

## Orestes at Colonus—*Not?* (A Study in Intertext and Intermyth)

From Euripides' late *Orestes* and Sophocles' posthumous *Oedipus at Colonus* in relation to other tragedies involving their title characters emerges a striking counterpoint of both *intertext* and of what we may call *intermyth*.

Bibliography on individual plays is intractable. Phenomena below described seem to have been missed. Unexplored correlations and correspondences, to be spelled out in greater detail for full paper (and eventual article) may be stated schematically thus:

Oedipus and Orestes are born into dynasties under curse, to parents under strain: Oedipus to Laius who did not want to beget a son, Orestes to Clytemnestra whose first spouse and son Agamemnon had slain (according to Euripides' posthumous *Iphigenia*).

Both are *de facto* displaced from home very young, in first exile: Oedipus as mutilated neonate who by Theban parents' order is exposed to die but is rescued and raised at Corinth. At unknown age Argive boy Orestes is sequestered in Phocis by his mother (Aeschylus), at about age eleven by his sister (Sophocles) or by a slave loyal to his father (Euripides).

Each is raised by foster parents. Orestes knows his to be such, while Oedipus believes his to be biological ones.

Each grows up to be a king's heir: in Oedipus' case under fateful misapprehension about *which* king's, to *which* kingdom; in Orestes', in hope of succeeding murdered Agamemnon at Argos. Orestes must merely kill a usurper to become legitimate king. Oedipus has to vacate a hereditary throne by (unwitting) patricide.

After killing father or mother each does become hereditary *basileus*, though Oedipus was long thought to be immigrant *turannos* (as in the familiar title of Sophocles' "*OT*").

When the Delphic Oracle enjoins or anticipates killing of parent/s, each leaves the land where he grew up and arrives at his birthplace. Attempting to invalidate literal import of Phoebus' prediction Oedipus flees Corinth for Thebes, while Orestes, mandated to claim a birthright at Argos-Mycenae, heads *there*.

Once home each has a starkly contrasted relationship with that parent whom he does *not* kill. Oedipus marries his *mother*—further, posthumous outrage to Laius—whereas Orestes avenges *his* father Agamemnon whose vindictive spirit may lend him force (Aeschylus, maybe Sophocles, *but hardly Euripides*).

Both suffer fraught relations with Erinyes. One or more of these, represented in his sister Electra (Aeschylus and Euripides possibly, surely Sophocles), incites Orestes to kill his mother, whereupon Erinyes pursue and persecute him (or *don't*: evidently not in Sophocles' *Electra*).

Sooner or later both gain as collaborator/s a sister (Orestes') or sisters (Oedipus' sisters-and-daughters in Sophocles' *OC*).

Oedipus also has *brothers-and-sons* who eventually dishonor him, whom he curses. Orestes has only a *foster* brother Pylades (actually an allied cousin) and within this survey's span of dynastic history no *son*—at least yet (since marriage and a son are in the future).

Oedipus, self-blinded (Aeschylus and Sophocles) or blinded by others (Euripides), sees nothing. Maddened, Orestes “sees” Erinyes invisible to most other mortals (Aeschylus and Euripides; *not* Sophocles unless, as suggested above, it is Electra—indeed Clytemnestra here may also perceive her as a bloodthirsty “Fury”).

Parent-slaying sends both princes, grown up, into second exile.

Second exile brings each to Athens, Oedipus to suburban hills (Sophocles), Orestes to Ares' Hill (in Aeschylus and—according to three plays—in Euripides).

Final note on Erinyes: In Sophocles' posthumous *Oedipus* Oedipus comes—unwittingly, blindly—among them virtually becoming one (as grim *eumeneia* at *OC* 631 hints). They come to him in *Orestes*.

In Sophocles Poseidon's son Theseus intervenes to rescue Oedipus and his daughters at a space sacred also to that god. However, *Apollo* has given Oedipus clear instructions about the end of his earthly life. In Aeschylus and subsequently Euripides, *Athena's* casting vote frees Orestes. Apollo cannot.

Sophoclean Oedipus' uniquely strong will, insisting upon autonomy vis-à-vis gods, prevails: in *OC* since they cannot beat him, they invite him to join them. Euripidean Orestes remains their plaything, whereas in Sophocles' *Electra* the self-starting avenger asks Apollo not *what* to do but *how*. Euripides, with scant regard for royal legitimacy, even less for revenge, and none whatsoever for Apollo, dramatizes agonized subjection, supremely in *Orestes*, likely in his preceding *Oedipus*. Although Phoebus' divine aloofness and enigmatic forecasting pervade Sophocles' oeuvre, yet his Apollo shows begrudging respect for a rare Oedipus—Sophocles' heroizing one. Though hardly loving the Delphic Lord, Sophocles reveres *him*.

In Attica Oedipus ends his mortal existence, joining the gods (whether those above or those below, Theseus and Sophocles alone know), whereas only Orestes' persecution ceases there. Euripides' prince returns to Argos to reign as 'happily ever after' as this psychically shattered matricide can.

Well may one ask: Has Euripides designed his Oedipus, pathetic in extant late *Phoenissae*, more like his Orestes? Does Sophocles suggest, inversely, that autonomous Orestes resembles his Oedipus?