

## SUPPLIANT AND SAVIOUR: OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

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“THE CENTRAL THEME is the transformation of Oedipus into a hero.”<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps unfortunate that the subject of Sophocles’ last play can be defined so concisely, for the definition has led to confusion. The suspicion that the long middle scenes of the play, Oedipus’ encounters with Creon and Polynices, form a dramatic diversion unrelated to the central theme has been surprisingly widespread and persistent. Carl Robert long ago advanced the curious hypothesis that the Polynices scene was a hasty result of Sophocles’ quarrel with his own son, Iophon.<sup>2</sup> Wilamowitz defended the play against the charge of slapdash revision, but himself judged the middle section an essentially intrusive attempt to link Oedipus’ death to the events of Theban legend.<sup>3</sup> Waldo, in his unabashed way, asserted that Sophocles had chosen a subject too thin for a whole play and was now faced with the problem of spinning out suitable material to cover the gap in his theme.<sup>4</sup>

All these views are founded on a misapprehension of the central theme of the play. Sophocles does not bring Oedipus to Colonus to die and be venerated as a hero, but to become a hero before our eyes. That is to say, *Oedipus at Colonus* is a drama of confrontation and contest, not a sacred pageant. Oedipus’ struggle to achieve death and transformation in accordance with his oracle, the essence of the action, is largely enacted in the “irrelevant” middle section of the play.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford 1944) 309.

<sup>2</sup>C. Robert, *Oedipus* (Berlin 1915) 1.469–80. A variant of this theory has recently been propounded by R. G. Tanner, “The Composition of the *Oedipus Coloneus*,” in M. Kelly, ed., *For Service to Classical Studies, Essays in Honour of Francis Letters* (Melbourne 1966) 153–192. On Tanner’s view, the Polynices scene and parts of the Creon scene belong to a revision made after the dispute with Iophon, but for other motives: political allegory and the possibility of producing a Theban trilogy.

<sup>3</sup>U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff in Tycho von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles* (Berlin 1917) esp. 329 ff. For Wilamowitz, Sophocles’ failure to integrate the parts of his drama, a failure he can explain only by the influence of the saga tradition and of earlier plays, notably Euripides’ *Phoenissae*, is more than a matter of structure. Like many others, he is deeply disturbed by the depiction of Oedipus’ fury against his sons, and cannot reconcile it with the old man’s transformation into a hero.

<sup>4</sup>A. J. A. Waldo, *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge 1951) 219–221. Similar doubts assail even vigorous defenders of the play’s unity. H. Weinstock, *Sophokles* (Leipzig 1931) 201, speaks of the middle scenes as “saving the dramatic life” of the play; Bowra (above, note 1) 309 feels that the central theme was “insufficient” for Sophocles.

<sup>5</sup>This general view of the structure of *Oedipus at Colonus*, already suggested by C. R. Post, “The Dramatic Art of Sophocles,” *HSCP* 23 (1912) 71–127, esp. 84 ff., underlies

Indeed, one can go much further. The dramatic form of the play is not an improvisation, but an adaptation of the pattern of suppliant drama, a pattern of action familiar from Aeschylus' *Suppliants* and Euripides' *Children of Heracles* and *Suppliants*.<sup>6</sup> How and why Sophocles adapts this pattern for the purposes of his play should provide a key to its underlying design.

As a first step, it is worth observing that the suppliant pattern provides the outline of a dramatic action with its own characteristic impetus. The suppliant, in flight from a powerful enemy, seeks refuge in a foreign land. He must win the support of his host, who, when the enemy approaches, undertakes to save him even at the cost of war. The battle ends favorably for the suppliant's cause, and his safety is assured. This action focuses our immediate attention on the outcome of a series of encounters: the suppliant must win protection, even in the face of his enemy's threats. The enemy's attempts to impose his will by force must be foiled. By adapting the suppliant pattern to give dramatic form to his legendary material, Sophocles produced not a disjointed series of episodes, but a connected sequence of events, and moreover one with whose outlines his audience was already familiar.

The conventions of suppliant drama offer Sophocles not only a pattern of action, but a repertoire of roles, incidents and formal structures capable of adaptation to this new context. The arrival of Oedipus will be made dramatic in the same way that Aeschylus made drama out of the arrival of the Danaids in Argos. Oedipus will be a suppliant, pursued by his enemy, Creon, and therefore in need of a saviour, Theseus. There will be a plea scene in which the suppliant commends himself to his saviour; an *agon* between suppliant and enemy, ending in violence; an *agon*

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many recent studies of the play. It is well stated by S. M. Adams, *Sophocles the Playwright* (*Phoenix* Supp. Vol. 3, Toronto 1957) 160–177, who, however, unfortunately connects it with the theory that Sophocles' purpose in writing this play was to "defend" and "rehabilitate" a cult that had come into disrepute. B. M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper* (Berkeley 1964) 148 ff., shows how the overcoming of each successive challenge reveals in Oedipus new prophetic power and the growth of inner strength.

<sup>6</sup>An extended comparative analysis of these plays is offered in my dissertation, *Suppliant Drama* (Princeton 1971), on which the present study is based. The analogies of form between *Oedipus at Colonus* and the other suppliant plays have been largely ignored. K. Reinhardt, *Sophokles*<sup>3</sup> (Frankfurt am Main 1948) 204–206, one of the few critics to recognize their significance, rightly stresses that this stems not simply from the subsistence of a known pattern, but rather from Sophocles' unique adaptation of it. That Sophocles is himself responsible for adapting the pattern to turn the legend of Oedipus' death into drama is at least a reasonable assumption. On the conflicting traditions surrounding Oedipus' death and burial, see Robert (above, note 2) 1.1–47. The Attic legend of Oedipus' expulsion from Thebes and death at Colonus first appears in the extant literature in Euripides' *Phoenissae* 1705–1707; no trace of an earlier literary treatment of the subject has been uncovered.

between enemy and saviour, ending in the enemy's expulsion; a battle sequence, ending in the salvation of the suppliant.

All of these elements can be traced in *Oedipus at Colonus*, but none appears in its straightforward, "typical" form. Indeed, no small part of the power of the play stems from Sophocles' skill in transforming these elements, in playing upon a constant tension between the expectations they raise and the way those expectations are fulfilled.

Perhaps the most obvious, and certainly the most significant, way in which Sophocles varies the conventions of suppliant drama is his free adaptation of the role of the suppliant. Oedipus has all the misery and helplessness that typify the suppliant's condition, but as the drama unfolds it becomes increasingly apparent that he will not be confined to that role. The central paradox of the play is that the suppliant is destined to be the saviour.

*Oedipus at Colonus* begins in misery. The blind, ragged beggar is led on stage by his faithful daughter. The suppliant has reached his place of refuge, but he does not know where he is or that he is to remain. A hint of the role the sacred grove will play may be felt in Antigone's brief description of the spot (14-20); for Oedipus, however, it seems only another pause in his wanderings. But his misery has also taught him resignation, "asking little, receiving less than little, and content with that" (5-6). This is a new Oedipus, submissive enough to play the role of suppliant.

Yet, almost at once, we sense that there is more to this "miserable ghost of Oedipus" (109-110) than wretchedness and the pathos of fallen grandeur. His chance encounter with an inhabitant of Colonus is not an auspicious start for one seeking refuge; the stranger immediately orders him to "go away" (ἐξέλθε, 37). Oedipus the defiled has again stumbled into defilement.<sup>7</sup> But, as soon as he hears that the ground on which he has trespassed is sacred to the "all-seeing Eumenides" (πάνθ' ὀρώσας Εὐμενίδας, 42), his old mastery returns. Instead of beating a retreat, he stands his ground and replies calmly with the wish that the goddesses receive him as their suppliant, "for never would I go away (ἄν ἐξέλθοιμι) from this refuge" (45).

The stranger does not understand, just as he is mystified by the benefits that the old beggar now promises to confer if Theseus will come to his aid. This first indication of the boon—Oedipus' heroic power—which will become the heart of his suppliant plea is explained only by a paradox. To the stranger's question, "And what help can there be from a blind man?" Oedipus answers, "What I say will be full of sight" (πάνθ' ὀρώντα, 74). The all-seeing goddesses will confer their sight on Oedipus.<sup>8</sup> Cryptic

<sup>7</sup>Cf. C. H. Whitman, *Sophocles* (Cambridge, Mass. 1951) 200.

<sup>8</sup>On imagery of sight and blindness, especially prominent in the initial scenes of the play, cf. M. G. Shields, "Sight and Blindness Imagery in the Oedipus Coloneus," *Phoenix* 15(1961) 63-74.

as this promise is, the stranger is sufficiently impressed to allow Oedipus to remain in the grove while he informs his fellow-demesmen. Oedipus is no longer the helpless, acquiescent beggar we have just seen arrive at Colonus. He has heard "the watchword of my fate" (46).

As soon as the stranger has departed, Oedipus reveals the source of his new-found certainty. In a moving prayer to the Eumenides, he recalls the oracle of Apollo that long ago revealed his destiny, promising that he would end his life at a seat of these Dread Goddesses, bringing benefits to those who receive him and ruin to those who drove him into exile (91-93).<sup>9</sup> His prayer as a suppliant is simply that the Eumenides show him the way to end his life in accordance with Apollo's oracle.

From the beginning, then, Oedipus' supplication is directly linked to the promise of his destiny. Its cause is not an enemy's pursuit, its goal is not protection, for Oedipus does not yet know of the threat from Thebes. It is rather a tool in the struggle to fulfill his fated end. Yet that end is still shrouded in uncertainty. The first references to it are hints that Oedipus himself does not fully understand, and that his interlocutors can only wonder at. There must be a long struggle before matters can be made clear, and Sophocles keeps our attention focused on Oedipus' immediate concerns.

The first stage of Oedipus' struggle involves convincing his hosts to let him stay where he knows he must. This is typically the suppliant's first task, but Sophocles develops the theme with complete freedom. The plea scene occurs, in effect, before the king arrives, in Oedipus' tortured exchanges with the chorus. The issues of war and peace, and of suppliants' rights, elsewhere central, are here of minor consequence. Everything centers on Oedipus the man, on the terrible past he is forced to relive and on the destiny he seeks to fulfill after so much sorrow.

The chorus, elders of Colonus, repeat in a much more extended form the reception given Oedipus by the stranger, moving from shocked hostility to respectful sympathy. At the outset, the scandal of Oedipus' sacrilege pales before the horror of his identity. Having coaxed him step by step from the grove with the promise of safety, they force him to reveal his name and then break their promise by ordering him out of the land. Such is the horror that surrounds Oedipus' past; to overcome it he must reopen all his most painful wounds.

Oedipus' defense contains many commonplaces of the suppliant plea,<sup>10</sup> but its heart is an impassioned protestation of moral innocence. And it culminates with a second hint at the hero's boon:

<sup>9</sup>This constitutes a definition of the hero's double power to bless and curse. Cf. Eur. *Heracl.* 1043-1044: διπλοῦν δὲ κέρδος ἔχει' ἐξ ἐμοῦ, ὕμᾱς τ' ὀνήσω τοῦσδε τε βλάψω θανόν.

<sup>10</sup>The elders' duty to the gods (275-281); their pledge to the suppliant (284); and above all Athens' reputation for piety and the protection of strangers (258-262, 282-283).

*ἦκω γὰρ ἱερὸς εὐσεβής τε καὶ φέρων  
 ὄνησιν ἀστοῖς τοῖσδ'.*

I come as one holy and reverent,  
 and bearing a blessing for this city. (287–288)

This surprising declaration is again coupled to a plea to send for the King. Although the chorus cannot yet know what benefit an apparently helpless old man, stained by the most dreadful pollution, can bring them, they are willing to relax their hostility and defer to the King's judgment, just as the stranger had left the case to them. The paradoxical claim of this man, on whom the gods seem to have visited all their wrath, to be "holy and reverent" is shrouded in mystery, but his bearing and his fervor carry conviction.

The arrival of Ismene provides a necessary ingredient for the development of the plot, but it is worth noting that the matter might easily have been handled otherwise. Ismene brings the news that Thebes now wants to reclaim its exile and Creon is in hot pursuit. Once again, Sophocles is adapting his material very freely to the form of suppliant drama. In the other plays, the pursuit of an enemy precipitates the initial supplication. Sophocles could easily have followed the same pattern by making Oedipus aware from the outset of the new oracles that Ismene here reveals, and therefore all the more eager to find the refuge promised by Apollo. Instead, he has chosen to make the supplication initially quite independent of the pursuit.

One reason for this technique can be found in the effect of the new oracles on Oedipus himself. This effect, as Knox's perceptive analysis of the scene suggests, is cumulative.<sup>11</sup> The old prophecy spoke of a resting place at a shrine of the Eumenides, from which Oedipus would help his friends and harm his enemies. But how? The new oracles make this clear: the power and well-being of Thebes depend on possessing Oedipus' body. By denying this, he can work her ruin. Yet even so, the Thebans are unwilling to admit him inside their walls; because of his blood-guilt, they will hold and bury him outside, just near enough to be in their power. For Oedipus, the issue is now clear: "Then they shall never have me in their control" (408). He understands that the power to bless and curse will inhere in his bones, that he can hurt Thebes and help Athens when they battle over his grave.

The scene, then, is designed to reveal the growth in Oedipus' understanding of his heroic destiny, and consequently the growth of his power. The introduction here of the fatal rivalry of his sons furthers this end. Coming in a context that emphasizes the filial devotion of Oedipus' daughters and his love for them, the father's condemnation of his sons'

<sup>11</sup>Knox (above, note 5) 150–151.

callousness gains enormous force. Oedipus' blast demonstrates his emerging inner strength. Ismene's new oracles amplify the old prophecies "which Phoebus has fulfilled for me at last" (454), and Oedipus can be certain that the power for which his sons are struggling will bring them no benefit (*δνησις*, 452). His prayer that the outcome of their struggle be left to him, the expression of his rising wrath at their earlier failure to protect him from a banishment he no longer wished nor felt he deserved and at their present refusal to recall him, foreshadows the terrible curse he will hurl at the suppliant Polynices.

Oedipus' speech ends at the other pole of his new powers, as if to confirm his double destiny of cursing and blessing. In lines that draw our attention to the impending crisis of the suppliant drama, Oedipus combines a defiant challenge of Thebes to send Creon against him with an appeal to the chorus that presents him, for the first time, not only as suppliant, but as saviour:

ἐὰν γὰρ ὑμεῖς, ὦ ξένοι, θέλητ' ἔμοι  
σὺν ταῖσδε ταῖς σεμναῖσι δημόχοις θεαῖς  
ἀλκὴν ποιεῖσθαι, τῇδε τῇ πόλει μέγαν  
σωτήρ' ἀρεῖσθε, τοῖς δ' ἔμοις ἐχθροῖς πόνους.

For if you, o strangers, are willing,  
along with these dread goddesses,  
guardians of the land, to give me  
protection, you will get a great  
saviour for this city, and much trouble  
for my enemies. (457-460)

The confidence with which Oedipus now combines the appeal for help with the promise of it is an indication of how far he has progressed since his halting steps first brought him to Colonus. So, for that matter, is the readiness of the chorus to help him,

ἐπεὶ δὲ τῇσδε γῆς  
σωτήρα σαυτὸν τῷδ' ἐπεμβάλλεις λόγῳ

Since you add to your argument that  
you will be the saviour of this land. (462-463)

The elders now advise him to seek atonement for his trespass on sacred ground, but the prayer they prescribe, the central element of the rite (*μέγιστα*, 485), portrays the old man not as a sinner, but in his double role of suppliant and saviour:

ὥς σφας καλοῦμεν Εὐμενίδας, ἐξ εὐμενῶν  
στέρνων δέχεσθαι τὸν ἱκέτην σωτήριον

That those whom we call "kindly ones"  
will receive out of their kind hearts  
the suppliant saviour. (486-487)<sup>12</sup>

At this point the drama takes a somewhat startling turn. We had been led to expect (294-295) that Oedipus would have to present his case to Theseus and win him over, as is the rule in suppliant drama; but that hearing never takes place. Instead, before the King arrives, the elders suddenly return to the horrors of Oedipus' past in a tone that has been aptly described as "almost prurient."<sup>13</sup> This prurience serves, among other things, to provide the very strongest possible contrast to Theseus' humane reception of his suppliant.

Oedipus responds to the elders' questions with a second, even stronger defense of his moral innocence. He suffered evil rather than committing it (538-539) and is "free of stain before the law" (548). The language strains to express a standard of guilt and innocence new and startling to the chorus,<sup>14</sup> but they need make no reply, for Theseus now enters and his complete silence on the matter is answer enough. When Creon smugly reopens the question of pollution, we are ready for the defiant, almost scornful denial of moral guilt that Oedipus unleashes in reply (960-999). Pollution remains, of course, making a whole range of normal human contacts inaccessible to Oedipus (cf. 1130-1135), but pollution cannot void his claim of justice for his deeds, nor excuse injustice against him.

The encounter of Theseus and Oedipus is a striking variation of the usual meeting of suppliant and saviour.<sup>15</sup> Theseus' first words effect at once the recognition of the suppliant and the acceptance of his suit. The blindness and misery that so startled the chorus become the tokens of recognition (551 ff.). The questions Oedipus has thereby been spared

<sup>12</sup>In line 487, *σωτήριον*, the universal reading of the codices, is clearly right, and Bake's emendation to *σωτηρίους*, unnecessary. The assumption behind the emendation is that the *soteria* in question here must be the Eumenides' power to save Oedipus, but a reference to Oedipus' own powers of *soteria* is made perfectly clear, and given a great deal of point, by the passages cited above. Here, as in 462-463, the chorus puts forth Oedipus' claim to be saviour as grounds for his own safety. There is no need for apologetic interpretations, such as that of Jebb *ad loc.* Once the fundamental paradox of Oedipus' dual nature as suppliant and saviour has been recognized, the mss make perfect sense. For *σωτήριος* = *σωτήρ* in tragedy, cf. Soph. *Aj.* 779, *Elec.* 281 (of the gods); Eur. *Herac.* 1032, *Orest.* 657, *Ba.* 965.

<sup>13</sup>Knox (above, note 5) 152. Notice particularly the manner in which the chorus reintroduces the subject, 510 ff.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford 1960) 105 f., on the new distinction between objective guilt (pollution) and moral responsibility. He compares the language of 536 ff. with [Antiphon] *Tetralogies* 3d5.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Reinhardt (above, note 6) 216: "Geht man an diese Szene wieder von der Gattung heran, so zeigt sich wieder, wie durch Sophokles die Gattung über sich hinausgehoben wird."

("who I am, of what father I was born, from what land I have come," 571-572) are precisely those the elders had raised (204-206), and whose answer had led them to order him out of the land. Here, their fear of a polluted pariah is replaced by Theseus' spontaneous assertion of a common human bond between himself and his suppliant. The horrors of Oedipus' past, so formidable for the chorus, are no longer an issue. Theseus sees Oedipus simply as "ill-fated" (557), one who, like himself, has known exile and suffering, and who is, despite that suffering, no less than he: "I know that I am a man and have no greater share in tomorrow than you" (567-568). This unquestioning and unreserved acceptance, in contrast with the timid prurience of the chorus is a sign of Oedipus' progress as well as an indication of the stature of his protector.

The difficulties that beset the suppliant in winning asylum and protection have not been eliminated from *Oedipus at Colonus*, but rather transferred from his encounter with the King to the earlier confrontations with the stranger and the chorus. As a result, the meeting of Theseus and Oedipus becomes a meeting not so much of suppliant and saviour, but of equals. This is consonant with the special quality of Oedipus' plea. Oedipus does not make his appeal by throwing himself on his host's mercy. Nor does he put forward the expected arguments of kinship, friendship, religious obligation.<sup>16</sup> Instead he offers a fair exchange of benefit for benefit, *soteria* for *soteria*.

In place of the usual plea, Oedipus offers a gift:

δώσω ἱκάνω τούμὸν ἄθλιον δέμας  
σοὶ δῶρον, οὐ σπουδαῖον εἰς ὄψιν· τὰ δὲ  
κέρδη παρ' αὐτοῦ κρείσσον' ἢ μορφὴ καλῇ.

I have come to give you my wretched  
body as a gift, not fine to see, but  
the benefit from it is better than  
lovely form. (576-578)

Oedipus declares the nature of his boon far more explicitly than before, and in a way that clearly reveals the power growing within him. Thebes and Athens shall one day fight, and Oedipus' bones will protect his friends and wreak daemonic vengeance on his foes:

ἵν' οὐμὸς εὖδων καὶ κεκρυμμένος νέκυς  
ψυχρὸς ποτ' αὐτῶν θερμὸν αἷμα πίεται,  
εἰ Ζεὺς ἔτι Ζεὺς χῶ Διὸς Φοῖβος σαφής.

<sup>16</sup>In Aesch. *Supp.*, the Danaids stress their Argive descent through Io and the rights of suppliants as reasons compelling their acceptance; in Eur. *Heracl.*, Iolaus advances Heracles' kinship and friendship with the Athenian royal house; in Eur. *Supp.*, the suppliant mothers make much of their pathos and helplessness.



My corpse, slumbering, buried, cold,  
 shall drink their warm blood, if Zeus  
 is still Zeus, and Phoebus, son of Zeus,  
 a true prophet. (621–623)<sup>17</sup>

Cursing and blessing, vengeance and protection, are simply two ways of looking at the hero's power. Here daemonic vengeance is emphasized, and the blind suppliant's wrath offers a terrifying preview of the hero to be.

The risk of war, in suppliant drama the characteristic obstacle to accepting the suppliant's plea, is treated in *Oedipus at Colonus* in as novel a manner as the plea itself. It is not raised as an obstacle by Theseus, but indirectly, as a kind of afterthought, by Oedipus. When Oedipus offers the boon his body can bring simply in return for burial, the request seems a small one to Theseus. Oedipus replies emphatically that it involves a struggle:

δρα γε μὴν· οὐ σμικρὸς, οὐκ, ἀγών ὄδε.

But look here: this contest will  
 be no small one. (587)<sup>18</sup>

In the exchange that follows, Oedipus tells of Thebes' intention to claim him against his will in order to avoid a future defeat at the hands of Athens, but does not mention Creon's coming attempt to seize him until Theseus has formally pledged protection. Only then does the immediate threat become the center of attention, by way of transition to the next segment of the action. And it is not the King who is distraught at the thought of a struggle.

As might be expected, motifs characteristic of suppliant drama are prominent in Theseus' acceptance of Oedipus' suit and in the remainder of the episode.<sup>19</sup> Theseus, however, goes beyond the promise of protection required by the pattern, and indeed beyond what Oedipus has requested, by making him an Athenian citizen. Oedipus the ἀπότολις (208) is now

<sup>17</sup>Bowra (above, note 1) 312–313 points out that these lines suggest quite specifically the cult of a hero, to whom blood offerings were made. Knox (above, note 5) 153, adds that there is already "an unearthly quality, a daemonic wrath" in Oedipus' words, which now go beyond what the oracle has told him, interpreting it on the basis "of some new force and knowledge within himself."

<sup>18</sup>Even this is not an unambiguous warning of war, for, as Jebb points out *ad loc.*, ἀγών does not necessarily imply a physical contest.

<sup>19</sup>Like Demophon (Eur. *Herac.* 236–246), Theseus begins by giving three reasons for his decision, including Oedipus' supplication (631–635); like Pelasgus (Aesch. *Supp.* 957–960) and Demophon (*Herac.* 340–343), Theseus offers Oedipus the hospitality of his palace (643); Oedipus' fears and Theseus' reassurance are paralleled by Aesch. *Supp.* 504–523.

ἔμπολις (637),<sup>20</sup> fully associated with the city that protects him, as he will one day protect it. This complete acceptance of Oedipus is not only a token of Theseus' generous nature. It is also a further indication of the way in which the King's decision in this play is unencumbered by the weighing of risk against risk.

The supplication scenes of *Oedipus at Colonus* are uniquely expansive.<sup>21</sup> Their technique, as we have seen, involves the separation, repetition, and variation of the characteristic motifs of suppliant drama. Oedipus' search for the place of rest that Apollo has promised him is separated from Thebes' pursuit to make clear from the beginning that the roots of his supplication do not lie in an immediate, external crisis, but in a long life of suffering. Ismene's announcement of the pursuit sets the stage for the coming confrontation, her new oracles complement those of Oedipus, extending their meaning and increasing his stature.

Similarly, the double encounter of Oedipus and his prospective hosts emphasizes the true significance of his apparently fortuitous trespass of the sacred grove by separating it from the larger question of his past defilement. Equally atypical, and equally purposeful, is the casting of the meeting of Oedipus and the elders in the form of a tortuous recognition scene, in which Oedipus first hides, then reveals his name with the greatest reluctance and inner strain.<sup>22</sup> Throughout these scenes the development is free but by no means loose, complex without losing momentum, full without any trace of padding. Everything is constructed around one or more facets of Oedipus' character, gradually revealing him in his paradoxical roles as suppliant and saviour, victim and avenger, plaything and protégé of the gods. In the process of this revelation, the seeds of his transformation from outcast to hero are sown.

The dramatic point of the fluid technique employed in these scenes, however, can be fully appreciated only in the light of the sharply contrasting encounter of Oedipus and Theseus that follows them. The fundamental variation of the suppliant pattern in the first part of the play, the shift of Oedipus' struggle to win acceptance of his suppliant suit from the encounter with the King to the confrontation with the chorus, now bears

<sup>20</sup> ἔμπολιν is Musgrave's correction of the mss. ἔμπαλιν. While the ms reading gives sense (Σ: οὐκ ἐκβάλλω, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῦ ἐναντίου ὑποδέχομαι), the correction is an undoubted improvement and has been adopted by all recent editors. (L. Campbell, who resisted the change in his edition, recanted in *Paralipomena Sophoclea* [London 1907] 225.)

<sup>21</sup>In *Oedipus at Colonus* the King enters at line 551; in Aesch. *Supp.* at 234; in Eurip. *Heracl.* at 120; in Eurip. *Supp.* at 87.

<sup>22</sup>It is worth noting that there are two significantly contrasted pairs of variations on the theme of recognition in *Oedipus at Colonus*: this scene in contrast to the self-conscious lack of any question about Oedipus' identity at Theseus' arrival; and the two miniature recognition scenes that precede the entrances of Ismene and Polynices, masterful touches that reveal the depth of Oedipus' love for his daughters and hatred for his sons.

its fruit. Suppliant and saviour meet as equals and exchange in mutual respect their promises of *soteria*.

*Soteria* has a double force in *Oedipus at Colonus*. The suppliant pattern logically concludes with the *soteria* of the helpless fugitive, which Oedipus seeks and wins (cf. 262, 276, 725, 1210). That *soteria*, however, is simply the condition for the *soteria* which Oedipus, as a hero, can provide for his rescuers. The two acts of *soteria* balance each other and form a significant thematic link between the suppliant drama and the larger dramatic curve of Oedipus' rise to the final apotheosis. In this sense, the central theme of the play—Oedipus' transformation into a hero—and its formal matrix—the suppliant pattern—are not in opposition, but are fully and fruitfully complementary.

With the arrival of Creon in the role of enemy herald, we find ourselves once again firmly in the world of suppliant drama. Creon has all the earmarks of the enemy—violence, arrogance, disregard for suppliant rights and the laws of the state. Furthermore, the outline of the confrontation of enemy, suppliant and saviour in *Oedipus at Colonus* can be precisely paralleled in Aeschylus' *Suppliants* and Euripides' *Children of Heracles*.<sup>23</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that there are also many similarities of language<sup>24</sup> and argument<sup>25</sup> among the three plays. As striking as these correspondences are, however, Sophocles' ingenious adaptation of the suppliant pattern is of far greater significance.

Creon has often been compared to Odysseus in *Philoctetes*,<sup>26</sup> and the comparison is in many ways apt. Both know of oracles concerning a man whose power they wish to use for their own ends. Both intend to win that power by any available means, without fully accepting the man himself. Both employ intrigue as their weapon, and when that fails, force. These parallels are enough to suggest how much more complex than in the earlier suppliant plays the confrontation here becomes. The role of enemy, with its typical brutality, is only a starting point. Creon's hypocritical attempts at persuasion must first be unmasked before the full extent of his ruthlessness becomes apparent. Oedipus confronts not merely

<sup>23</sup>Antigone announces Creon's arrival (722–723; cf. *Supp.* 713 ff., *HerACL.* 48 ff.). Creon seizes her and attempts to seize Oedipus (819 ff., 874 ff.; cf. *Supp.* 885 ff., *HerACL.* 63 ff., 269). Theseus answers the chorus's cries for help (887; cf. *Supp.* 911, *HerACL.* 120). The agon ends with Creon's threats of war (1037; cf. *Supp.* 934 ff., *HerACL.* 261 ff.) and Oedipus' thanks (1042–1043; cf. *Supp.* 966–967, *HerACL.* 297 ff.).

<sup>24</sup>E.g., the prominence of the word *βία* here (815, 845, 854, 867, 874, 903, 916, 922, 935, 943; seven of these occurrences in emphatic position at the end of the line) and in *HerACL.* (47, 64, 71, 79, 97, 102, 106, 112, 127, 221, 225, 243, 249, 286).

<sup>25</sup>E.g., τοὺς ἐμοὺς ἄγω (832); τᾶμ' ὀλωλόθ' εὐρίσκων ἄγω (*Supp.* 918); ἄξω . . . τοὺς ἐμοὺς ἐγὼ λαβών (*HerACL.* 267).

<sup>26</sup>E.g., Whitman (above, note 7) 207; Knox (above, note 5) 156; H. Diller, "Göttliches und menschliches Wissen bei Sophokles," *Kieler Universitätsreden* 1 (1950) 26–27.

a herald, but a kinsman and a politician who is both unscrupulous and daring.

The antithesis of word and deed that recurs throughout the episode is one key to its interpretation.<sup>27</sup> Creon's first speech (728-760) is in essence a "Trugrede", and he continues until the end to use every device of persuasion, deceit and flattery at his command. He begins with words designed to disarm the opposition by anticipating the reactions that the enemy naturally engenders. The enemy's arrival produces fear; Creon's first words attempt to calm the fear of the chorus (729-731). The enemy characteristically uses violence; Creon anticipates the charge by denying that he has any thought of force (732). The enemy may be expected to scorn the power of the city to which he comes; Creon asserts his recognition of Athens' might (733-734).

Creon's hypocrisy is soon unmasked. His appeal to Oedipus rings false. There is a lurid quality about his description of the circumstances in which Oedipus and Antigone are forced to live, especially in his crafty insinuation that the old man is misusing his daughter's devotion by keeping her impoverished and unwed, "a reproach to you, to me, to all our race" (754). His appeal to Oedipus to "hide what is exposed" (755) suggests a pollution so great that it should not be seen. But even if this does not unmask his real attitude toward Oedipus, the invitation to return "to the city and the house of your fathers" (757-758) reveals him for what he is. We know that he is lying, that Oedipus will never be allowed within the walls of Thebes.

Oedipus turns on Creon in a crescendo of justified fury, contrasting this present show of solicitude with Creon's past indifference. Creon could have granted Oedipus the *χάρις* (767) of exile when he wished it, but refused, only insisting on it when Oedipus had ceased to desire it. Now, his apparent kindness also comes too late (*δὲ τ' οὐδὲν ἢ χάρις χάριν φέροι*, 779). Oedipus sweeps aside the false offer of restoration to Thebes that exposes Creon as a liar (784-786). Then fierce denunciation turns to prophecy: Creon will not obtain Oedipus' body for Thebes, but rather his avenging spirit; the patrimony of Oedipus' sons will be "just enough of my land to die in" (789-790). Oedipus prophesies now in his own name, with the authority of the oracle as confirmation. His strains are now the strains of the blind seer, as powerful as those of Tiresias.<sup>28</sup>

Creon proves the justice of Oedipus' condemnation by revealing the violence his words had masked until this point. He announces that he has already seized Ismene (818-819) and proceeds to lay hands on Antigone. The scene is one of tremendous agitation, formally very free and varied,

<sup>27</sup>See especially lines 761-762, 782, 817, 861, 873, 881, 1000-1002, 1036-1037.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*<sup>3</sup> (London 1961) 382.

dramatically very effective.<sup>29</sup> Antigone is carried off, and Oedipus is reduced for the last time to helplessness. Like Philoctetes robbed of his bow, he has lost his means of support. Creon makes a violent advance against Oedipus himself, who responds by launching a new, personal curse against his enemy—an old age like his own (864–870). Enraged, Creon unblushingly exults in *βία* (874) and *ὑβρις* (883), only to be halted by Theseus' hasty return in answer to the chorus's cries for help.

Creon's violence meets with a scathing rebuke. The familiar issues of the confrontation of saviour and enemy are prominent: disrespect for the city and its laws (913–918), violation of suppliant rights (922–923), disregard for the duties of the *xenos* (928). One element, however, is quite atypical. Whereas in the other suppliant plays the herald's actions are treated as fully representative of those who sent him, Theseus emphatically dissociates Creon's violence from the policy and practice of Thebes (919–923). This has led some to suspect that the speech has a specific political point to make, but what it might be is hard to see.<sup>30</sup> Theseus earlier expressed surprise at Oedipus' prediction of a future war with Thebes (606), and in this speech he continues to assume that she is a friendly power. In their dramatic context, these lines form a pointed part of Theseus' condemnation. Creon's violence is measured not only against Athens' protection of Oedipus, but against the standards of the city he claims to represent (737–738). He violates not only Athenian law, but precepts that Thebes and all of Greece respect.<sup>31</sup>

Creon replies to this rebuke with a final, calculated attempt at persuasion; he tries to drive a wedge between the suppliant and his hosts by returning to the theme of Oedipus' pollution (944–949). Creon addresses

<sup>29</sup>Cf. W. Jens, *Stichomythie in der frühen griechischen Tragödie* (Zetemata 11, Munich 1955) 100–101. Dochmiacs blend with trimeter, stichomythy yields to broken verses, distichs, short rheseis, and so on. Notice particularly the close verbal parallels between the summoning and entrance of Theseus and the analogous scene in Aesch. *Supp.* (ἰὼ γὰρ πρόμοι, 884 = ἰὼ πόλεως ἄγοι πρόμοι, *Supp.* 905; τί τοῦργον, 887 = τί ποιεῖς, *Supp.* 911). Reinhardt (above, note 6) 218 rightly refers to the technique as “archaizing;” as Jens points out, the adaptation of archaic forms is an important feature of the style of *Oedipus at Colonus*.

<sup>30</sup>The difficulties raised by interpreting this passage as a reference to contemporary politics stem from the fact that Thebes was Athens' most relentless enemy during the last years of the Peloponnesian War. Wilamowitz (above, note 3) 369 sees here otherwise unsupported evidence for the early emergence of a pro-Athenian party within Thebes, which Sophocles commends through Theseus; but this is to invent history to explain the passage. The alternative course, suggested by Robert (above, note 2) 1.483 and supported by M. Pohlenz, *Die Griechische Tragödie*<sup>2</sup> (Göttingen 1954) 2.142–143, is to ascribe the parts of the speech that deal favorably with Thebes to a supposed revision of the play by Iophon before its first production in 401. But, as Pohlenz admits, there is nothing about the passage, beyond its friendly attitude toward Thebes, to make one suspect interpolation.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Reinhardt (above, note 6) 222.

Theseus, but it is Oedipus himself who answers, his impassioned self-defense gaining in force because we have observed his earlier struggles with this terrible theme, and witnessed Theseus' tacit acceptance of his claim of innocence. Creon's strategem fails; the elders cap the tripartite agon by affirming their support for Oedipus, and Theseus ends it abruptly with a call for action (1016).

At this point, despite a very singular situation, the suppliant pattern is followed with remarkable fidelity. In Euripides' *Children of Heracles* and *Suppliants*, the repulsion of the enemy herald leads directly to war. The King marches off to meet the enemy, a "battle stasimon" indicates the passage of time before the outcome of the battle is known, and a messenger then reports on the fighting.<sup>32</sup> Here, Theseus, who has already sent a force to head off Creon's men (897-903), now leads Creon away, despite his threat of war (1036-1037), to recover the kidnapped maidens. The time required for the rescue is marked by a supremely confident battle stasimon (1044-1095), a kind of martial pendant to the praise of Attica's peacetime splendor in the Colonus ode.

The example of the Euripidean suppliant plays would lead us to expect a messenger speech describing the battle before Theseus returns. Instead, he appears immediately to restore Antigone and Ismene to their father's embrace. When Antigone prompts him to report on the battle, he declines in order to avoid "vain boasting" (1148-1149). This modesty is becoming, and Sophocles has more important matters to attend to, but one may also wonder what kind of fight there was to report. Did Theseus simply release Creon to the Thebans in return for Oedipus' daughters? Did Creon's men fight despite the fact that their leader was in the enemy's hands? For that matter, how many men could Creon bring with him into Attica on an ostensibly peaceful mission? And how many would have been at the sacrifice with Theseus?<sup>33</sup>

Such questions are pointless. Sophocles does not report on the battle and therefore avoids having to raise them. They are of interest solely in that they suggest the extent of the influence of the suppliant pattern on Sophocles' dramatic strategy here. Unlike Euripides, he offers no declared war between the protectors of the suppliants and their enemies; but the "battle motif" is so closely wedded to the suppliant pattern that Sophocles is free to adapt it to this new situation.

With the defeat of Oedipus' enemy the action of the suppliant drama is essentially complete, but instead of coming to an end, the plot takes a surprising new turn. Theseus announces that another suppliant waits at an altar for permission to speak to Oedipus. Oedipus realizes that it is his hated son Polynices and declines to hear him. He relents only grudging-

<sup>32</sup>This sequence is not confined to the suppliant plays; cf. Aesch. *Septem* 720-821.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Wilamowitz (above, note 3) 355.

ingly to Theseus' urging and Antigone's pleas. Father greets son with stony silence at first, then launches against him the most terrible of his curses.

Polynices and Creon are often coupled by critics,<sup>34</sup> and there are a number of significant parallels between them to which we shall shortly return. It is equally important, however, to see their differences. Creon's coming had been already announced by Ismene (396–397), and he came in the role of enemy herald. Polynices comes unexpectedly and, like Oedipus himself, as a suppliant. There are marked affinities between the Polynices scene and Oedipus' own supplication.<sup>35</sup> From a purely formal point of view, one can easily recognize many elements of the meeting of suppliant and saviour in this confrontation of father and son. Even the questions that lead to Oedipus' recognition of Polynices before he appears are the typical questions of that encounter: who is he, where is he from, what does he seek (1160–1166; cf. 204–206, 571–572). Oedipus' reaction to the recognition of Polynices parallels that of the chorus when they discover his identity.

The fact that Polynices is a suppliant fully reverses the fundamental premise of the action thus far: Oedipus, who appealed for aid as a suppliant and received it, now receives a similar appeal only to reject it. Earlier, he had needed to remind the elders of their duty to the suppliant and the gods (275–281); now Theseus must remind him (1179–1180). Once again, as at the outset of the play (237–253), Antigone pleads on behalf of a suppliant, but this time to a reluctant Oedipus, not for him. Her appeal is largely couched in terms characteristic of suppliant pleading; with great force she evokes the *χάρis* (1183) due Theseus and the gods, and the obligating bonds of kinship (1189–1191). Oedipus yields, but he makes it clear that he does so out of regard for Antigone and Theseus, not because of any change of heart (1205).

Oedipus' apprehension at this point functions as an ironic introduction to the actual encounter with his son. "Let no one ever win control (*κρατέιτω*) of my life" (1207), he begs Theseus, as if Polynices might, like Creon, bring force to bear upon him. But, of course, it is Oedipus himself whose daemonic curses control (*κρατοῦσιν*, 1381) the fate of his powerless son. The third stasimon stands in similar contrast to the remainder of the action. The despairing vision of old age will be followed by a new demonstration of Oedipus' strength of spirit.<sup>36</sup> The elders of Colonus look

<sup>34</sup>See especially Whitman (above, note 7) 207–212.

<sup>35</sup>P. E. Easterling, "Oedipus and Polynices," *PCPhS* n.s. 13 (1967) 5–6, shows, in the course of a careful study of the language of this scene, that "Sophocles makes great play with Polynices' suppliant position" (*βωμῶ καθήσθαι*, 1158; *θάκημα*, 1160, 1179; *ἔδρα*, 1163; *προσθακῶν ἔδραν*, 1166) partly to contrast him favorably with the interloper Creon.

<sup>36</sup>Cf. G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama* (Ithaca 1958) 201.

ahead to Oedipus' approaching death, but only as the final release from the waves of trouble still pushing against him. There is no suggestion of the triumphant apotheosis to come.

The appeals of Theseus and Antigone on Polynices' behalf correspond to Oedipus' initial pleading before the Coloneans; they are designed to prevent the suppliant from being sent away before his case is heard by the man who can save him. Now Polynices appears. Antigone's description of his approach contrasts sharply with her earlier announcement of Creon's arrival "not without followers" (723). Polynices comes, she says, "quite without escort, tears streaming from his eyes" (1250-1251). The situation is not that of confrontation by an enemy, although Oedipus can see in his son only an enemy. Polynices approaches not to despoil, but to beg for *soteria*.

Polynices repeats the pleas, already advanced on his behalf, of kinship (1323-1324) and suppliant status (1278, 1285, 1309, 1327), and adds the claim of common suffering (1335). It is an attempt to forge the same kind of human bond that played so prominent a part in Theseus' acceptance of Oedipus. Like Oedipus, Polynices has been unjustly exiled (1292-1298). His supplication, like that of Oedipus, brings with it the promise of benefits for himself and for the man to whom he appeals. If Oedipus aids him, he will regain the throne and restore Oedipus to Thebes; if not, he is lost (1340-1345).

Polynices' supplication, in short, is presented in almost total contrast to Creon's deceitful and brutal attack. There is, of course, a crucial link between Creon and Polynices. Both seek to turn the oracles concerning Oedipus to their own advantage and are rebuffed; both attempt to use Oedipus for their own ends and win only curses from him. Beyond that, however, the similarities are more apparent than real, whereas the contrasts are consistent and striking.

Both Creon and Polynices dwell upon Oedipus' misery, but the difference in manner is telling. Creon, as we have seen, coolly reproaches Oedipus with mistreatment of Antigone and unseemly exposure of his pollution. Polynices, on the other hand, enters in a state of great agitation at his own misfortune, and is suddenly caught up by the recognition of Oedipus' horrible suffering:

οἷμοι, τί δράσω; πότῃρα τὰμαντοῦ κακὰ  
πρὸσθεν δακρύσω, παῖδες, ἢ τὰ τοῦδ' ὄρων  
πατρός γέροντος;

Alas, what shall I do? Shall I first  
lament my evils, children, or, now that I  
have seen them, those of my aged father? (1254-1256)



For the first time, Polynices recognizes his own guilt and draws from it the necessary conclusion about his relations with his father:

ἀγὼ πανώλης ὄψ' ἄγαν ἐκμανθάνω·  
καὶ μαρτυρῶ κάκιστος ἀνθρώπων τροφαῖς  
ταῖς σαῖσιν ἦκειν·

Wretch that I am, I have learned too  
late, and confess that I come as the  
basest of men in caring for your  
needs. (1264-1266)

He prays for his father's mercy, for he sees that only by mercy can the breach between them be healed (1267-1270).

Whereas Creon disguises the political purpose of his mission, Polynices makes no attempt to hide his self-seeking intentions. He is open about the advantage he hopes to gain in a way that Creon cannot be. His indignation at the way Eteocles and Thebes have wronged him, his dreams of victory and restoration, bring him to seek Oedipus' help and cause him to continue on his ill-fated path after Oedipus rejects his pleas. Oedipus roundly condemns Creon's hypocrisy, but never makes a similar accusation against Polynices. Creon's offer to restore Oedipus to Thebes is exposed as a lie, but there is nothing to mark Polynices' offer as similarly insincere. Polynices has been rejected by Thebes (1298) and is attempting to conquer her. He need hardly respect the earlier decision to keep Oedipus outside her borders after Oedipus had helped him to regain power.<sup>37</sup>

The contrasts between Creon and Polynices are essential to the point of this scene. Not only does Sophocles cast Polynices in the role of a suppliant, a role that inevitably claims the spectator's respect, he gives Polynices as well a strong case and a frank manner quite opposite to Creon's. By making Polynices as sympathetic as possible,<sup>38</sup> he makes the

<sup>37</sup>A comparison of the Creon and Polynices scenes provides the best answer to the argument, advanced in its strongest form by Adams (above, note 5) 173-174, that Polynices, like Creon, is a hypocrite. It is worth noting that Adams' view clearly derives from his conception of the play as a moral vindication of Oedipus. "I do not think that Sophocles would put Oedipus, even obliquely, in the position of cursing a son who felt any qualms at all." This is, in effect, one possible response to the objection of Wilamowitz (above, note 3) 355 that the man who curses Polynices is "wahrlich . . . ein anderer Oedipus als der zum Sterben bereite Schützling der Eumeniden." Another, equally unsatisfying, is to condemn Oedipus for a monster from the outset. This approach, involving a curious rejection of Oedipus' claim of innocence and a quixotic defense of Creon, can be examined in T. G. Rosenmeyer, "The Wrath of Oedipus," *Phoenix* 6 (1952) 92-112.

<sup>38</sup>Jebb, *ad* 375, points out that Sophocles varied the tradition account by making Polynices older than Eteocles. In addition to the reasons Jebb offers, this change has the advantage of strengthening Polynices' case by presenting him as the natural heir to the throne unjustly deposed by a younger rival.

final test of Oedipus' new powers the most difficult of all, and Oedipus' curse of his son more terrible than anything that has come before. The Creon scene is fundamentally the expected impediment to *soteria* found in every suppliant play. The Polynices scene is a new and unexpected stage in Oedipus' transformation created largely by the subtle manipulation of the suppliant motif.

The daring staging of this scene as a supplication within the suppliant drama conveys with enormous force the change in Oedipus' fortunes and the growth of his daemonic power. The helpless suppliant, who stumbled upon his destined refuge, won safety and withstood the enemy's onslaught is now cast in the role of saviour. He has promised *soteria* to Athens after his death, but before he dies he must face an appeal for *soteria* from his own son, his greatest enemy, and now his suppliant. He rejects the suppliant with the powers of a prophet to foretell the future, and of a *daimon* to determine it. There could be no harsher demonstration of the old man's new powers, no more effective prelude to the mysterious transfiguration that follows.<sup>39</sup>

Oedipus greets his son with devastating silence, and then, when Polynices has said all he can say, answers with an even more devastating denunciation. It is an explosion of wrath and hatred without parallel, directed at first against Polynices alone, then turning with fine impartiality against both brothers. Oedipus has been wronged; beside this, family means nothing, supplication means nothing, Polynices' own wrongs at his brother's hands mean less than nothing. Oedipus sees Polynices only as the cause of his exile and misery, as a murderer (1361). It is too late for repentance (1358–1359); no supplication can outweigh the ancient law of retribution (1380–1382). As for kinship, "you are someone else's sons, not mine" (1369, cf. 1383). Oedipus can now prophesy, without so much as a reference to Apollo's oracle, the destruction of both his sons (1372–1374). He knows that his prayer to control the outcome of their battle (421–424) has been granted. Antigone calls his words oracles (*μαντεύματα*, 1425), and indeed they seem to transcend the limits of merely human speech.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike Creon, who continues to argue and resist after Oedipus' curse, Polynices makes no reply to his father's dreadful words. Instead, he turns to his sisters and bids them attend to his burial if the curse should be fulfilled (1405–1410). Despite the curse, despite Antigone's pleas,

<sup>39</sup>Easterling (above, note 35) 10 finds the episode "infinitely more tragic if we see Oedipus not as a developing daemon here, but as a man, to whom we can respond as human beings." But it is hardly necessary to choose between the man and the developing daemon. Out of the extremes of Oedipus' very human emotions we see the daemon begin to emerge. To recognize this does not entail denying Oedipus' humanity or suppressing our response to its powerful expression throughout the play.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Knox (above, note 5) 159–160.

Polynices will not abandon his quest for power. He knows that he is setting out on a "road made ill-fated, evil-omened by my father and his Furies" (1432-1434), but shame at the mockery Eteocles has made of him (1422-1423), and a residual, self-delusive hope that Fortune may yet save him (1443-1444), push him onward to his death. Oedipus' curse does indeed control Polynices' fate.

The further fortunes of the house of Laius form a sombre backdrop to the radiant scene of Oedipus' triumph in death. Antigone's loving but fruitless concern for her brother heightens the pathos of his departure and makes Oedipus' wrath all the more appalling. The same sisterly affection reappears with equal poignance at the very end of the play, when Antigone requests Theseus' permission to go to Thebes in the hope of preventing her brothers' suicidal struggle, a hope we know is as vain as her attempt at persuasion here. Antigone never slackens in her loyalty to her father, and yet her disapproval of his curse is implicit in her statement that a father should not requite a son's wrongdoing with further wrongs (1189-1191). She knows the "evil end of evil wrath" (1197-1198). But all her attempts to mitigate Oedipus' harshness, to forestall the doom which is his inheritance to her brothers, fail, as they must fail.

How are we to judge Oedipus' terrible wrath, especially in the light of Antigone's more humane attitude? This problem has caused critics of the play much discomfort, but every attempt to extract a clear-cut "moral" has failed.<sup>41</sup> Oedipus' own insistence on his innocence of the crimes that caused his downfall make it especially attractive to view his subsequent rise from degradation to godlike eminence as a recompense to which his moral stature entitles him. But his very innocence is an indication that his downfall was no punishment of a moral fault, and we should therefore be wary of viewing Oedipus' transfiguration as a reward for moral virtue.<sup>42</sup> He has suffered, apparently arbitrarily, at the hands of the inscrutable gods, who now at last give him rest and the mysterious power of the hero to bless and to curse. He claims this power in *Oedipus at Colonus* by sheer force of character, but there is nothing to suggest that he owes it to his innocence or to a just providence.

<sup>41</sup>The attempt to justify Oedipus' curse involves either the implausible denial of Polynices' sincerity (cf. note 35) or the argument that Greek legal and religious thought strongly condemned ungrateful children, even though this hardly covers the case of such an act of vengeance or meets the objection raised by Antigone's attitude. For this approach, see Bowra (above, note 1) 327-329. Those who feel that Oedipus' curse cannot be justified must, like Wilamowitz (above, note 3), excise it from the main fabric of the play as somehow irrelevant, or else try to show that Sophocles himself condemns it. Evidence for this view is not easy to find; thus G. Perrotta, *Sophocle* (Messina 1935) 610, is reduced to arguing that the thunder that announces Oedipus' end is a sign of divine (and Sophoclean) disapproval.

<sup>42</sup>Cf. Weinstock (above, note 4) 198-199.

Oedipus' curse stands outside the boundaries of ordinary moral judgment. It is, as Winnington-Ingram has observed, the act of one who "seems to earn his place among the chthonian powers by administering that kind of blind and passionate justice based on the principle of retaliation and involving the innocent with the guilty."<sup>43</sup> We do not condemn Oedipus for not sharing Antigone's gentler view, because it has no place in his heroic world, is based on a love he does not share and a code he cannot accept. As befits the hero he is becoming, Oedipus' hatreds and loves are absolute. There is no greater love than his for the daughters who have served him faithfully (1617-1618), no greater hatred than his for the sons who have betrayed him. How could Oedipus not curse Polynices? The very suppliant pleas with which son appeals to father are reminders of the dreadful intertwining of their fates; the claims of kinship and of like suffering are claims to a common destiny (*τὸν αὐτὸν δαίμον' ἐξειληχότες*, 1337). Polynices asks his father's blessing on the very action that will fulfill that destiny and the curse upon the house.<sup>44</sup>

Oedipus' destiny is set alongside the destiny of his children in a way that makes it difficult to accept Bowra's comforting vision of his passing: "The gods are not after all indecipherable; they reward the just. At the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* no unresolved discords remain, no mysteries call for an answer."<sup>45</sup> At the moment of Oedipus' death, discord is silenced by ineffable mystery. More than that we cannot say. For his very nature is discord—blind seer, polluted innocent, lover and hater, protector and destroyer, suppliant and saviour. All of this he carried to his mysterious grave, and beyond. The curse to which he was bred and which he breeds, the blessing he wins for himself and bestows on others, remain forever mysteries.

Oedipus' encounter with Creon represents the last, necessary step in achieving the *soteria* required to fulfill his destiny. The encounter with Polynices, playing upon the roles of suppliant drama, moves off to the brink of that fulfilment. The suppliant as saviour confronts the suppliant as enemy and repels him with a daemonic force that proves Oedipus' readiness for the coming transformation. Yet, carefully as the play's design prepares this transformation, we do not know with certainty, until it is about to happen, that it will be part of the action.

We learn from the oracle revealed at the beginning of the play that Oedipus is to end his life in a shrine of the Eumenides at a moment

<sup>43</sup>R. P. Winnington-Ingram, "A Religious Function of Greek Tragedy," *JHS* 74 (1954) 24. Winnington-Ingram points out that Oedipus' curse is part of a larger scheme whose full consequences not even he envisages. He dooms the sons he hates, but Antigone's departure for Thebes at the end of the play reminds us that he dooms her, too, whom he loves.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. Diller (above, note 25) 30.

<sup>45</sup>Bowra (above, note 1) 349.

revealed by some natural sign (91–95). When this will happen is left indefinite while our attention centers on his immediate struggle. Oedipus repeatedly mentions the boon he brings to Athens, telling Theseus that it will be revealed “when I die and you bury me” (582), but the action proceeds as if its goal were simply his safe establishment in Attica despite his enemy’s designs. Only the increasing force of Oedipus’ utterances, the growing certainty of his prophecies make us aware that his transformation has already begun. Until the thunder peals out, we do not know that the moment is at hand.<sup>46</sup>

The prelude to the luminous scene of Oedipus’ passing is, in a typically Sophoclean contrast, agitated in the extreme. Just as typically, the agitation finds expression in a kommos of the most exacting formal symmetry (1447–1499).<sup>47</sup> The thunder breaks suddenly and unexpectedly into the chorus’s troubled consideration of Oedipus’ curse. The apotheosis springs directly from the great demonstration of Oedipus’ daemonic wrath. But the elders do not understand what the thunder signifies, and react to each successive peal with mounting terror. Even Antigone is uncertain. Only Oedipus knows. Now, for the first time, it is clear that Oedipus’ death will be part of the play itself, and not merely of his prophecy. What is, in retrospect, so clearly the central theme has been carefully prepared by being carefully subordinated to a series of confrontations.

When Oedipus hears the sign that calls him away, his only concern is to bestow upon Theseus his *τελεσφόρον χάριν* (1489), the benefit he has promised from his death. Hearing this, the elders understand, and summon the king to receive the *δικαίαν χάριν* (1498) that Oedipus offers in return for what he has received. Thus, the first announcement of Oedipus’ impending death reiterates his suppliant plea and shows that it is about to be fulfilled. The suppliant, as he promised, is about to become saviour. Oedipus’ power to bless Athens is emphasized in these last scenes in contrast to the dreadful curse that came before. Similarly, the love Oedipus shares with Antigone and Ismene balances his hatred for his sons. The messenger who reports Oedipus’ passing dwells on the faithful daughters’ performance of Oedipus’ last ablutions, their tearful leave-taking, and Oedipus’ final words of loving gratitude. These themes of love and lamentation continue in the closing kommos.

The final scenes of *Oedipus at Colonus* transform the expected *soteria* of suppliant drama into the mysterious *soteria* of the hero, granted to

<sup>46</sup>Cf. I. M. Linforth, “Religion and Drama in *Oedipus at Colonus*,” *CPCP* 14, 4 (1951) 168–170. Linforth no doubt overestimates the extent to which the final miracle comes as a surprise through his misguided zeal to eliminate the miraculous from the play as much as possible, but he is, to my knowledge, the only critic to observe that it is not the obvious denouement from the outset.

<sup>47</sup>The two strophic pairs are separated by three sets of anapests, in each of which Oedipus speaks two verses, Antigone one, and Oedipus two more.

Oedipus in death. The suppliant drama creates the necessary foundation for the mystery that rises out of it. There is no interruption or reversal of the action, but rather a continuation of its upward curve, transcending and transfiguring all that has come before. In the encounter with Poly-nices, Oedipus played the part of saviour, but received his suppliant with merciless wrath, the prerogative of his new daemonic power. Now, in his passing, he begins to fulfil the other part of his heroic fate. The prophetic knowledge and power growing in Oedipus since the beginning of the play finally burst even the bonds of his physical weakness. With inspired inner sight, the blind beggar leads the way to the place he alone can recognize, the site of his heroic grave. Here he completes his own *soteria* and provides *soteria* for Athens. His curse is the requital of past wrongs, his blessing the return of kindness to those who have saved him to achieve his destiny at last.

The contrasts and dissonances of Oedipus' nature are, paradoxically, the sources of the play's inner logic, and therefore of its unity. Sophocles' adaptation of the pattern of suppliant drama contributes to that unity by providing a framework within which Oedipus' complex nature can gradually be revealed. The movement of the suppliant pattern toward safety is subsumed in Oedipus' quest for *soteria* to be won and given. The series of encounters thus generated forms a vast continuum of motif and action at whose poles are Oedipus' twin roles of suppliant and saviour.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>It is tempting, although speculative, to add that Sophocles may have found the suppliant pattern attractive as a means of establishing formal and thematic links between *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Critics have often observed the great inverse symmetry of their designs; see e.g., Kitto (above, note 28) 393; Adams (above, note 5) 164. R. D. Murray, Jr., "Thought and Structure in Sophoclean Tragedy," in T. Woodward, *Sophocles, A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1966) 23-28, shows that the plays are mirror images not only in general outline but in many details of structure as well. At the outset of *OT*, Oedipus, masterful and self-reliant, receives his people's supplication. At the outset of *OC*, helpless and dependent on others, he is himself a suppliant. The structure of *OT* describes a falling curve, from might and apparent vision to blindness and abomination. *OC* describes the opposite curve. In *OT* Oedipus unwittingly curses himself and only later learns his identity. In *OC*, he wins prophetic knowledge and the power to curse his enemies. At the end of *OT*, Oedipus blinds himself and begs for exile; he enters the palace of his fathers as an outcast among men and gods. At the end of *OC*, Oedipus gains inner sight and leads the way to his final home; he enters the sacred grove having at last achieved that proximity to the gods wrongly attributed him at the beginning of *OT*. There, Oedipus is greeted as saviour (48) and revealed at last as enemy; here he becomes saviour in fact. It is perhaps worth noting that Oedipus opens both plays with short speeches of self-introduction, each 13 lines long and divided into units of 8 and 5 lines, with the division marked by ἀλλὰ. These parallels gain point because of the total reversal of situation, condition and attitude the speeches convey. It seems at least possible that the speech in *OC* is deliberately modelled on its predecessor.