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“Oedipus, Creature of a Day: Personal Identities in Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannos”

CAMWS 113th Meeting

April 7, 2017

1.

ἐμοὶ πατὴρ μὲν Πόλυβος ἦν Κορίνθιος,

μήτηρ δὲ Μερόπη Δωρίς. ἠγόμην δ᾿ ἀνὴρ

ἀστῶν μέγιστος τῶν ἐκεῖ…

ἀνὴρ γὰρ ἐν δείπνοις μ᾿ ὑπερπλησθεὶς μέθης

καλεῖ παρ᾿ οἴνῳ πλαστὸς ὡς εἴην πατρί.

κἀγὼ βαρυνθεὶς τὴν μὲν οὖσαν ἡμέραν

μόλις κατέσχον…

…ὅμως δ᾿

ἔκνιζέ μ᾿ ἀεὶ τοῦθ᾿· ὑφεῖρπε γὰρ πολύ.

My father was Polybus the Corinthian,

and my mother was Merope, a Dorian. And I was brought up a man, the greatest of all the townspeople there…

For a man at dinner was full of drink, and contended over his wine that I was a fabricated (*plastos*) son to my father. And though it weighed on me, I kept myself

at bay for the present day… but

nevertheless this was always chafing me; and it very much stole over me.[[1]](#footnote-1) (774-785)

2. Owens, Timothy J., Dawn T. Robinson, and Lynn Smith-Lovin. “Three Faces of Identity.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 77-99.

“We first draw a distinction between identity theories that focus on internalization of social positions within a self-structure and those that focus on how consensual, cultural identity meanings are implemented within situations that evoke them. The former theories (e.g., Stryker’s and Burke’s Identity Theory) focus on how stable, internalized aspects of social identities are formed and how they affect behavior as the social actor moves from one situation to the next. Implicitly, these internalization theories assume a socialization process through which repeated social interactions lead to the development of personalized identity meanings; these meanings then become incorporated into a stable, trans-situational self-concept. **The latter theories** (e.g., Tajfel’s Social Identity Theory and Heise’s Affect Control Theory) **emphasize how social contexts elicit certain identities and shape their meanings.** **These theories focus on how consensual cultural meanings associated with identities are imported by actors into local interactions and how situational environments shape the localized meanings of the situationally relevant identities.** The situation and the culture within which it is embedded are more central than any internalizedaspect of the actor” (478).

**Self-concept:** “...the totality of a specific person’s thoughts and feelings toward him- or herself as an object of reflection” (479).

3.

Vernant, Jean-Pierre. “Ambiguity and Reversal: On the Enigmatic Structure of the *Oedipus Rex*.” *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (1988): 113-140.

4.

Reinhardt, Karl. *Sophocles.* Trans. Hazel Harvey and David Harvey. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979. 100-1.

C.f. Beer, Josh. "Oedipus Tyrannus." In Markantonatos (Ed.), 2012. 93-110. Beer (93f.) notes that the play is one of “mistaken identity,” and centered on the inherent duality of ‘who Oedipus is’.

5.

436-8 Oedipus’ parents are those who made him (οἵ σ᾿ ἔφυσαν, 436) and thus their identity is the key to his own. Oedipus responds in kind, asking “who among mortals made me?”(τίς δέ μ᾿ ἐκφύει βροτῶν, 437). The priest replies:

This day will make you and destroy you.

ἥδ᾿ ἡμέρα φύσει σε καὶ διαφθερεῖ.

(438)

6.

οὐδ᾽ ἄστυ γ᾽ οὐδὲ πύργος οὐδὲ δαιμόνων

ἀγάλμαθ᾽ ἱερά, τῶν ὁ παντλήμων ἐγὼ

κάλλιστ᾽ ἀνὴρ εἷς ἔν γε ταῖς Θήβαις τραφεὶς

ἀπεστέρησ᾽ ἐμαυτόν…

Not (to look upon) the city, nor the tower,

nor the sacred statues of gods, of which I myself, utterly wretched, deprived myself,

a man who was raised up the very finest in Thebes…” (1378-81)

7.

ὡς εἴπερ ἄρξεις τῆσδε γῆς, ὥσπερ κρατεῖς,

ξὺν ἀνδράσιν κάλλιον ἢ κενῆς κρατεῖν:

ὡς οὐδέν ἐστιν οὔτε πύργος οὔτε ναῦς

ἔρημος ἀνδρῶν μὴ ξυνοικούντων ἔσω.

If you hold sway over this land, as you do rule,

it is better to rule a land with men than an empty one;

for no tower or ship is anything

if it is empty of men who live inside. (54-7)

8.

...θανάτων δ᾿ ἐμᾷ

χώρᾳ πύργος ἀνέστας

...he stood as a tower

against death in my land (1200-1).

9.

ὅστις πέφασμαι φύς τ᾿ ἀφ᾿ ὧν οὐ χρῆν, ξὺν οἷς τ᾿

οὐ χρῆν ὁμιλῶν, οὕς τέ μ᾿ οὐκ ἔδει κτανών.

…I who am revealed as born from those I should not have been,

consorting with those I should not, killing those whom I ought not!

(1184-1185)

10.

Lape, Emma C. *Flowers that Bend with the Rainfall: Time and Identity in Greek Epic and Tragedy.* BA Thesis. Dartmouth College, 2016.

11.

On the history of the *ephemeros* concept and notions of human vulnerability to time, see:

Fränkel, Hermann. "Man's "Ephemeros" Nature According to Pindar and Others." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 77 (1946): 131-45.

Snell, Bruno. *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature.* New York: Dover Publications, 1982.

Cf. Pind. *Pyth.* 8.95, Archilochus 128.7, Simonides 521.16.

12.

Knox, Bernard M.W. *Oedipus at Thebes.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.

“the reconstitution of the imperious, dynamic, intelligent figure of the opening scenes” (185).

“all the traits of his magnificent character reappear, so that “it is not long before he is recognizably the same man as before” (187).

13.

ἐγὼ δ᾿ ἐμαυτὸν παῖδα τῆς Τύχης νέμων…

τοιόσδε δ᾿ ἐκφὺς οὐκ ἂν ἐξέλθοιμ᾿ ἔτι

ποτ᾿ ἄλλος, ὥστε μὴ ᾿κμαθεῖν τοὐμὸν γένος.

But I judge myself the child of Fortune…

And with such a birth still I would never turn out

another sort of man, so that I would not learn my own birth. (1080-5)

14.

Oedipus accuses Teiresias of joining in the conspiracy against him, he imagines what would happen if a different individual were playing the same role:

...εἰ δ᾿ ἐτύγχανες βλέπων,

καὶ τοὔργον ἂν σοῦ τοῦτ᾿ ἔφην εἶναι μόνου.

...If you happened to have your eyesight,

I would even say that the deed was yours alone! (348-349)

15.

Oedipus describes the punishment he would deal out if Teiresias were not so old

εἰ δὲ μὴ ᾿δόκεις γέρων

εἶναι, παθὼν ἔγνως ἂν οἷά περ φρονεῖς.

If you did not appear to be so old,

you would learn through suffering how awful are your thoughts. (402-3)

16.

As Oedipus takes on the role of a beggar asking Kreon for mercy, “the adaptability of Oedipus surmounts the most terrible reversal of fortunes imaginable” (Knox 1957, 190).

17.

Knox 1957, 194.

18.

Martin, Raymond and John Barresi. *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

19.

Budelmann, Felix and Pat Easterling. “Reading Minds in Greek Tragedy.” *Greece & Rome* 57. 2 (2010): 289-303.

20.

Murnaghan, Sheila. “Reading the Mind of Ajax.” Classics and Cognitive Theory Conference, 27-28 October 2016. New York University, Silver Center for Arts and Science, NY.

21.

Reinhardt, Karl. *Sophocles.* Trans. Hazel Harvey and David Harvey. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979.

Dodds, E.R. “On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex.*” *The Ancient Concept of Progress, and other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966. 64-77.

1. All translations are my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)