show reverence to the gods. . . .' It was Neoptolemus who killed Priam at the altar when Troy was taken, but we have not been reminded of this part of his story until this glancing hint very late in the play, and Kott is surely unjustified in treating him as a war criminal all along. Sophocles likes making these ironical references to other stories at the very end of his dramas; one might compare the end of *O.C.*, where Antigone asks to be allowed to go to Thebes in order to settle her brothers' quarrel (1769 ff.), or the reference at the end of the *Electra* to 'the present and *future* ills of the Pelopidae' (1498).

Almost all critics, I suspect, would agree that the profoundest moment in the play is Neoptolemus' decision to take Philoctetes home, which as it is enacted on stage, with Neoptolemus supporting Philoctetes, is made more significant through its recall of the earlier scene of his breakdown. At once Neoptolemus' act of listening to a friend's persuasion is echoed by Philoctetes listening to Heracles, and Clare Campbell[32] is right, I think, to suggest linking these events very closely in the stage action, so that the one shall seem to precipitate the other. Certainly they are linked in meaning: they give the answer to the question What really matters? This answer takes us away from the familiar and perhaps too schematic image of the proudly lonely Sophoclean hero to something more complex, which is echoed in the themes of *philos* and *xenos* in the *Coloneus*.[33]

18

APOCALYPSE: *OEDIPUS AT COLONUS*

CEDRIC H. WHITMAN

If the *Oedipus at Colonus* fails to exhibit the dramatic alacrity of earlier plays, it is for a good reason. The play presents the long slow reversal of the *Oedipus Rex*. Instead of the abrupt plunge down the precipice, the movement here is laboriously uphill, and endurance is the criterion. The gods who speak from the whirlwind imparted their lightning swiftness to the *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus himself sets the tempo for the play in which, hated by the gods and abandoned, he finds his answer to them. The gods who destroyed him earlier make no further move, either for or against him, until they finally acknowledge his dignity with the affidavit of their heavenly thunder and bring to pass the moment in which he is complete. The timeless divinities are the lords of time, but Oedipus is the actor, and he looks to them for nothing save the continuation of their dread function. If time continues, endurance continues; but while time remains the same in essence, endurance grows greater, and so does knowledge. Given time, *tlemosyne* [heroic endurance] must achieve its victory.

Almost in his first words, Oedipus lists time as one of the three great elements of his moral fibre (3-8):

> Who will receive today the wanderer
> Oedipus, with some scanty charities?
> Who begs but little, and of that little still
> Gets less, but finds that it suffices him:
> For sufferings, and length of time, my comrade,
> And third, nobility, teach me content.

Previously, Oedipus had spoken of himself as the 'brother of the months' (*O.T.* 1082-83). He now has time as his constant companion. Once time had 'found him out' (*O.T.* 1213); now it stands by him as a medium

From *Sophocles: A Study in Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951), pp. 197-214. Reprinted, with notes slightly abridged, by permission of Mrs Anne Whitman.

of greatness and even as a teacher.[1] Again, as in the *Electra*, there is a contrast between what Oedipus is expected to learn from time and what he actually does learn. In the scene with Creon, the latter, staggered by Oedipus' proud replies, says that an old man in such misery ought to have learned to be mild and acknowledge his own weakness (809 ff; 852 ff.). But time teaches every man what he really is, and in Oedipus' case it has rather confirmed his high spirit and strength. It has, in a way, brought the man to pass, as it brings all things to pass, especially the most unexpected (1454 ff.). Itself a paradox, time fosters paradox, and turns things into opposites; it is the inevitable condition of Becoming yet in the end it reveals Being, even as Oedipus implied to Theseus in the great speech already quoted. The gods are free of time, deathless and ageless. Yet in the world they govern, in the events wherein they manifest themselves, all things are inverted to their opposites, friend becomes enemy and enemy friend, faith dies, and falsehood blossoms. But the helpless and aged Oedipus, the prey of time, will become a timeless blessing, a member of those heroic dead whose power represented to the Greek mind one of the most holy and inviolable forces in the world.

This speech of Oedipus is somewhat reminiscent of Ajax' 'yielding' speech, save that when Ajax says that in time things become their opposites, it is clear that he is resolved to be no more a part of the shoddy flux, but to get out of time, seize Being at a blow and be himself forever.[2] The inflexible standard of the old arete compelled Ajax. But Oedipus' virtue was one of the intellect; like the Homeric Odysseus, he could accept time with its contradictions as the framework of man's existence in which through devious ways he comes to fulfillment. His inner law has made survival difficult, but necessary. For the same intellectual honesty and skill which drove him in the earlier play to find out who he was, and to boast that he could bear the knowledge, has given him both the will and the strength to achieve that boast.

Oedipus himself states clearly his moral independence of the gods in the scene with his daughter. Ismene has told him that the victory in the war depends on him, and Oedipus, half-aside, reflects on the strangeness of the news; Ismene tries to give a pious answer (392–95):

> *Ismene*: They say their victory lies in your hands.
> *Oedipus*: When I am nothing, then am I a man?
> *Ismene*: Yes, for the gods who smote now raise you up.
> *Oedipus*: Cheap gift, to raise an old man, who fell young![3]

The rejection of Ismene's pietism is unmistakable. A little later, when

Ismene reports the prophecy that if Oedipus dies hostile to the Thebans his tomb will be an affliction to them, the old man, in deep self-consciousness of his inward power, says drily: 'A man might know that by his wits, without a god's help' (403). Indifferent to what the gods may seem to do, Oedipus trusts his intellect still; he does not really fancy the gods care about him at all (385 ff).[4] His exaltation cannot be interpreted as an act of grace, as Ismene suggests. It is a product from within, born of Oedipus' own equipment.

It has long since been recognized that Oedipus, in fundamental character, is still the same as ever. His mind, the quality which made him 'small and great', has only been deepened, not discredited by time. No less his famous wrath is vigorous as of old, and perhaps even a little more savage, as the insight and authority which motivate it grow. Innocent sufferer though he may be, he shows none of the religious transfiguration or humble self-abnegation of the Christian martyr.[5] Half of his exalted function is to bless Attica, but the other half is to have personal revenge on his enemies, and the terrible explosions which Creon and Polyneices endure show the ferocity of his hatred and anger; even Theseus gets a rather sharp answer.[6] Christian sentiment may recoil from the sheer violence of these outbursts; but the hypocrisy which they rebuke need find no sympathy. Oedipus is more right than ever in his anger, for his honesty has only grown fiercer with the years. The compromise which all expected of a condemned and polluted exile has not been forthcoming.

For all that, it is never for a moment forgotten that Oedipus is polluted, that he is the man who slew his father and married his mother. Not only his character but also his external fate remains unchanged. To emphasize this point, Sophocles has symbolized it nicely in the first part of the play by making him once more stumble into defilement. The first thing he does is to step on the consecrated ground and sit on a sacred stone. Thus throughout the prologue, first chorus, and first episode, he is technically guilty of sacrilege against the Eumenides. Eventually he makes amends, or rather sends his daughter to make them; but he is in no hurry, and in the end, it is into the most sacred and forbidden part of the grove that he turns. By this light touch the poet recalls and reasserts the same old fate of Oedipus the king – his almost innate luck of touching things which are forbidden, without knowing it. He is the man who treads blindly and innocently upon taboos. Yet even as Oedipus had formerly committed sacrilege and survived in greater wisdom and strength, so now the revelation of his error does not cause him to start up in alarm; he only asks on what land he is trespassing (39–46):

Stranger: Here the dread
Goddesses dwell, daughters of Earth and Darkness.

Oedipus: Let me hear by what name I should address them.

Stranger: The people of this land call them the all-seeing
Eumenides; elsewhere they've other names.

Oedipus: Graciously let them take their suppliant
For from this place I never shall depart.

Stranger: What does this mean?

Oedipus: The token of my fate.

The last line, like so many of Oedipus' remarks, is spoken as an aside and goes uncomprehended by the stranger, who at once changes the subject. But it is clear that Oedipus has passed beyond the phase where technical defilement matters. If it had been his fate alone of all men to defile what was most sacred and to suffer for it, his suffering has invested him with certain rights; for now he alone of all men may walk in the Athenian grove of the Furies and not suffer.

And what strange Furies these are, who receive their suppliant graciously – and such a suppliant – and whose grove echoes with the song of nightingales (17-18). These are purely Athenian Furies;[7] only after the first consistory of the Areopagus were the Furies given nightingale voices, when an earlier exile, 'hated of the gods', Orestes, found relief and dignity again in the equable air of Athens. Now Oedipus comes to Athens, and there is no yelping of 'insatiable, bronze-footed bloodhounds', but only the music of the birds, as if all the past evil of the Theban house were transformed by the mysterious forces of time and suffering into a present of tranquil beauty and a prospect of hope. Quite after his own fashion, Sophocles has borrowed the gentle goddesses of pain from Aeschylus and spun them magically into his many-levelled, symbolic scheme of the heroic life. Here, in the grove of these paradoxically sweet dread goddesses, Oedipus could recognize a token of his fate; and Athens too could see herself once more, as at the trial of Orestes, the defender of the weak, mediator between the suppliant and justice, the restorer of the fallen – the great role she loved to play. With characteristic finish, Sophocles brings in these nightingales again in the great ode on Athens, so that the whole episode of Oedipus' coming and acceptance is rounded off with the music of nightingales.

Error and exaltation, pollution and the song of nightingales! No union of opposites could be more Sophoclean. Nothing is denied or remitted; all the old misery, the horror of the fate of Oedipus remains unchanged and unrationalized. Nothing has been invented to show that the gods really meant well. Within and without Oedipus is the same man, save

that he has added a new dimension of fortitude and knowledge. He continues to act his role with ever increasing self-consciousness.[8] He knows the 'token of his fate', and therein creates a historical self. He is the blind man who knows; he is the 'hated of God' who is innocent and noble. In this role he will win recognition.

Oedipus' battle for significance finds its core in the defense of his nobility. Those about him on the whole believe that no one could do the things which he did and yet be a good man. The lack of distinction which antiquity, until the time of Socrates, made between inner and outer values is well expressed in the famous *scolion* of Simonides:

> No man can help being bad
> Whom hopeless misfortune seizes;
> For every man who fares well is good,
> But if he fares ill, he is bad and the best on the whole
> Are those the gods love.[9]

The gods had not loved Oedipus; he had been seized with hopeless misfortune. Hence the chorus is suspicious of him from the first. When they hear who he is, their reaction shows clearly how they have formulated their feelings about him. He must be guilty, for if his murder of Laius had been the moral equivalent of mere manslaughter in self-defense, the gods would not have punished him (228 ff):

> No fated punishment comes to him
> Who avenges what he first has suffered.

The gods afflict him, he must be evil; let him get out. Antigone attempts to correct this attitude by presenting her father in the light of one undeservingly oppressed by the gods' arbitrary will (252 ff.):

> Among all men you will not find
> One who, if a god leads on,
> Has power to escape.

In these two views the fate of Oedipus is summarized respectively as a tragedy of fault and a tragedy of fate. Antigone's appeal is meant to lighten the burden of guilt, but only Oedipus himself understands fully his own innocence.

The *Oedipus Rex* can hardly have failed to stir ambiguous reactions in Athens. The passages just quoted illustrate the interpretations which his story prompts; indeed, it is even possible that between 429 and Sophocles' resumption of the myth, the much debated question of the guilt or innocence of Oedipus had already begun to divide readers into bristling camps. Sophocles may have wished to settle it once and for all by the heavy emphasis he lays in this play upon his hero's innocence.[10]

In his very opening speech, Oedipus mentions 'suffering, time, and third, nobility' as the things which have given him his strength. The emphasis upon 'nobility' is beyond question.[11] Time and suffering will do nothing for the ignoble man, except make him bitter. Even as in the *Oedipus Rex*, when he faced the imminent revelation of his parricide and incest, he knew that no external fortune could destroy his soul, so now in his old age he maintains his basic excellence. Later, when Antigone's appeal has quieted the chorus, in a speech of formal defense, he states quite explicitly that his deeds were unwilled, and that his griefs are due to no evil in his nature (263-272):

> And will you then
> Uproot me from this seat and drive me forth,
> Fearing a name alone? You cannot fear
> Either my body or my deeds; for these
> My deeds were not committed; they were suffered,
> If, as you must, you mean my history,
> My father and my mother, for which tales
> You fear me. Ah, full well I know it is!
> And yet, how am I evil in my nature,
> I who, when struck, struck back, so that had I
> Even known my victim, I'd not be condemned.

The legal claim that he killed in self-defense and ignorance is backed by the moral claim that even if he had known that his assailant was his father, he would not be morally guilty. It will be remembered that Laius had hit him over the head with an ox-goad, for no reason other than that he was in the way, a fact which perhaps lends weight to Oedipus' claim. Be that as it may, the real innocence rests, in his own eyes, upon his inward conviction of integrity. Later he says to Creon (966-968):

> For not in me, nor in myself, could you
> Discover any stain of sin, whereby
> I sinned against myself and mine.

Oedipus' rejection of the word 'hamartia' here clearly has an inward reference, while his outer misdeeds are undeniable. In a similar spirit he can use the old figure of the 'gift of the gods', always a dangerous thing to receive (539 ff.):

> *Chorus*: You have done –
> *Oedipus*: I have not done.
> *Chorus*: What then?
> *Oedipus*: I have received a gift . . .[12]

The gods and their gifts, the misery of his life; these are all externals and ineluctable. But he is himself, and the gods can do nothing to break the strong moral good he wills. Oedipus is a landmark in Greek morality, for he presents the first really clear exposition of the independence of the inner life, that doctrine which in Socrates and his followers became the cornerstone of a whole new phase of civilization.

Yet for this moral independence to be significant – to be real one might say – it had to be recognized. Herein the feelings of the fifth-century poet differed from the mysticism of Plato, the reality of whose inner world was prior and causal. For Sophocles, the hero must win in this world; whether in such a death as Antigone's or in such a life as Oedipus', the heroic victory had all its reference and significance in the purely human sphere. Hence the rising action of the *Oedipus at Colonus* shows the hero's triumph over person after person. He already has Antigone, in whom for the first time a Sophoclean protagonist has a real companion. Antigone is not a foil, she is a counterpart to Oedipus; Sophocles kept in mind the character he had given her almost forty years before and here endowed her with no little of her father's endurance (345-52). Ismene shares her position to some extent, so that in the three of them, in the scenes where the old man praises his daughters (337 ff., 1365-68), one detects the nucleus of a world in which Oedipus is accepted and honored. With them, Oedipus stands on his own terms, commanding and receiving freely their love and honor.

It is not long before the stranger of the prologue adopts a respectful tone.[13] The chorus similarly, in spite of its misgivings, is forced (76) 'to feel awe at his pronouncements' (292 ff.). But the climax of Oedipus' triumph over society appears in the scene with Theseus, who recognizes him at once as a superior being (631 ff.). It is the essentially Athenian interpretation of *aretē* which underlies this scene and makes it moving. Theseus represents Athens; without hesitation he penetrates all the disguises of fortune and circumstance and arrives at the true man. Drawn in the aristocratic colors of a legendary king, he is none the less the embodiment of the most enlightened kind of democratic individualism. Mutual recognition of virtue, as in the case of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, can bring the great man back to the world, or, more accurately, can bring the world back to the great man, whose ethos has remained unchanged. The value of the true man, whatever his state, attains a just estimate in the liberal air of Athens. Theseus comes and listens respectfully before Oedipus, and Oedipus acknowledges his excellence (569, 1042 ff.). Hero recognizes hero as a fellow stranger in this world, knowing its uncertainty, and basing standards of behavior on its immanent sorrow (562-68). Oedipus makes for himself a world of the souls that

can respect him in his tribulations, and when he departs, he is no longer isolated, but prized.

Thus, like Philoctetes, Oedipus is set free to bestow the value of himself upon the world. But those who would avail themselves of his blessing must accept the blind beggar himself and not try to use his greatness without understanding him. So too, Philoctetes' magic bow could not be separated from its lame and offensive owner. The paradox of human value must be taken whole; there is no short way. Philoctetes and disease are one; Oedipus and pollution are one. The hero's external daimon and internal daimon, that is, the inner and outer divine forces of his life, are inextricably interwoven until the great moment comes when the external yields, and the hero's inwardness may burst out and become a reality. And this is not so much a mystic process as a social one. Theseus and the Athenians could perceive that reality through the shell. They are therefore a little like Oedipus, who is blind but full of true insight: 'All he says has eyes' (74).[14] His murmured remark, 'When I am nothing, then am I a man?' conveys the whole secret. His triumph is prepared within himself, almost in defiance of the very gods themselves, and the Athenians, when they accept his paradox, are made worthy to share in his triumph.

But his triumph does not come without a struggle. The two scenes in which Oedipus sets his face against Thebes forever have occasioned much criticism. Their relevance has either been missed altogether,[15] or else explained merely in connection with the original saga, the *fabula sacra*.[16] But part of the saga is not necessarily part of the play. For the Greek dramatist, there was no *fabula sacra*; he was as free as Homer to exclude whatever detail he felt to be irrelevant. As examples of Oedipus' growing heroic powers, wherewith he settles his accounts in the world, the episodes of Creon and Polyneices clearly contribute something to the character of the protagonist;[17] but their significance is greater than that. The moral essence of these scenes is derived from the problem of the *Philoctetes*, where an individual of heroic proportions, rejected long since and cast away by his comrades, becomes once more the object of their specific personal concern.

Over and over again we are told that the Thebans, and Creon in particular, had exiled Oedipus long after the latter had ceased to feel that exile was necessary or appropriate to his misfortunes; up till that time they had kept him against his will (431-44; 765-771; 776-780). Precisely why is a question. Euripides, in the closing scene of the *Phoenissae*, makes the exile of Oedipus begin after the expedition of the Seven is over; it is therefore an act of the new king, Creon, who perhaps may be thought to have planned it in order to consolidate his power.[18] In Sophocles' play, however, Oedipus was exiled while Creon was merely

regent, during the minority of the princes. The latter, apparently, had been quite passive in the matter. In the absence of conclusive evidence, it is perhaps safe to assume that the disposal of Oedipus in some way affected the various claimants' interest in the throne (418-420; 448). In any case, the very doubtfulness of the motivation suggests Sophocles' real intention: the Thebans had used the legally justifiable reason for exile, blood guilt, as a kind of political cover for more selfish motives. Oedipus himself seems to feel that he ought to be received into Thebes and buried there (406-08). Yet technically, as a parricide, Oedipus could not possibly return. The Thebans certainly had no intention of bringing him into the city, but only of keeping him near at hand (399 ff.; 600-02). One might well ask how it had been possible for him to stay in the first place, and why he thought he might return at all, if ritual pollution had really such a solemn significance.

But the fact is, such pollution was open to flexible treatment, and the sons of Oedipus and Creon had made political capital of it. And now, like Odysseus in the *Philoctetes*, Creon and Polyneices both wish to use the great man's power without accepting the man himself. The oracle told them they would conquer if they could get him back (412-416), but there is yet some question of how a hero must be received. The great contrast with the pragmatic scheme of the Thebans is the frank and generous attitude of Theseus. Not only does he feel a personal respect and kinship for Oedipus; he gives him the full rights of a citizen and even offers to take him to his own house (636-641; 643). With Theseus' example before them, even the choristers seem no longer to fear the pollution which attends the old man, and they defend him valiantly against Creon's attack (834 ff.). To be sure, the Athenians are to gain much from him, but they have not tried to achieve it by the half-and-half plan of Creon.

In the scene with Creon, the political substance of the play becomes most clear, and brings the elements of festival drama into the foreground. All that the Athenian mind felt to be politically good clashes openly with the spiritual blindness of Creon. Creon arrives in guile and departs in violence. He behaves like a tyrant – indeed, he calls himself one (851) – and he carries off women, as tyrants are supposed to do.[19] But he is also much subtler, and like most fifth-century stage tyrants, he possesses less in common with the economic dictators of history than with the clever, sophistically trained oligarchs of the war years. His obsequious carefulness before the Athenian choristers who, by a curious anachronism, are at once the subjects of Theseus and liberal exponents of democracy, includes not only respectful compliments, but even a passing intimation that he represents a majority vote (733 ff.; 758 ff.; esp.

737 ff.). With deft political skill he answers the arraignment of Theseus by trying to use Athenian institutions and the famous piety of Athens to his own advantage: he says smoothly that he is sure that Athens would never receive an unholy incestuous parricide; the Areopagus would never allow it (944-49). Creon seems to know well the principle formulated later by Aristotle, that 'we should know the moral qualities characteristic of each form of government, for the special moral character of each is found to provide us with our most effective means of persuasion in dealing with it' (*Rhet.* I, 8 [1366a]).

Aristotle further states that the end of tyranny is protection of the tyrant, while the end of aristocracy is the maintenance of education and national institutions. Clearly Creon is here a tyrant speaking in his own defense; but with great skill he uses as his principal argument the moral end of the aristocratic Theseus, namely the maintenance of Athenian piety and the court of the Areopagus. A definite political antinomy, therefore, is only thinly veiled in this scene. It appears even more clearly in Theseus' reproof, which enters almost unnecessarily into Theban manners. Creon, says Theseus, is not only unworthy of Athens, but unworthy of Thebes herself, and the Theban tradition of breeding gentlemen (913-923).

By contrast with Creon, the failed aristocrat, the mythic figure of Theseus, characterized both as the true aristocrat and the man of the polis, with its ideal of legality and true piety, points the religious question implicit in the political antinomy. Creon's well-planned references to Athenian piety miss fire. Theseus deigns no answer, but Oedipus in towering wrath bursts out in one of his terrible cannonades.[20] He defends himself from the scornful, personal taunts of Creon (960-1002), strips the veil from his pretense of justice, and then says (1003-1009):

> How fine for you to flatter Theseus' name
> And Athens, calling her well administered!
> But in your commendations you miss much;
> If any land knows how to honor gods
> With reverence, this land leads all the rest.
> Wherefrom you, plundering these girls and me,
> The aged suppliant, try to drag us off!

Creon's breach of the most holy right of the aged and the suppliant fits oddly with his otherwise scrupulous observance of religious forms in treating a parricide. He will bring Oedipus into the vicinity of Thebes as a useful object, but will not admit his technical pollution within the walls. The Thebans are thus represented as standing on the forms of piety without regarding their essence, while Athens 'knows how to

honor the gods with reverence', by receiving the suppliant generously with no reservations. Far from dallying over mere religious formalities, Theseus leaves a sacrifice half-finished in order to go to battle for his guests (887-890; 897-903) – the sort of religious enlightenment which Sparta, for instance, would not risk in the crucial year of Marathon.

These details are too closely allied to the play's principal action to be regarded as merely adventitious. The paradox of seeming and being, which informs the character of the hero, is here extended to include a commentary on the spirit and the letter, in the culture and political ethics of Greece herself. In this scene, even more fully than in the great ode on Athens, Sophocles has poured out his love for the city and his faith in her as the genuine polis, where not merely the nightingales sing and the sacred olives flourish, but where also the individual man, that irreducible minimum of political or any other kind of greatness, holds his place by arete alone, and 'whatever good he may do to the city'.[21]

Scholars have long since recognized references to the Peloponnesian War in this play.[22] The shadow of bitter hatred between Athens and Thebes overhangs the whole, and with reason, for in the late years of the war, Thebes showed herself Athens' most implacable enemy, ransacking her outlying fields for anything movable,[23] and clamoring later at the peace table for demolition of her walls and enslavement of her inhabitants.[24] In the years just preceding Arginusae (406), when the *Oedipus at Colonus* was written, Athens was in desperate condition. The treasury was empty, the statues stripped of their gold; her leaders were incompetent, her population starving, every nerve was strained to the breaking point. If Thucydides, writing probably at about this same time, could call Athens 'the education of Greece', because she represented the greatest opportunity for an individual to be self-sufficient and at his best,[25] it is not so surprising that Sophocles too, with his profundity of poetic insight, should have been able to see his city historically and create a vision of her which would be as timeless as the heroism of the old Oedipus. When he speaks of Athens in the play, he never mentions her sufferings. He speaks of her as if she were inviolable, as if the sacred olive trees were not burned stumps and the land ravaged and ruined. Athens herself in those days was a pattern of heroic tlemosyne; and if Sophocles could see beyond the ruins and the stumps, it was because he saw whence Athens derived her almost incredible fortitude. The value of man was implicit in it all, and embodied in the figure of Oedipus. The man whose intellect has brought him to divine insight has come to the place where only the true counts. The ideal Athenian setting is more than a patriotic motif: in it Sophocles symbolizes the world of man's metaphysical value, the world which is the only home for Oedipus.

The picture is, of course, confessedly and purposely idealized, but it is not fiction. It is myth, which is to say, it is history distilled into meaning.

The scene with Polyneices completes the picture of society's misguided attempt to regain the great individual for its own ends. Once more, as in the *Philoctetes*, the attempt through guile and force yields to the attempt through persuasion and appeal, and once more the same refusal follows. Polyneices is no mere politician like Creon; he is very sympathetically drawn. Even though he is perhaps still too self-involved to rise above his practical need of Oedipus into a full understanding of the old man's worth, nevertheless his full admission of guilt, and especially his recognition that has come too late (1264), stamp him at once as a serious and wellnigh tragic character.[26] Therefore the appalling execrations which the old man calls down on him are the more surprising. But Polyneices really is too late, and it is only out of empty hope that he can suggest how he may make up for his sins (1269 ff.).

For Polyneices' faults are in his nature and in the nature of his will. He has put himself where he cannot turn back (1418 ff.), but he has done so not because of any moral standard, but because he wanted the throne. He is therefore in a tragic situation, perhaps, but he is not a tragic character; however genuine his penitence may be, it implies little understanding and no real morality. Fundamentally he needs Oedipus for precisely the same reason as Creon does, and he would never have come otherwise.[27] Oedipus' refusal of him rests on the same absolute standard he has always espoused. Since now Oedipus is himself all but a god, it may be said that his refusal rests on a divine standard.

The curse may seem another matter. Many scholars have argued that Oedipus was wrong to curse his son;[28] others that the curse merely illustrates Oedipus' great exaltation.[29] Still others have collected much juridical evidence to prove that Polyneices, as the very image of a bad son, by all contemporary standards deserved damnation.[30] Yet in a play about inner and outer religious standards, Sophocles would hardly allow Polyneices to be condemned on merely legalistic grounds. Polyneices is undoubtedly a bad son; yet he is drawn in touchingly human colors: in his parting from Antigone, in his rather high conception of generalship, and in the loneliness of his sorrow as he bravely accepts his fate, he carries away a good deal of our sympathy (cf. 1429 ff.; 1402–04; 1432 ff.). The simply bad son might be forgiven, one feels, if Antigone could intercede for him. If Sophocles meant us to remember only his past deeds, he should have made him appear more like them. But instead, he has deliberately given his cause some justice by making him the elder, instead of the younger brother (374 ff.).

It has been wisely noted that in the epic source the curse on the sons

of Oedipus precedes and apparently causes their strife,[31] but in Sophocles the strife came first, arising 'from some god and their own sinful mind' (371 ff.). By the time Oedipus utters his curse, Polyneices is already on his way to the war, and is too fatally involved to turn back, as his words to Antigone show. So the curse, which once had a supernatural causative force, is here simply a statement of fact, though Polyneices still refers to the Furies as the ones who will bring it to pass, as one always speaks of a god in connection with what is true (1433).[32] Obviously it is Polyneices who will bring it to pass, for he is already doing it, and Sophocles has made it doubly pointed by letting Antigone beg him so movingly to desist. But Polyneices, whose name means the 'man of the heavy curse', knows who he is. Quite aside from his past cruelty to his father and sister, and even apart from the fact that he is still only trying to use Oedipus, Polyneices deserves the curse because he is accursed, as Esau was accursed long before the actual denunciation came.[33] Oedipus, like an oracle, has simply told the truth. Once more, the supernatural element enters in such a way that it can only be symbolic. Appropriately enough, the last of the three gods whom Oedipus invokes to destroy Polyneices is the War itself, the really destructive element 'which has cast such heavy strife' between the brothers (1391).[34]

The Creon and Polyneices scenes are not loosely or poorly integrated, from the moral point of view. From the mere standpoint of plot they revive and restate the conflicts of the *Philoctetes*, illustrating with infinitely subtle turns the world with which the great individual must deal, in his struggle for weight, dignity, and reality. Individualism in terms of such values means more than ordinary individualism; it is a norm of heroic being. And the basic difference between Oedipus and Polyneices is that Oedipus asserts his heroic right to be, while Polyneices asserts only his right to have. Therefore the one is oracular and blessed, the other accursed and pathetically confused in his humanity.

With the retreat of Polyneices, Oedipus' moral triumph is complete, and the mastery which he has shown throughout the play is now symbolized in the final scene of divine mastery. The last and most impressive of the supernatural happenings in Sophocles has this in common with all the others: the supernatural 'cause' follows its effect. Oedipus officially 'becomes a hero', with the power of blessing and cursing. But manifestly, the transformation which takes place in the depth of the sacred grove adds little in itself to the power of Oedipus. The blind and aged hero has already repulsed Creon and cursed Polyneices; before he leaves, he pronounces the eternal blessing upon Theseus and Attica. To the Greek, a person could become a hero only if he really was one, and Oedipus has already exercised his full prerogatives. Viewed in their simplest and

most profound light, these prerogatives are no more than the ability to see through the veils of circumstance into essential fact. Oedipus' words 'have eyes'. His insight attains its perfect symbol when he himself leads the way into the grove, unguided except by what he calls 'the present deity'; nor does he hesitate to identify himself subtly with that divine force. The inward man has at last come true.

It is a grave mistake to overlook the moral qualities which have made Oedipus a hero, and to regard his apotheosis as a simple act of grace on the part of the gods, or as amends made by them for the sufferings which he has endured.[35] The choristers, indeed, interpret it thus:

> Out of the many woes that came
> Without cause, now the god in justice
> Would lift him up. (1565 ff.)

On the other hand, they have already prayed on their own behalf, when they heard the thunder and saw Oedipus' fate coming, to be delivered from any share in such 'gainless grace' (*akerdē charin*, 1484). It is clear that they regard the gods as the actors here, and the whole process as fraught with danger, not only for Oedipus, but also for the passive spectators. These good Athenians, with their simple, human limitations and their sophrosyne, know that the gods can be almost as perilous friends as they are enemies, and they would prefer to stand apart and pray. Oedipus himself rejects any such interpretation, however. He uses the word 'grace', but always of the blessing he himself is to bestow on Athens (1489).

It will be remembered with what contempt he treated the suggestion of Ismene, in an earlier scene, when she remarked that the gods who formerly destroyed him were now about to reinstate him (394-395). Oedipus, with his customary brutal truthfulness, called it a cheap favor. Indeed, the gods did little for Oedipus; he had to prove himself every inch of the way, and it is no wonder that he omits all sanctimonious expressions of gratitude. He speaks seriously of the gods and the world at large only to Theseus, for the latter is the only other character of sufficiently heroic proportions to understand him in his own terms. By the same token, Theseus alone is permitted to witness the last hour of Oedipus. Only the large soul can fully understand how 'the gods look well but late', how time penetrates all things, or how the noblest in man is rooted in his essential weakness and subjection to change (1536 ff.; 607 ff.; 560 ff.). Others may grasp the words when they are spoken, but Theseus comprehends out of his own being. And Theseus, champion of the true Athenian religiosity, regards Oedipus himself as the grace-bringer, not the gods. There was no Messiah in Greek theology; if man

was to come near to the divine, he must get there himself. How this can be achieved is known only to him who has in some sense already achieved it; the rest of the world will view it with limited, and doubtless frightened, eyes. As Hölderlin once wrote:

> Only those who themselves are
> Godlike ever believe in gods.[36]

Oedipus brings us to a vision of godhead, whose content and significance are Oedipus himself. Sophocles says nothing of the gods who greet him, but he has shown all he could of the man who, after long sorrow, greeted the gods.

The end, therefore, is no great change, except that it releases Oedipus from the struggle of asserting himself and the suffering which pursued the moral activity of his soul. He had exalted himself by his endurance in that activity, and the final scene shows only the universal of which the play was the particular. That universal is important, but one must not forget how it came about. It is the result of 'time, suffering, and his own nobility'. How perfectly his last words to his daughters sum up the trial of values by which he has triumphed:

> Children, it now behoves you leave this place,
> Enduring, in nobility of mind. (1640 ff.)

Endurance, nobility, mind: these are the laws of the human soul. So stated, they sound very simple, and in essence perhaps they are. But in action, which is life and the only context in which human beings can know them, they are the stuff of tragedy, the divine scheme of *ananke*, which binds the magnanimous man to himself and puzzles and outrages the philistine world, until it finally can ratify itself in a form that can no longer be denied.

Greek Tragedy

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