

Prophecy and hero cult in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*

Prophecies play an important role in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, as they do in his other six extant tragedies and many of his surviving fragments. However, the role of prophecy in this play has not received the attention that has been given to prophecies in other Sophoclean plays (e.g., Bowman 1997, Hester 1981 on *El.*; Bowman 1999 on *Trach.*; Gill 1980, Kane 1975 on *OT*; Hinds 1967 on *Phil.*).

This paper examines a series of prophecies directly uttered or indirectly referred to over the course of the play. The first prophetic utterance is the Delphic oracle reported to Oedipus by Ismene ("you shall one day be sought by the people there in death and in life for their preservation's sake," 389-90; see also 413-5). Its riddling wording points to Oedipus' liminal position in this play: the aged Oedipus, on the threshold of passing from life to death, is pursued while still alive for his tutelary power in death. Over the course of the play, his status shifts from exile to hero, from pariah to talisman, and he begins to utter prophetic utterances himself.

In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus is presented as an indefatigable sign interpreter, chasing clues and seeking to establish his interpretation of events; his attempts to manage uncertainty by predicting the future fail, and he learns through experience the inscrutability of the future. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus is a very different kind of prophet. He is now the blind seer who utters true prophecies, accepts his fate, and rejects attempts to use him for political ends. He begins in life to exercise the power of a hero to inflict harm (864-70) and dispense blessings (1124-5). His language reflects the already/not yet temporality of this transition (e.g., "I come to offer you the gift of my miserable body [ἄθλιον δέμας], not much to look at, but the benefits that will come from it are better than good looks," 576-8; cf. 621-8 where he describes the power his body, now characterized as a corpse [νέκυς ψυχρός, 621-2], will exercise over his enemies and friends in death).

Oedipus then prophesies Polynices' death at the hands of his brother at 1372-82, characterizing this prophecy as a curse that he invokes on his two sons for their *atimia*. Both Antigone (1424-5) and Polynices himself (1434-8) consider the prophecy's fulfillment as inevitable. Oedipus' authority as a prophet is uncontested.

In the final scene, Oedipus is presented as a prophet interpreting the signs of his own impending departure (1372-5, 1508-15), and this time it is Theseus who attests to Oedipus' prophetic authority (1516-7). This prepares for Oedipus' final speech (1518-55), in which he foretells Athens' eternal security as locus of his tomb and hero cult.

Bibliography

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