

Role Sharing and Metatheater in the *Oedipus at Colonus*

The question of role distribution has long provided ample material for scholars interested in the performance realities of fifth-century Athenian drama. By deducing from the text what roles actors either were required to assume or could have potentially assumed in a dramatic performance, critics have been able to escape from the narrow perception of the Aristotelian “three actor rule” as a generic constraint. Rather, as with costume, music and set design, playwrights consciously manipulated the distribution of roles among three actors as part of their creative process and in ways that often proved thematically significant (e.g., on Sophocles, Ringer 1998).

This paper considers the dramatic significance of role distribution in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, the nuances of which play have posed significant challenges for dividing the roles among three actors. These difficulties stem partially from the play itself: its ensemble cast of characters, its many and abrupt entrances and exits, its use of mute characters onstage for hundreds of lines, and the necessity of sharing one role (Theseus) among all three actors. But still other difficulties are created by this last item, “role sharing.” Because the phenomenon is unprecedented in extant tragedy (besides, possibly, Euripides’ *Phoenissae*) critical opinion has been divided on how the play would have been performed vis-à-vis the convention of three actors. For instance, older scholars like Croiset (1913) and Ceadel (1941) reasoned on the grounds of consistency and believability that a fourth actor must have played Theseus. More recently, scholars have tended to advocate for the possibility of role sharing in the play, but without explaining adequately or sufficiently, in my judgment, how this device contributes meaning to the play (Damen 1988; Ringer 1998; Johnston 1993). This paper aims to do just that by offering close readings of several passages. In doing so, I aim to describe how a carefully

designed role sharing scheme imbues the text, as it would have the performance, with metatheatrical significance, which I describe below.

After first defining and providing examples of terms such as “role sharing” and “role switching,” I present as a case study the play’s second episode (886-1043), in which, if we postulate a three actor performance, the deuteragonist who had played Antigone must now step behind the mask of Theseus to deliver a rousing speech about religious duty and freedom. Not only does the speech allude strongly to the earlier *Antigone*, the language and rhetorical devices on display, I argue, designate the speech as metatheatrical. By “metatheatrical” I mean that the playwright makes reference to the dramaturgy behind the production, the convention of using three actors. Moreover, by placing her voice and ideas behind the mask of the revered Athenian king, the play elevates Antigone and aligns her values with those of Athens.

The second part of the paper demonstrates how Oedipus’ reaction to Theseus’ speech further develops the metatheatrical significance of role sharing in the play. Drawing on the work of Pavloskis (1977) on the actor’s voice, I discuss how Oedipus fixates on Theseus’ voice so as to strongly suggest his awareness of the Antigone actor on stage. Therefore, role sharing, and Oedipus’ cognizance thereof, communicates the preternatural vision of the blind man, a theme that recurs throughout the play. Oedipus’ ability both to see and to see behind actors’ masks designates him as a sort of idealized audience member, a phenomenon which one scholar has described as a “conspiracy of knowledge” which exists between Oedipus and the audience (Seale 1982).

The paper concludes by discussing the implications of role distribution for our understanding of “character” or ethos in ancient drama. If, as this paper argues, devices such as role sharing and role switching were carefully coordinated by the playwright for thematic effect,

how then should we reconcile this more fluid idea of character with authorities such as Aristotle's *Poetics*? Overall, it is the aim of this paper to answer an old problem with new methods, and in so doing, contribute to our understanding of what is arguably Sophocles' most difficult drama.

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