He does not realize that it is the place of his reward, his grave, his eternal home. His first contact with the inhabitants of Colonus is not auspicious. He is brusquely interrupted in his appeal for information and ordered off; he has trespassed on holy ground, the grove of the Eumenides, daughters of Earth and Darkness, those august goddesses among whose dread and ancient functions was the fulfillment of a parent's curse.[12] But this rebuff brings



an unexpected reaction; the humility of the beggar vanishes in a moment, and he replies with a refusal to move. He announces his decision in an absolute, determined phrase which recalls the heroic *tyrannos:* "I shall never move from this place where I have taken refuge" (45). "What does that mean?" asks the astonished native of Colonus, and he is answered with an enigma: "The watch word of my fate" (46). Oedipus has recognized his final resting place—among the august goddesses; here he is to stay forever. The patient beggar of the opening scene now demands an audience with Theseus, the king of Athens; in fact, since he has stated so emphatically that he will not leave, he is summoning the king to Colonus. He is sure that he will come. For Oedipus brings a gift to Athens. Theseus, he says, "by small service may win great gain" (72). The puzzled native of Colonus retires to talk this over with his fellow citizens, and Oedipus, left alone with Antigone, prays to the goddesses of the grove. We learn now the basis of his sudden confidence and peremptory speech. The prophecy of Apollo which foretold the deeds which have made him an outcast also promised him this resting place among the Eumenides,[13] and more than that. In this country he would end his life of suffering, and by his residence there be a benefit to those who received him and destruction to those who drove him out and so sent him there. He is to end his life by rewarding his friends and punishing his enemies. And though he has at the moment not the slightest idea how this will be accomplished, his faith in the god's word is so great that he sends for Theseus at once. He prays now to the goddesses of the grove for fulfillment of Apollo's promise, and calls on Athens to receive him, in terms that foreshadow his transition from body to spirit. "Pity this wretched ghost (*εἴδωλον* 110) of Oedipus the man; for this is not the body he possessed once long ago."

As a body, as a man, he is a thing to be pitied—blind, feeble, ragged, dirty—but the change has already begun. The first comer treated him with mingled pity and condescension—"You seem noble, though obviously unfortunate" (76)—but the

chorus of old men of Colonus feels fear at the sight of him. "Dreadful to see, dreadful to hear" (δεινὸς μὲν ὁρᾶν, δεινὸς 141). They too order him to leave the sacred grove, and he does leave, but only when they have promised him protection in the new place of refuge to which he moves. When they extract from him his name, they go back on their promise. "Out of this country, go far away" (226). Apollo promised him 'rest' but it is a gift he must fight for. He must defend his past, and, not for the last time in this play, he rehearses the whole dreadful tale again. He acted in ignorance, he says, he killed his father in self-defense; his past is suffering rather than action. But now he comes to act, not to suffer, not in ignorance but in knowledge and power. He comes 'sacred' (*ἱερός*), the suppliant of the Eumenides, 'reverent' (*εὐσεβής*)—he is fulfilling the oracle of Apollo—and he comes "bringing advantage to this town" (287–288).

He does not yet know what advantage; he speaks with blind faith in the prophecy. In the next scene his daughter Ismene comes to tell him what he needs to know. His two sons are at war for the throne of Thebes, and a new prophecy has been delivered by Apollo at Delphi: that Oedipus, in his life and even after his death, will be sought after by Thebans, for their victory and power lie in his hands. Soon Creon, acting for Eteocles, will come to take Oedipus home. Not to Thebes, but to a place near the border, where he can be held, alive and dead, under Theban control. It is hard for the old man to understand this new prophecy, which seems to contradict the one he has just described, that he would find rest among the Eumenides, to whose grove in Athens he has been brought, as he sees it, by divine guidance (97 ff.). But gradually it becomes clear that the new prophecy supplements the old. It is his burial place that will bring victory, and the Thebans, much as they want that victory, still will not bury him in Theban soil, for he has his father's blood on his hands. "Then they shall never have me in their power" (408), he replies, and learns they will live to regret it; they will suffer from his anger when some day they take



their stand in battle on the ground where he lies buried. He sees now that the two prophecies are one; it is by his choice of resting place that he can do what Apollo promised him the power to do, to hurt his enemies and help his friends. He chooses to give victory to Athens and defeat to Thebes when one day Theban armies invade Attic soil. He will deny both his sons the victory that either of them might win if he gained control of the old man's body; his anger against them is sharpened by their renewed ingratitude which appears flagrantly in their failure to invite him home to Thebes now that they have heard the prophecy (418–419).

He expresses his decision in words which show that he is still a man, no more. To reward Athens and punish Thebes by his choice of a place to die is something which *does* lie within his power as a man, and he states it as an intention, and as an offer to Athens. But the punishment of his ingrate sons is something over which the prophecy gives him no control, and that he can express only as a wish, a prayer: "May the gods not quench that fated strife between them and may the issue of their quarrel lie in my hands. If that were to be, the one would not remain king nor would the exile ever return home" (421–427). He prays for the fulfillment of the curse he has already[14] pronounced on them, that they should kill each other in the fight for his inheritance. This is no part of the prophecy of Apollo—it is his wish; but before the play is over he will restate it in the unmistakable voice of true prophecy, not Apollo's but his own.[15]

He has proclaimed himself a savior for Athens, and the chorus treats him now with respect. But if he is to stay in Colonus he must propitiate the goddesses on whose untouchable ground he has trespassed. The chorus describes for him in elaborate detail the purificatory ceremonies that must be performed. The scene is spun out far longer than is warranted by its technical (and necessary) function—to get Ismene off stage so that she can be captured by Creon. The loving care with which the ritual is described sets the tone for the religious mystery we are going to witness, and the scene also shows us the hero's docility and

eagerness to be instructed in matters of religion,[16] an attitude which will be sharply contrasted with his growing assertiveness and intractability in his relations with men. The ceremony of purification will restore him to proper contact with the goddesses on whom he will later call for strength and words to curse Creon and his own sons; it is in no sense a ritual absolution from the pollution of his past actions. That will remain with him until the end.[17]

With Ismene gone to make the proper sacrifices, the chorus returns to its insistent, almost prurient, probing into the horror of his past, and it is in this atmosphere of old, terrible, crimes recalled that Theseus first comes face to face with his strange visitor. We are thus prepared for a repetition of the same outraged rejection that Oedipus has already suffered once, but that is not what happens. Theseus welcomes him, without any reference to the promise of advantage, but simply on the basis of his own experience of exile and his knowledge that all men are equal in the mutability of fortune: "I know, being a man, that I have no greater share of tomorrow than you" (567–568). It is the same tragic sense of life that Odysseus in the *Ajax* shows in his pity for his enemy; "thinking of my own case no less than his" (124). In the words and figure of Theseus we are presented with the best morality by which mortal man can live in this unstable world and a picture of the humane greatness of Athens at its best, the generosity and compassion which had long since vanished in the crucible of war and revolution but which Sophocles here recreates in all its ideal dignity and warmth. Oedipus has chosen well. *This* Athens deserves the future victory over a Thebes represented by the violence and lies of Creon, the hyprocrisy and fratricidal hate of Polynices.

His gift to Athens, the old man says, is his own wretched body. It will bring profit, but only after it is buried. It will bring trouble too, for the Thebans will come to claim it as their own property. When he learns that Thebes wants Oedipus back and that the stubborn old man refuses to go, because, as he says,



they did not take him when he wished it, Theseus loses his patience and speaks to him harshly. "You fool, passion is not what your misfortunes call for" (592). The answer is a fiery rebuke from a superior. "Wait till you hear what I have to say before you reproach me" (593). His grave, he now explains, is to be the scene of an Athenian victory over Thebes at some future time. But Theseus, the statesman, cannot conceive of war between the two cities. Oedipus rebukes him in his turn. Such confidence is misplaced. "Dearest son of Aegeus, only to the gods comes no old age or death. All else is dissolved by all-powerful time. The earth's strength decays, the body's too, faith dies, mistrust flowers, and the wind of friendship does not blow steady between man and man, city and city. For some now, for others later, sweet turns to bitter, and back again to love" (607–615). These words strike the same note as the great speech of Ajax, written so many years before. In the flux of time nothing in this mortal world remains the same. No man can be confident of the future. Man's knowledge is ignorance. It is the lesson Oedipus himself learned in his own person at Thebes, and he reads it now to Theseus with all the authority of his empty eyes and dreadful name. But he does not apply it to his own knowledge. For he goes on to predict the future—war between Athens and Thebes. He prescribes for Theseus the limits of human knowledge but he is not bound by them himself; he speaks not as one subject to the law he lays down but as one of the powers that administer it. And with this confident prediction, this assumption of sure knowledge, goes anger, but the words Sophocles gives him suggest something stronger than the anger of a mortal man. As he speaks of the future defeat of Thebes on the field of his grave the words take on an unearthly quality, a daemonic wrath. "There my sleeping and hidden corpse, cold though it be, will one day drink their warm blood" (621–622).[18] There was nothing like this in the prophecy of Apollo; this stems from the growth of some new force and knowledge within himself. But the prediction is

qualified: "if Zeus is still Zeus and Apollo a true prophet." He does not yet prophesy in the authority of his own name. That will be the final stage.

Theseus recognizes the authority of this speech and accepts for Athens the gift he is offered. "Who would reject the favor of such a man . . . ?" (631). The word he uses, *eumeneia*, is a word normally used of divine favor,[19] and the form of the word recalls the Eumenides, those kindly goddesses in whose grove Oedipus first recognized the watchword of his fate. Oedipus asked for a refuge, but he is given much more; Theseus makes him a citizen of Athens (ἔμπολιν 637) and assures him the full protection of his new city. Oedipus is now an Athenian; the wandering stateless beggar has a home, a city to protect him. And just in time; his enemies are close at hand. Creon has already seized Ismene and will soon be here in force, to take away Antigone, his other support (848)—like Philoctetes he is to be deprived of his means of life.

He is a citizen, and of no mean city. The ode which precedes Creon's entry sings the praise of Colonus and of Attica in those marvellous lines which recreate for us the Attic landscape as Sophocles knew and loved it: the thick shade of the trees, the nightingales in their branches, the ivy, the dew on the narcissus, the golden crocus, the river waters, the olive groves, the horses, the sea. This is Attica, not Athens; the city is not mentioned. And yet it is there. Every detail of the landscape recalls some aspect of the city's greatness.[20] The ivy of Dionysus, "who walks the land," and the narcissus, "ancient crown of the twin goddesses," remind us not only of the wine of the country and the grain which, so tradition ran, was first cultivated on Attic soil, but also of the theater which began in Athens and of the great religious center at Eleusis. The waters of the river Cephisus are associated in Attic legend with the goddess Aphrodite,[21] and, Sophocles adds, "the dancing chorus of the Muses loves them too." The olive, Athena's gift to Athens, "which flourishes most fruitfully in this land," produced the oil, the great Athenian export, carried to every quarter of the



Mediterranean world in those vases, made of Attic clay, which men in countries where no Greek was spoken prized above all other possessions and took with them to the grave. The horses, Poseidon's gift, are the restive mounts of those aristocratic Athenian youths who will soon ride to the rescue of Oedipus' daughters and who still ride in the procession on the Parthenon frieze. And the oar which Poseidon fitted to Athenian hands had made the city undisputed mistress of the sea; for most of Sophocles' long lifetime, no ship had sailed the waters of the Aegean against Athens' will.

But under this lyric celebration of Athens, greatness through the evocation of the landscape there runs a deep strain of sadness. The nightingale is the bird of lamentation;[22] the narcissus, which tempted Persephone to her doom, is the flower of death;[23] the crocus, also associated with the Eleusinian goddesses, was planted on graves. The power of Athens is dying; that inviolate peace of the grove at Colonus and of the Attic landscape had been breached and ruined. Colonus itself had been just a few years before the scene of the last-minute defeat of Theban cavalry *en route* for Athens;[24] the way to Eleusis, the processional road, was barred by Spartan patrols;[25] the olive trees of the Attic farms had been chopped down and burned by the enemy who now occupied the northern approaches; the young horsemen of the frieze were long since dead on the stricken fields of Delium and Mantinea; and Athenian seapower rested now on a battle-weary fleet waging an unequal struggle against superior forces which were soon to annihilate it on the Hellespont. But the sadness is not despair. For these same images speak not only of death but also of immortality. The twin goddesses promised blessed life after death and the olive is 'self-creating' (αὐτοποιόν 698)—the sacred olive on the Acropolis, burned by the Persians, had put out fresh shoots the next day.[26] The Athens Sophocles knew in his youth is to die, but be immortal; he sings of it as he remembered it in its days of greatness and beauty, and this is how we remember it still. "Even if we lose," said Pericles,

"the memory will live forever." The city of Sophocles' youth and manhood will put on immortality, like the old, blind man who has now become its citizen.

The wanderer has found a home, and now comes the attempt to dislodge him. Creon arrives, and with armed guards. The struggle of which Oedipus warned Theseus has begun. Creon has come with force, but first he tries deceit. He invites Oedipus back to the home of his fathers; we know, as Oedipus does, that this is a lie. Like Odysseus in the *Philoctetes*, Creon regards the hero as an instrument for his own purposes and does not see that the prophecy portends not advantage for Creon but recompense for Oedipus. His expressions of pity are hypocritical and hardly conceal his disgust. The answer he gets is not what he expected. We have seen Creon and Oedipus face to face before, in the earlier play, and there Creon had to bear the brunt of the hero's savage anger. So he does here. Their final interview is a repetition of their first. In both Creon is condemned out of hand, with the same swift, vindictive wrath, but this time the condemnation is just. Oedipus, blind though he is, sees through to the heart of Creon—he knows what Creon is. He taunts him with the truth. "Not to take me home, but to settle me outside the frontier so that your city (πόλις δὲ σοι 785—he speaks as an Athenian) may escape from this land untouched by disaster" (784–786). But it will not happen that way. Now he prophesies, and now, face to face with the object of his wrath, he prophesies not in the name of Apollo, but in his own. "You will not have it so; what you will have is this—my avenging spirit dwelling forever in the land. And as for my sons, they will inherit of the land I ruled enough to die in, no more" (787–790).

Creon proceeds to show the justice of Oedipus' rejection by turning to force. He reveals that he has already seized Ismene; he now seizes Antigone and threatens to lay hands on Oedipus himself. Oedipus is helpless, and only the prompt arrival of Theseus saves him. This is the man in whom new strength is growing, power and knowledge which will make him equal to the gods; not the splendid *tyrannos* at the height of worldly



success and bodily vigor, but a blind old man, the extreme of physical weakness, who cannot even see, much less prevent, the violence that is done him. Physical weakness, but a new dimension of spiritual strength. This Oedipus judges men justly and exactly, knows fully, sees clearly; his power is power over the future, the defeat of Thebes, the death of his sons. And this transformation of human weakness into superhuman power is conveyed to us in the familiar formulas of heroic intransigence. One thing Creon said to Oedipus throws light on the nature of the process we are witnessing: "Ill-fated man, will not even time teach you wisdom?" (804–805). Creon expected to find the Oedipus of the opening scene of the play, a man taught acquiescence by time and suffering. But what he finds seems to be the same *tyrannos* he once knew and feared. "You work evil for your own self now as you did then," he tells him, "indulging in that anger which has always been your ruin" (853 ff.). He recognizes the old man before him as equal to the young *tyrannos*. In one sense he is right, the heroic fire has been reborn in the old man, but in a greater sense the young Oedipus and the old are no more equal than man is equal to the gods.

Theseus' arrival rescues Oedipus, and his angry reproof of Creon restores the dignity of Athens, insulted by this successful attack on its suppliant and newly made citizen. But Creon is not finished yet. Deceit and force have both failed, and now he tries persuasion. Not on Oedipus, but on Theseus. His speech is a crafty attempt to alienate the city from the man it has taken in. He excuses his action on the grounds that he knew Athens would never welcome such a tainted man, the killer of his father, a man of impiety, who had been married to his mother. He appeals to the authority of the ancient court of the Areopagus "which," he says, "forbids wanderers such as this to dwell in this city" (948 ff.). It is a reproach to Theseus and a manoeuver designed to drive a wedge between Oedipus and the chorus. Oedipus must defend himself, and as an Athenian he speaks as if he were pleading before that solemn court

Creon invoked, the Areopagus, the ancestral Athenian place of judgment for cases of murder. His defense is detailed and omits no particular of the terrible events which cost him his eyes. It is a plea which the Areopagus could admit. He killed his father and married his mother in ignorance (*ἄκον πρᾶγμα* 977, *ἀκων* 987), not voluntarily. And as for his father Laius, Oedipus would have been innocent even if he had known his victim's identity, for he struck in self-defense. Not even his father, he says, if he were living, would contest this plea. The speech is intended to justify him before the high court of the city which has adopted him; and it succeeds. Theseus orders the pursuit of Creon's men, who are riding for the border with their prisoners, Ismene and Antigone; the power of Athens is engaged, at risk of war (which Creon threatens), to protect the rights of Oedipus.

With Theseus' return and the restoration of the daughters to their father's arms, the action seems to be almost complete. "I hold my dear ones," says the old man, "and now were I to die, I would not die wholly wretched" (1110–1111). But the thunder and lightning and earthquake shock which were to summon Oedipus to his death do not come yet. There is to be one more assault on his determination, one more effort to pry him loose from Athens. A mysterious suppliant at the altar of Poseidon begs for a word with him. It is a man of Oedipus' own family, from Argos. "Stop where you are!" cries the old man. "Do not ask me" (1169–1170). He knows who the suppliant is; it is Polynices, his son, come to beg for help against Eteocles and Creon. Oedipus will not listen. But the strong urging of Theseus and the reproachful pleas of Antigone wring this concession from him. Before he goes to his promised rest, he must face this last trial, hear, though he cannot see him, the son whom he has cursed, whose speech, as he said himself, would cause him "the greatest pain of any voice in the world" (1173–1174).

To the very last moment his life is to be suffering. The chorus, old men themselves, see in his helpless, harrassed, old age the proof that "not to be born is best, when all is reckoned in. But once a man is born, the second best is to go back quickly to



where he came from. For after youth with its lightheaded folly is past, come trouble, sorrow, hatred, faction, strife, battle, murder, and, last of all, old age" (1224 ff.). Oedipus has known them all, and his rest is overdue, but "like some sea cape in the north, the storm waves beat on him from every quarter" (1240 ff.). And now comes the last, Polynices, his son.

There is not much Polynices can say. He can only beg pardon for his neglect, promise to atone for his misdeeds, and invoke the name of mercy (*Αἰδώς* 1268).[27] Oedipus remains obstinately silent; he promised to listen, he did not promise to speak. Polynices turns from the past to the future, and tells why he has come. His allies, ready for the attack on Thebes, have sent him to win Oedipus to their cause, for the oracle promises victory to the side which Oedipus will join. He is a foreigner in a strange land, like his father, like him a beggar, like him expelled from Thebes. "Both of us live by fawning on others, our fate is the same." And he promises, if victorious, to restore Oedipus to his home.

These words stir Oedipus to answer. All the years of brooding on the ingratitude of his sons bear their bitter fruit now in this terrible denunciation, which sweeps from accusation through malediction to prophecy in language that seems to transcend the nature of human speech altogether and become the medium of a daemonic, superhuman wrath. He repudiates his sons: "You are some other man's sons, not mine" (1369). He prophesies again, this time not the content of the oracle of Apollo but the fulfillment of his own curse: "You shall not sack that city, but first will fall soiled with your brother's blood and he with yours" (1372 ff.). And in a final passage which clangs and rattles with massed, bristling consonants, an explosion of hate and fury, he curses his son: "Get out. I spit on you. I am not your father. You vilest of all vile things, take this curse with you, which I call down on you. Never may you win with the spear the land where you were born, nor return to the vale of Argos, but die and in dying kill the brother who drove you out. This is my curse, and I call on the hateful darkness of Tartarus

where my father lies to prepare a place for you. I call on these divinities of the grove, on the war-god who planted such dread hatred in you both. Now you have heard me, go" (1383 ff.). The content can be translated, but not the sound of it. This is a superhuman anger welling from the outraged sense of justice not of a mortal man and father but of the forces which govern the universe.

Creon could argue and resist, but to this dreadful speech no reply is possible. There can be no doubt of its authority. Polynices tries to make light of it (though he will not tell his allies what he has heard); he will go to Thebes all the same. When Antigone tries to dissuade him she finds the right word for Oedipus' speech. "Do you not see that you are fulfilling his oracles?" (*μαντεύμαθ'* 1425). "Who will dare to follow you when they hear what he has prophesied?" (*οἳ' ἐθέσπισεν* 1428). These are the words used of divine prophecy; Oedipus who once tried to escape prophecy, and cast scorn on it, now speaks with its voice. And his son now starts on the same road his father trod. He dismisses the prophecy,[28] and does so in a phrase that is a startling echo of something his mother said long ago. "For all prophecy can say," Jocasta said to Oedipus, "I would not in future look this way or that" (*οὐχὶ μαντείας γ' ἂν οὔτε τῇδ' ἐγώ/ βλέψαιμ' ἂν οὔνεκ' οὔτε τῇδ' ἂν OT* 857–858). And her son says now: "All this is in the power of the *daemon*, it may turn out this way or that" (*καὶ τῇδε φῦναι χἀτέρᾳ* 1443–1444). "In the power of the *daemon*"—a god, does he mean, or Fortune? Whatever he means, he does not realize the sense in which the words are true. The *daemon* in whose power it lies is Oedipus himself. He had prayed that the result of the battle between his sons should lie in his hands; the prayer has been granted and he knows it—he both foresees and determines the future.

Oedipus has put on power which does not belong to human kind; such power should not walk the earth in mortal shape. And as the chorus in bewilderment tries to understand what it has just heard, the thunder crashes. Oedipus' time has come. But first he must fulfill his promise to Theseus, and as the



thunder and lightning summon him ever more imperiously he calls for the king to come before it is too late. To Theseus, who now recognizes him as a true prophet, he gives his last instructions: to keep secret for himself and his royal descendants the place where his body will lie. And then in a scene which must be seen for its tremendous effect to be appreciated, the blind old man, whose every painful step had to be guided since the beginning of the play, leads his daughters and Theseus off stage with surefooted certainty. "Follow me . . . I will lead you now as you led me . . . Do not touch me, let me find by myself the holy burial place . . . This way, come this way . . . this is the way Hermes the guide leads me, and the goddess below" (1542 ff.).

The chorus prays to the gods of death that Oedipus may leave this life not in pain, nor in deep-toned lament. And the prayer, as we learn from the messenger, is granted. "The manner of his death was not in lamentation, nor in sickness or suffering, but miraculous, if ever man's death was" (1663 ff.). And before he went to his mysterious end, the gods, at last, spoke to him. They reproached him for his slowness. "You, Oedipus, you there, why do we hesitate to go? You have delayed too long" (*ὦ οὗτος οὗτος Οἰδίπους τί μέλλομεν/ χωρεῖν; πάλαι δὴ τἀπὸ σοῦ βραδύνεται* 1627–1628).

These strange, almost colloquial words are all that the gods say to Oedipus in either of the two plays.[29] But as we have a right to expect of so long-delayed and august a summons, the words are complete and final. The hesitation for which they reproach him is the last shred of his humanity, which he must now cast off; where he is going, vision is clear, knowledge certain, action instantaneous and effective—between the intention and the act there falls no shadow of hesitation or delay. And the divine "we" completes and transcends the equation of Oedipus with the gods; his identity is merged with theirs.

The last of the Sophoclean heroes, the most fiercely angry of all those intractable figures who defied the limits set to human power and assumed the attributes of divinity, is here recognized

by the gods as their peer and welcomed to their presence. The gods of Sophoclean tragedy, the most remote and mysterious creation in all Greek literature, here show their respect for the hero in unmistakable terms; they gave Ajax his burial, Antigone her revenge, Electra her victory, Philoctetes his return to life—but to Oedipus, who suffered most and longest, they give, in the death he longed for, immortal life and power.

# NOTES

is the emissary Odysseus promised to send in the prologue; what he says now has been carefully dictated to him by Odysseus.

[32] Cf. Whitman (1), 181 ff.

[33] For Adams of course it is sincere. But even if the arms of Achilles were kept by Odysseus, this ode has nothing to do with that; the chorus is talking about the original award of the arms to Odysseus. The chorus, who are Scyrian subjects of Neoptolemos (139 ff.) cannot have been present as they claim, for this happened long before Neoptolemos was called from Scyros. Bowra is right (274): "He tells his false tale; the chorus testify to it with what is very like an oath."

[34] See Kitto (2), 118.

[35] David Grene (*Sophocles II* in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, 223) and E. F. Watling (*Sophocles: Electra and Other Plays*, 188), respectively.

[36] Cf. Adams (149): "In Greek drama stage directions are practically unknown. There is no parenthetical 'Philoctetes gives a cry of agony' or the like; the dramatist must incorporate this sort of thing in his text."

[37] Adams sees in the hexameter meter a hint that Neoptolemos "is inspired by the god of prophecy himself. . . . It is a revelation induced by his own pity but decreed by the god of Delphi" (150). This seems an overstatement; Apollo is not mentioned in the play.

[38] Kitto cites this quick reaction of Odysseus to the suicide attempt as an indication that Odysseus' later announcement that he does not need Philoctetes but only the bow is not sincere: "if the presence of Philoctetes at Troy were not necessary, Odysseus would not have been so swift to prevent him from doing away with himself" (124). But he prevents the suicide at 1003, just after he announces that Philoctetes must go to Troy; the decision to abandon him comes after Philoctetes' long furious tirade (at 1054) which establishes clearly that his mind is set forever against going to Troy. In any case, Odysseus is no fool; it would be one thing to come back with the bow alone and explain that Philoctetes, because he hated the Greeks so much, refused to come, and quite another to have to explain that Philoctetes committed suicide.

[39] For this word, cf. *Aj.* 672, *Ant.* 1105.

[40] 1054: *ἄφετε γὰρ αὐτὸν*. Whitman's description of Philoctetes as 'manacled,' during the lyric scene which follows (1) 184, overlooks this line. The scholiast (1004) does say *δεδεμένος φησι* but *ξυλλάβετε* (1003) means merely that he is held by Odysseus' men.

[41] E.g., Kitto (2), 124. Lesky (1), 130, takes the opposite view: "Odysseus (1055) ohne ihn [Philoctetes] allein mit dem Bogen gegen Troia ziehen will . . ." and adds in his note: "Nur unter der Voraussetzung, Odysseus könnte wirklich mit dem Bogen allein fort wollen, hat seine Rückgabe durch Neoptolemos volles Gewicht."

[42] Cf. Kitto (2), 125: "To call this Fate is nonsense; to disclaim guile is useless; to offer friendship is mockery."

[43] See Kitto's excellent analysis of this scene (2), 126.

[44] Kitto (2), 132, remarks on Neoptolemos' final attempt at persuasion: "Sophocles carefully avoids the argument that by going to Troy Philoctetes would be setting free the Greek army. This would be an argument which Philoctetes could not easily withstand." But 1200 ff.—"Be damned to Troy and *all* of those who beneath its walls" (*οἵ θ' ὑπ' ἐκείνῳ πάντες*)— shows that on the contrary Philoctetes would not have been moved by that argument at all; like Ajax, like Achilles, he includes in his wrath and wish for revenge the whole army as well as those who have wronged him.



[45] For the 'illogicalities' Kitto finds in this speech, cf. n. 20, above.

[46] This is why he says: *λέγεις μὲν εἰκότ'* 1373, "What you say is reasonable" (on which both Kitto and Adams lay stress for their differing interpretations). If he is not now to explain to Philoctetes that the whole elaborate story of Odysseus and his father's arms was a lie from beginning to end (and so revive Philoctetes' suspicions of him by revealing the full extent of his former duplicity), he must admit that Philoctetes' objections are 'reasonable.'

[47] As Kitto (2), 136, wittily remarks: "This is an occasion in which history is not so philosophic as poetry; Troy did fall."

[48] See P. W. Harsh, 'The Role of the Bow in the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles,' *AJP*, LXXXI, 408–414.

[49] For Heracles as *πολύπονος*, cf. P *N.* 33, E *HF* 1192.

[50] *παρῆνεσ'* 1435. The advice the Sophoclean hero will not accept from his fellow men, Philoctetes here accepts from a god. Cf. also *οὐκ ἀπιθήσω* 1447.

# NOTES TO VI
## (Pp. 143–162)

[1] Cf. Lesky (2), 168: "Athen, vor dessen Fall er die Augen schliessen durfte . . . Dass dieser Fall kommen wurde, hat er wohl geahnt."

[2] X. *HG*, 2.2, 19. The Corinthians and Thebans especially were for destroying Athens (*ἐξαιρεῖν*).

[3] Cf. Whitman (1), 210. It will be clear to the reader how much I owe to Whitman's brilliant and eloquent discussion of the play.

[4] See the judicious discussion in E. R. Dodds, *Euripides Bacchae*,[2] 91.

[5] Cf. also the comic treatment of Iolaus in the *Heraclidae* (esp. 686, 692 with its suggestion of sexual impotence and the grotesque exit of the *therapon* and Iolaus 723 ff.).

[6] Jones remarks (265) on the fall of Oedipus in the *OT* that "the word *exemplum* is inadmissible because it declares a distinct moralising intent and a way of looking at the stage-figure which Sophocles' play is without." He seems to have overlooked this passage, in which the Greek equivalent of *exemplum* is so heavily emphasized.

[7] Cf. *Aj.* 13, *OT* 499, *El.* 658.

[8] See Knox (3), 127–128.

[9] Cf. Knox (2), 7–8.

[10] Cf. Lesky (1), 132. "Der Weg des Dulders führt in den Frieden aber noch einmal greift mit Lockung und Gewalt die Unruhe dieser Welt nach ihm, ehe er dem Rufe der Gottheit folgen darf."

[11] This is of course Bowra's interpretation (310 ff.), which is severely criticized by Linforth (*Religion and Drama in the Oedipus at Colonus*, 75–192). Neither of them pays sufficient attention to the salient feature of Oedipus' transformation, the growth in

him of prophetic power. Lesky (1), 133, emphasizes the point that the hero does not undergo a transformation of *character*, the 'hero' has the same characteristics as the man. This is not a 'transformation' in the Christian sense, but an 'elevation.' "Nicht um eine Verklärung handelt es sich wohl aber um eine Erhöhung die den Menschen mit seinem ganzen Wesen in das Sein des Heros hinübernimmt; aus diesem wird er Segen und Fluch mit der gleichen Kraft eines heissen Willens senden, mit der er einst als sterblich Lebender seiner Umwelt begegnete."

[12] Adams states (165) that the Eumenides of the grove "are not, as in Aeschylus, Erinyes transformed from 'Furies' into 'Kindly Ones' . . . there is no suggestion of Erinys where these goddesses are concerned . . . when in this drama Oedipus calls on revenge, he does not call on the Eumenides." In his note he explains that when Oedipus, in his curse on Polynices, calls on the Eumenides (*καλῶ δὲ τάσδε δαίμονας* 1391) his curses are his own; "these powers [i.e., Tartarus, the Eumenides and Ares] are invoked to seal his curses not to make them." However Oedipus also calls on the goddesses of the grove when he curses Creon (864 ff.). It seems difficult to believe that in a play which has as its climactic scene a wronged father's curse on his son, the connection between the Eumenides and the Erinyes should be neither intended by the poet nor felt by the audience. This connection may well have been, as Adams says, an Aeschylean invention, but it clearly took root fast; in the *Orestes* of Euripides for example the Eumenides are four times named as avenging goddesses (321 ff., 836, 1650, and 38, where Electra calls them *θεάς εὐμενίδας* because she is restrained by religious fear, *αἰδοῦμαι*, from pronouncing their name).

[13] There was of course no word of this part of the oracle when it was described by Oedipus in the earlier play (*OT* 791 ff.). This promise has been grafted on to the original oracle. This is one of the many ways in which Sophocles deliberately throughout this play refers to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. (After all, the prophecy in the *OC* could easily have been presented as an independent utterance of the god.) Other points of connection between the two plays are the Creon scene which recalls the confrontation of the two men in the earlier play, and Polynices' echo of Jocasta's speech on prophecy (see page 160).

[14] Jebb (followed by most critics) refers the *πρόσθε* of 1375 to Oedipus' words against his sons in 421–427 and 451 ff. He rejects Campbell's suggestion that it refers to a curse already pronounced on the sons before the beginning of the play. But *πρόσθε* speaks eloquently for Campbell. It makes no sense for Oedipus to say to Polynices, "Such curses I sent forth against you before, and now I call on them to come to me as allies, "unless Polynices had heard (or heard of) the curses. Which is not true of the passages to which Jebb refers the words. In any event those passages are not curses, (what a curse is like we can see all too clearly from 1383 ff.), they are in the first case a wish and in the second a prophecy.

[15] On the growing definiteness of Oedipus' pronouncements and its significance, see Kitto (1), 388.

[16] Note the words, usually associated with the hero's intractability, which here emphasize his willingness to coöperate: *παραινέσαι* 464, *διδάσκετε* 468, *δίδασκε* 480, *ἀκοῦσαι* 485.

[17] Cf. *OC* 1132 ff.

[18] See Bowra 312–313 for the hint of hero cult in these lines.

[19] Cf. *OC* 486, *Ant.* 1200.



[20] Cf. Errandonea 153: "La primera estrofa con su antístrofa elogian principalmente a Colono, la segunda a Atenas, cuyos majores timbres de gloria se cifran en el olivo, el caballo y el mar."

[21] Cf. E. *Med.* 835 ff. with Page's note (Euripides *Medea*, Oxford, 1938).

[22] This needs no illustration but it may be pointed out that *μινύρεται* (671—used of the nightingale's song) is a variant form of *μινυρίζω* which originally (in Homer) was associated with sadness and complaint. Cf. Dain-Mazon *ad loc.*

[23] Cf. *OC* 684, *h. Cer.* 8, 428; crocus, *ibid.* 6, 178, 426.

[24] Diodorus 13.72–73; and cf. Aristides *ὑπὲρ τῶν τεττάρων* 172 and the scholium. But it is too much to see in this the genesis of the play, as Dain-Mazon do (69–70).

[25] Cf. Plu. *Alc.* 34.3.

[26] Cf. Hdt. 8.55.

[27] So Jebb, Bowra (325), Dain-Mazon (la Pitié). Adams dissents: "Antigone [sic] is not appealing to Oedipus in the name of mercy, but in the name of duty, duty of father to son" (173, n. 10).

[28] In a previous short discussion of the play (*Tragic Themes in Western Literature*, ed. Cleanth Brooks, New Haven, 1955, 28) I rashly accepted the suggestion of the scholiast (*χρησμῳδεῖ*) and translated *χρήζει* as 'prophesy.' This of course cannot be maintained (if only because of *γάρ*) but the lexical separation of *χρήζω* into two different words in *LSJ*[9] is surely wrong. What a god wishes (*χρήζει*) becomes without effort a fact (cf. A. *Supp.* 100 ff.); in expressing his wish, therefore, he 'prophecies' (*χρήζει*). The word means exclusively 'prophesies' at E. *Hel.* 516, and there are several instances where the meaning is somewhere in between 'wish' and 'prophesy.' For example A. *Ch.* 340: *ἀλλ' ἔτ' ἂν ἐκ τῶνδε θεὸς χρήζων/ θείη κελάδους εὐφθογγοτέρους.* Cf. Σ. *χρήζων. ὁ χρησμῳδῶν Ἀπόλλων.* E. *Ion* 428: *ὅσον δὲ χρήζει—θεὸς γάρ ἐστιν—δέξομαι.*

[29] The impatient tone is the regular formula for Death summoning the hesitant mortal. Cf. E. *Alc.* 255, where Alcestis in her final delirium hears Charon calling to her: *τί μέλλεις; ἐπείγου. σὺ κατείργεις.*—appropriate words for the Hermes who on the lekythos of the Phiale painter (illustrated in Arias-Hirmer, *A History of 1000 Years of Greek Vase Painting*, pl. XLI, XLII) summons the dying woman with an impatient, imperious gesture. But the summons to Oedipus is made more solemn by the preceding silence (1623), the repetition of the god's voice (*πολλὰ πολλαχῇ* 1626) and, above all, by the mysterious *μέλλομεν χωρεῖν*, which emphasizes what Jebb finely calls "the companionship of Oedipus with the unseen."

# THE HEROIC TEMPER

## STUDIES IN SOPHOCLEAN TRAGEDY

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY AND LOS ANGELES
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, LONDON