

ΟΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ ΕΠΙ ΚΟΛΩΝΩΙ

Jebb¹ (pp. xxxix ff.) tells us that *Oedipus at Colonus* may well have been written toward the close of Sophocles' life (d. late 405 or early 404 BC), and he quotes Lachmann's view that the drama was written just before the beginning of the Peloponnesian war, and that it was 'political through and through' ('durch und durch politisch'), as a lift to patriotic self-belief at this time of trial. My argument supports this view. *Oedipus at Colonus* follows Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in affirming and celebrating the Athenian Apollonian miracle, as allegorised in the radiant moon, symbol of Apollo. The following analysis will drill down to a low level, demonstrating how the drama tightly coheres as allegory, as a notable incarnation of the Aquinian virtues of consonance, radiance and integrity.

The broad line of the allegory is this. Oedipus is a typical wandering (πλανητης, l. 3) planet: the moon in fact, in which the dark is gradually and inevitably gaining on the bright, to culminate in the disappearance of the radiant moon for three days of the month (death of Oedipus in Colonus). Yet from this death a new radiant moon will be born, to bring everlasting gifts to Athens as a symbol of Apollo ('a defence, better than many shields, better than the succouring spear of neighbours' (Jebb, ll. 1524-5). Oedipus finds himself first at the grove of the Eumenides in Colonus. The Kindly Ones represent here, like the sphinxes in *Oedipus Tyrannos* and Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, the dark moon, as symbol of the unenlightened ignorance of the pre-Athenian ancient world (Persia and Egypt in particular). Antigone and Ismene are daughters and also sisters of Oedipus. Sophocles' allocation to them of the allegoric values of the bright and dark moons respectively allows him flexibility in the treatment of these two most important symbols. It is Antigone, then, who leads Oedipus on his wanderings; but Ismene will appear on stage further into the drama, when the dark moon has further waxed. Polyneices and Eteocles also represent the bright and dark moons respectively; and the former's entreatment of his father to join him on the assault on Thebes is rebuffed: for Oedipus is to be identified at this point predominantly with the dark moon, not the radiant. Finally, Oedipus' death has a divine quality to it: for it is also the birth of a god (Apollo).

ll. 36 ff.

Stichomythic exchanges always indicate, in Sophocles as in Aeschylus, the gradual waxing or waning, in baby steps, of a heavenly body. Here, in this environment of the grove of the Eumenides, Oedipus' involvement clearly indicates the waxing of the dark moon. The allegoric value of the stranger, who is a native of Colonus but is fearful of the grove, is most plausibly the bright moon, which is waning even as the dark moon waxes. It may well be, then, that Sophocles intended Colonus to be a place of the radiant moon.

ll. 88-93

ταύτην ἔλεξε παύλαν ἐν χρόνῳ μαχρῷ,
ἐλθόντι χώραν τερμίαν, ὅπου θεῶν
σεμνῶν ἔδραν λάβοιμι καὶ ξενόστασιν,
ἐνταῦθα κάμψειν τὸν ταλαίπωρον βίον,

κέρδη μὲν οἰκήσαντα τοῖς δεδεγμένοις,
ἄτην δὲ τοῖς πέμψασιν, ὃ μ' ἀπήλασαν...

‘who [Phoebus] ... spake of this as a rest for me after long years,—on reaching my goal in a land where I should find a seat of the Awful Goddesses, and a hospitable shelter,—even that there I should close my weary life, with benefits, through my having dwelt therein, for mine hosts, but ruin for those who sent me forth—who drove me away...’

Oedipus’ life will conclude in this environment, for the Awful Goddesses bear the allegoric value of the dark moon, the victory of which will see the bright moon (temporarily) extinguished. The ‘benefits’ will be the Apollonian world view which he will bestow on Athens.

ll. 113-202

In this scene Oedipus and Antigone, having left the grove of the Eumenides, hide themselves off the track, until a group of local elders (the chorus) arrives, whereupon they discover themselves. Antigone then leads her father forward in small steps:

Oedipus: ἔτ' οὖν;

Chorus: ἔτι βαῖνη πόρσω.

Oedipus: ἔτι;

Chorus: προβίβαζε, κούρα, πόρσω· σὺ γὰρ αἴεις.

[A verse for Antigone, then a verse for the Chorus, and another verse for Antigone, seem to have been lost here]

Antigone: ἔπεο μάν, ἔπε' ὄδ' ἀμαυρῶ
κόλω, πάτερ, ἧ' σ' ἄγω.

‘Further then?’ ‘Come still further.’ ‘Further?’ ‘Lead him onward, maiden, for you hear us and obey.’ ‘Come, follow this way with your dark steps, father, as I lead you.’

The Chorus of elders represents here, as elsewhere in Sophocles and Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, the immensely ancient stars of the night sky. The starry backdrop appears to the watcher to be fixed, as the planets move (wander) across it. The appearance of Oedipus and Antigone represents the dawning of the moon, which rises in the east and moves westward across the sky at a rate of approximately one diameter per hour:

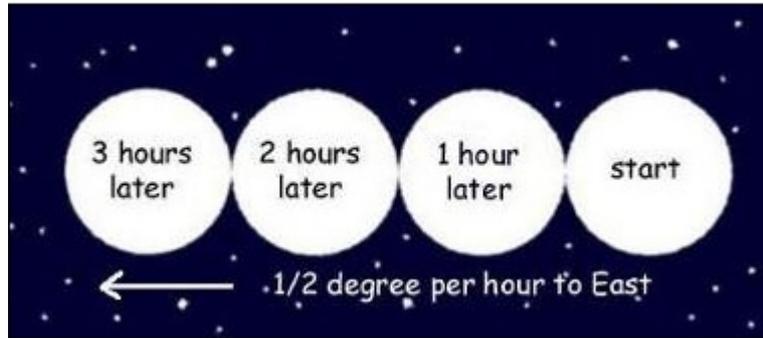


Figure 1 The motion of the moon westward across the sky, at a rate of 1 diameter/hour

This motion is figured here in the step-by-step advancement of Oedipus.

The Chorus then bids Oedipus crouch down on the elevated edge of a shelf of rock, most plausibly to suggest the spherical form of the moon, on high in the sky. Oedipus first asks, ‘Shall I sit down?’ To which the Chorus replies, ‘Yea, move sideways and crouch low on the edge of the rock’ (ll. 195-6):

OI. ἢ ἐσθῶ; XO. λέχριός γ' ἐπ' ἄκρου
 λαὸς βραχὺς ὀκλάσας.

Jebb remarks of this exchange, ‘He has already been told to go no further ... but, in his anxiety to avoid further offence, it is conceivable that he should repeat his question in the clearest form’ (p. 42). However, in terms of the allegory this would rather point to Sophocles’ tactic of highlighting the specific posture of ‘crouch’ (ὀκλάσας), as contrasted with Oedipus’ more generic ‘sit down’ (ἐσθῶ).

ll. 324 ff.

The entry of Ismene here is of allegoric significance. We have seen in the preceding lines Antigone lead Oedipus out of their place of concealment to speak with the Chorus of elders, who bear the allegoric value of the starry sky, and then to crouch on the rock on high. The following of this scene by the entry of Ismene recalls, as allegory, Aeschylus’ treatment of Pylades in *Choephoroe*. I have argued that Pylades represents the dark moon, and that his silence through much of the play, to be broken only toward the end, portrays the invisibility of the dark moon in early twilight, while the bright moon is yet visible. The dark moon then becomes visible as deeper darkness falls, as shown here:



Figure 2: The dark moon visible at night

The stichomythic exchange between Oedipus and Ismene (ll. 327- 337) indicates that the dark moon is becoming more starkly noticeable. Oedipus most plausibly represents the moon in toto, dark + radiant. Both the moon as whole and its dark component are standing out progressively more strongly against the darkening sky.

There is a second, longer (33 lines) stichomythic exchange between Oedipus and Ismene beginning at l. 387. Intermitting these are relatively long speeches by Oedipus (337-360) and then Ismene (361-384), which express the strength, now, of the presence of the dark moon in the night sky. The identical lengths of these last two speeches point toward the allegoric equivalence of the speakers. There follows a substantial speech (421-60), the longest since the entry of Ismene, by Oedipus, to suggest the growth in visibility of the dark moon since line 384. There follows (465-85) a stichomythic exchange between Oedipus and the Chorus to indicate the simultaneous brightening of the stars and growth in visibility of the moon in toto (bright + dark = Oedipus).

Immediately before the entry of Theseus, Ismene is sent away to make offerings at the grove of the Eumenides. This is consistent with the allegoric roles of herself and the Kindly Ones as the dark moon. It is Oedipus and Antigone – that is, the radiant moon – who will interact with Theseus, as the import of the Apollonian world feeling develops in his soul.

ll. 551 ff.

Two introductory speeches by Theseus and Oedipus are followed by a stichomythic exchange between them (ll. 579-606), and another (ll. 642-55), intermitted by substantial speeches by Oedipus (ll. 607-28) and Theseus (ll. 631-41). If, as I have argued, a stichomythic exchange in Sophocles as in Aeschylus represents the gradual brightening or dimming of heavenly body, then what can be happening here with Theseus, who does not appear to bear the allegoric value of such a body? A plausible interpretation is that as the radiant moon (Oedipus) brightens in the sky with the deepening of night, the reflex of this moon strengthens in the mind of the watcher (Theseus): that is, the notion of the value of the Apollonian world feeling is 'growing on' him in these exchanges.

The scene ends with a substantial speech by the Chorus, to suggest, now, the stark presence of the stars in the night sky.

Il. 728 ff.

Creon marks his entry with a long speech (Il. 728-760) which is followed by an even longer one by Oedipus (Il. 761-99). We shall see in the analysis of *Antigone* that Creon most plausibly represents the sun. The battle for Thebes in Sophocles' trilogy, as in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, portrays as allegory the dawning of day, with the moon (Polyneices = bright, Eteocles = dark) being overcome by the radiance of the sun, which now rules the sky. Thus, in the final scene of *Antigone*, it is Haemon, son of Creon and also the sun in terms of the allegory, who brings Antigone down from the noose and lays her on the ground (bright moon being visible in the sky for some time after dawn, then disappearing in the radiance of the sun). And thus also, in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, the moon (Oedipus) quits the sky even as the sun rises (ascendancy of Creon).

I take Thebes to represent in *Oedipus in Colonus* the old goddess-worshipping pre-Hellenic civilisations, of which Persia bulked largest of all in the Hellenic apprehension. Day and the sun would effect the disappearance of the radiant moon, in contrast to Athens, where the Apollonian world feeling would be immortal and enduring. The banishing of the moon from the sky by the sun is suggested in lines 784-6 of *Oedipus in Colonus*:

Oedipus: ἦ κεις ἔμ' ἄξων, οὐχ' ἴν' ἐς δόμους ἄγης,
ἄλλ' ὥς πάραυλον οἰκισῆς, πόλις δέ σοι
κακῶν ἄνατος τῆσδ' ἀπαλλαχθῆ χθονός.

'You have come to get me, not to bring me home, but to plant me near your borders, so that your city might escape uninjured by evils from this land.'

Here, πάραυλον means 'dwelling beside,' 'on the borders,' 'close at hand': that is, dwelling hard by but not actually in a place. The allegory is clear as to what is happening here, with the moon not actually being visible in the sky by day.

Substantial speeches by Oedipus and Creon suggest the moon 'facing off' against the sun, with a stichomythic exchange between them (Il. 800-27) portraying as allegory the dimming of the former even as the latter grows more bright. Yet the threat is rebuffed: Creon is repelled thanks to Theseus. This will be a miraculous innovation for Athens, a new departure for the world.

In light of the foregoing, Theseus' arrest of Creon and rescue of Antigone and Ismene, and the several stichomythic exchanges of these episodes, need no further explanation.

Il. 1447 ff.

Neither does the death of Oedipus need extensive explanation. It is significant that he insists that Antigone not accompany him, for this will be an affair of the dark moon alone, from which a new radiant moon, symbolising the god Apollo, will miraculously be born, whence will derive the welfare and safety of Athens:

OΙ: τοῦτον δὲ φράζε μή ποτ' ἀνθρώπων τινί,
μήθ' οὐδέ κέκευθε μήτ' ἐν οἷς κείται τόποις:
ὥς σοι πρὸ πολλῶν ἀσπίδων ἀλκὴν ὄδε
δορός τ' ἐπακτοῦ γειτονῶν ἀεὶ τιθῆ.

‘But as to that place, never reveal it to another man, neither where it is hidden, nor in what region it lies, so that it may be an eternal defence for you, better than many shields, better than the spear of neighbours which brings relief.’

NOTES

1. Text and translations in this paper are from the edition by Richard Claverhouse Jebb (1889).