

## The Use of φύω in *Oedipus Rex*: An Ecocritical Perspective

Agricultural language and imagery appear often in Greek tragedy, offering a useful lens through which to understand a play, especially as it concerns gender and birth. Such language may be found in scenes of metamorphosis, but scholars have also noted its frequent metaphorical usage. Women are compared to a field in which a seed is sown, and children are like plants which spring up from the ground (Aubriot 2001). In her 2012 article on Mothers, Laura McClure argues for the importance of the “sown field” metaphor within Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* as it relates to maternal agency and behavior. She identifies several words within her essay such as σπέρμα, βλάστη, and τρέφω. The imagery in these terms works to emphasize the “horrifying proximity” between Oedipus’ breeding and subsequent incest (McClure 2012). While the words she discusses are certainly important for understanding agricultural language in Sophocles’ works, McClure and other authors have devoted less study to the verb φύω and its various forms, particularly in connection with ecocritical approaches.

In this paper, I will analyze the word φύω throughout *Oedipus Rex*, paying special attention to its metaphorical meanings. I argue that φύω acts to connect the aspects of birth, nature, and growth in both Oedipus’ family and in his natural environment. From an ecocritical perspective, Thebes as a landscape must not be neglected but must rather be viewed as an equal victim of the plague which deserves attention and concern. Additionally, I will argue that the Chorus acts as a watchful, ecocritical observer, instructing the audience to care for nature in addition to personal matters. Through the use of a word like φύω, the context of the play is not merely familial, but includes all aspects of a city, both personal and natural.

Forms of φύω are used thirty-eight times in this tragedy, often grouped together in certain scenes. For instance, it appears five times in the span of six lines during the dialogue Oedipus has with Tiresias concerning the identity of his parents. The repetition is immediately obvious, ensuring that φύω remains in the minds of the audience (see Silk 1996 for a discussion of this repetition). At

once there appears both agricultural and familial imagery: through the seed of his father, Oedipus is likened to a plant which grew in the field of his mother. He receives his nature (φύσις) directly from his parents—a fact which will later act towards his downfall.

If Oedipus is metaphorically a plant, he must be viewed as part of Thebes' natural environment. At the start of the play, Thebes is in the midst of a plague, where both the crops, the livestock, and the women are suffering to produce life (*Oedipus Rex* 25-7). In order to restore the land from this affliction, Oedipus must drive out the pollution, or μίασμα (*OR* 97). Over the course of the play, it becomes evident that Oedipus himself is the cause of the plague, and that his own birth and actions of begetting have brought on such destruction. His own exploitation of reproductive power has resulted in the lack of reproduction in Thebes itself. Thus, Oedipus possesses a moral imperative not only to drive out his father's murderer, but also to revive the natural landscape of Thebes.

#### Bibliography

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