

Sophocles' Valedictory *Oedipus* and the *Birds* of Aristophanes

Improbable though it were, in his posthumous *Oedipus at Colonus*, composed when the 'writing was on the wall' for the Athenians and their belligerent democracy, nonagenarian Sophocles turned to Old Comedy for structural and thematic elements, albeit in a subdued minor key and not without significant inversions. Aristophanes' *Birds* of eight years before seems in particular to have given him ideas, although the spectacular—literally—megalomania of earthly imperial power in that comic masterpiece gives way, in the venerable tragedian's elegiac valediction to his countrymen, to an old ex-king's vindication of spiritual force with hope for an afterlife of *eumeneia* (OC 631) as positive, constructive, and as negative, defensive force wielded for, if not by, a sobered, pious future Athens.

Like *Birds*, *OC* opens with two expatriates on a road to an unfamiliar place. Pisthetaerus and Euelpides have willingly escaped Athens, with all its litigiousness and other stresses, as Oedipus and daughter Antigone have left their unwelcoming native Thebes behind. The former seek life an easier life—provisionally a bird's; the latter, any place that will harbor an infamous offender against holiest relationships. Prophecies are implicated in both emigrations; Apollo is mentioned. False, concocted oracles, it is true, "predicted" and would prescribe Cloudcuckooland, whereas obscure ones, of which Oedipus is long aware but whose realization he understands only now, confirm the rightness of his trespass onto taboo ground at Colonus and the subsequent mystery of his departure from mortal life.

These immigrants must first persuade hostile choristers (scandalized inhabitants of Colonus and anthropophobic birds) and a local leader (Hoopoe and Theseus) that their intentions and abilities are not only innocent but extremely beneficial. They do so.

As with other plays by Aristophanes, the new alliances meet with opposition in central episodes. In Aristophanic drama we expect to see a series of interlopers who often want to co-opt the new powers or else to undermine them. The principal conflict arises well into the play. In tragedy, on the other hand, the essential antagonism usually obtains from the outset. Prologue and/or first episode dramatize it, even if its full extent emerges only afterward. In this extraordinary example by Sophocles, however, sudden new threats to Oedipus and his daughters come from, first, the coy villain Creon, who applies physical violence—a rarity in tragedy, common in comedy. Old Comedy frequently presents slapstick melodrama, more farcical than serious. Serious, in contrast, is the Theban intervention; yet Creon, first blustery, becomes unexpectedly "diplomatic" when the hero-to-the-rescue Theseus gets easy control of the situation.

A second interloper in *OC* for a grim episode that, delaying the conclusion-exodus now expected, gives this play its extraordinary length, is Oedipus' son Polyneices. He receives not physical beating like assorted rascals in Aristophanes (a soothsayer, Meton, et al. in *Birds*) but, once Oedipus breaks his awesome silence, as dreadful a verbal lashing, with a dire curse, as we hear anywhere else from the tragic stage.

Intruders in Old Comedy include spies, like *Birds*' Iris. That function here is divided between Creon and Polyneices, each of whom is anxious lest the other win Oedipus over to his side in the impending war.

There is no counterpart to the doubled parabases of *Birds*—or is there? The stasimon *OC* 668-719 is a strong candidate; some of its praises of the well-horsed Attic hinterland even resemble the paradise that the world is for flighted *birds* in the comedy.

Other parallelism may be seen in ritual business on stage, Oedipus' carefully prescribed purification (unique here in Sophocles) corresponding to consecration of Cloudcuckooland. Even the place of Poseidon, a character in *Birds* who, although he comically swears by himself, maintains much dignity, connects the plays. He is named more than once as benevolent patron deity of the environs of Colonus.

Both *Birds* and *OC* end with apotheosis which, uniquely for both dramatists, occurs at both plays' ends. (Sophocles' *Trachiniae* famously ends without indication that Heracles will become not ashes but a god; his appearance in the exodus of *Philoctetes* is not apotheosis but epiphany.). In the Aristophanes play it is a spectacular affair, when Pisthetaerus ascends to heaven with goddess-personification Basileia, his divine bride in a hubristic variation on the *gamos* theme typical at the end of its author's works. In the Sophocles, of course, there's no matrimonial counterpart; eligible Antigone, who could remain in Attica (with Theseus?), instead exits toward the fatal battle between her brothers—and her own doom as the playwright's well remembered earlier play presented it. Oedipus, however, has joined the gods—below or above.

Is it surprising, then, that the nightingale, whose flute-playing charms audience in *Birds*, metamorphic Procne in Sophocles' lost *Tereus* and referred to for mythological allusion in his *Electra*, is twice mentioned in his elegiac last play (*OC* 18 and in the aforementioned stasimon, 671-673)?