

Stasis in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*

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Abstract

In my paper I focus on one work – Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (OC). I try to answer a few fundamental questions: first, how *stasis* is represented and reflected on in OC; second, whether there are some passages or thoughts about the causes and prevalence of *stasis*, and third and finally, if *stasis* is avoidable or unavoidable. I argue that regarding the causes of fraternal strife as a metaphor for civil strife the pollution of the ruling family, which goes back far into the past, forms the pre-conditions of *stasis*, by which the set of conditions that enable the occurrence of *stasis* is meant. The pollution as something that transgresses religiously and socially unquestionable amounts to a propensity to act corrosively or destructively. On the other hand, if and how *stasis* occurs is influenced and conditioned by the con-

crete decisions of the members of the royal family. In other words, the case of *stasis* in OC was avoidable or preventable. The different question is if wars and internal wars are avoidable as such or not or what causes the fluctuation between war and peace, prosperity/stability and decay? In OC Oedipus argues that conflict as such becomes inevitable due to the passage of time. However, this answer needs to be supplemented. The specific mechanism underlying the fluctuation and breakdown of social stability appears to be the erosion of normative behavior.

Keywords: Stasis; Sophocles; *Oedipus at Colonus*; causes; avoidability; honour; revenge

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Introduction

The greatest fear of each and every ancient Greek community of the archaic and classical period was, after annihilation by an external enemy (van Wees 2004, 124–126; Flanchard & Harris 2021, 1–19), internal strife and violence (στάσις).¹ We find copious references to *stasis* in the archaic and classical Greek literature which testify to it.² The major political works of Plato and Aristotle contain deep inquiries into the ultimate causes of *stasis* accompanied by perspectives on how to avoid the disunity of the civic body and internal war and violence.³ Since the 1950s, many seminal texts have been written about the phenomenon of *stasis* in the ancient world on the basis of the approaches of different disciplines (empirical history, political philosophy and theory, anthropology, constitutional inquiry).⁴ These works have made a decisive contribution to the elucidation of the phenomenon and continue to shape our knowledge of *stasis* in ancient Greece. My aim in this paper is but a modest one. I will focus on one work – Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* (OC). I will try to answer a few fundamental questions: first, how *stasis* is represented and reflected on in OC; second, whether there are some passages or thoughts about the causes and prevalence of *stasis*, and third and finally, if *stasis* is avoidable or unavoidable. Before we approach Sophocles’ play itself, we should consider several points.

Firstly, drama cannot be understood as a discursive analytical treatise even though it also has an intellectual content. But it can offer an insight into the thought patterns of a certain period because a dramatist tries to elicit a collective response. This presupposes that these thought patterns must be shared to a large extent and that they can thus be communicated. Furthermore, drama represents the characters who are acting, including the presentation of their motivation, even if this motivation is sometimes not stated directly but must be inferred.

Secondly, a contest between tragic dramas was a part of many major religious festivals of Athens, e.g. Lenaea, Anthesteria, and the Rural and Great or City Dionysia. Though not all, but the vast majority of the extant plays were performed for the first time during

¹ I follow Wallach 2023, 613n.10 in rendering *stasis* as a continuum from “corrosive politics to deadly conflict”.

² E.g. Il. 1.63–64, 18.107–110; Od. 24.528–548; Hes. Op. 14, Theog. 617–735; Alc. fr. 130b7, 208; Sol. fr. 4 West.; Pind. fr. 109 Snell; Bacchyl. fr. 24 Snell; Aesch. Supp. 681–682, Eum. 858–866, 976–986, PV 197–241; Democr. B 249 DK; Hdt. 3.82, 8.3.1; Eur. fr. 173, 282, 453.24–26 TrGF V, HF 272–274; Soph. OC 1233; Thuc. 3.82–84; An. Iambl. 7.10; Lys. 18.17; Plat. Rep. 470b–471b.

³ On this topic see especially Mustacchio 1972, 129–162; Manicas 1982, 686–688; Balot 2001, 234–248; Olbricht 2021, and Wallach 2023 for Plato and Polansky 1991, Schütrumpf & Gehrke 1996, 164–178, 425–612; Weed 2007, and Hatzistavrou 2013 for Aristotle. Cf. Nippel 1980.

⁴ See Loenen 1953; Legon 1966; Mustacchio 1972; Ruschenbush 1978, 24–54; Ste Croix 1981; Fuks 1984; Lintott 1982; Gehrke 1985; Loraux 1987; Ulf 1990; Hansen 1995, 2004; Berent 1982, 1998, 2000; Fisher 2000; Balot 2001; van Wees 2008, and Puckett 2013.

the City Dionysia. The function of these festivals as highly ritualised events has a close connection to the topic of stasis and order and disorder, as the authors leaning on an anthropological approach demonstrated (Handelman 2004; des Bouvries 2018). According to des Bouvries, the Dionysiac festival “embraced a sequence of sacrificial, ceremonial and performative phases. During these phases, the participating community was drawn into a liminal period with the intensified orchestration of prescribed sentiments, transforming spectators into participants and transferring them temporarily into a sequence of affective states. The program moved from disruptive komos to solemn sacrifice, to polis-patriotic ceremonies” (des Bouvries 2018, 96–97). Handelman argued that the programme of the City Dionysia was constructed in such a way to take the community from its split during the dithyrambic contest of tribal choruses to dramatic performances unifying the divided community. In Handelman’s opinion the Athenian polis thus recreated and revitalised itself (Handelman 2004, 215). Concerning the tragic genre itself, as des Bouvries remarks, “tragedians affected the sense of the spectators, with their violations of the sacred, the socially unquestionable rousing comparable reflex reactions of cultural rejection, the tragic shock and horror.” This shock and horror delivered by the shaping of mythical material helped to refresh the world order of the polis and its institutions (des Bouvries 2015, 95–96).

Thirdly, if we ask about the causes of internal strife and war, we must realise that we are asking several related questions, as is the case with external conflict. Regarding external war, we search for what causes the constant recurrence of war. What causes variations in war and peace or under what conditions does war occur? What causes particular wars (Levy (2010, 217)? Obviously, political science muses on the deep structural causes, aiming at theories which cover and explain vast sets of cases. These causes may be considered on several levels, e.g. a) the level of power, b) the constitutional and institutional level, and c) the belief systems and psychological and emotional states of both leaders and citizens. Similarly, the question why citizens/mortals quarrel and fight each other defies a trivial answer.⁵ But what remains obvious is that every society has to be somehow structured and divided along some lines and these divisions are a potential source of conflict. In the case of classical Athens the division lines were birth, wealth, honour, and gender. Athenian democracy managed the tensions arising from such divisions more or less successfully, even though between 510 B.C. and 404 B.C. we record two internal wars and two attempts at coups accompanied by violence. On the level of values there was ideological pressure on aristocrats to accommodate their patterns of behaviour and thought to the established and evolving standards of a democratic environment.

⁵ See Eckstein 1965, 143–145 and his survey of five hypotheses or Gurr 1970/2010.

The Theban saga and the story pattern of the suppliant play

In OC Sophocles shaped the mythical material that was well known from epics⁶ about the ancestral fault of the Labdacid family, in consequence of which the city of Thebes had been endangered for three consecutive generations (Laius-Oedipus-Eteocles and Polynices). The Theban saga serves as a paradigmatic example of the destructiveness of an internal conflict, analogously to the Trojan War as a model example of an external war with its devastating effects. Sophocles focused on the end of the ruling family in Thebes in a fratricidal struggle for power and the figure of Oedipus in exile. As Juffras remarks, “Greek notions about strife lie behind the presentation of Oedipus as a political exile...” (Juffras 1988, 3). When the conflict between Polynices and Eteocles erupts, including the regent Creon and the people of Thebes, Oedipus, wandering and finally settling in Colonus becomes, according to the reported oracles (389–402), the key figure that will secure victory for those to whom he resolves to incline. Thus, this old, weak, and helpless man without an affiliation to a polis becomes transformed by the will of the gods into an extremely powerful hero.

The Theban events and Oedipus’ exile are set in the story pattern called the suppliant play. The plays of this kind, similarly to funeral orations, celebrated the idealised Athens as a civilising, just, and pious power, in short a moral and military hegemon of the Greek world that protects weak and hunted foreigners out of pity.⁷ In OC, Oedipus finds protection in Colonus and Athens by the king Theseus because it was prophesied by Apollo (84–91) that he would both die and have a tomb there. In accordance with the suppliant pattern there will be a conflict between the protecting power and the representatives of the foreign power who haunt the exile, committing violence (876–886) and encroaching upon the sovereignty of Athens (886–917). By her decision to accept a suppliant, Athens involves herself in the internal affairs and spheres of interest of another city, which puts her at risk of war with the opposing great power. We also observe this pattern in OC, in which the development of the plot brings a battle between the Athenian military forces and the Theban troops backing up Creon (1044–1095), who attempted to kidnap Oedipus from Colonus.⁸

⁶ See Grethlein 2003, 255–258, Markantonatos 2007, 21–29, 41–70, and Kelly 2009, 36–51.

⁷ See Burian 1971, 1–33; Grethlein 2003, 7–44; Bernek 2004, 13–44, and Tzanetou 2012, 1–30 on the nature of suppliant plays and the construction of the collective identity and ideology of the hegemonic power.

⁸ See Burian 1971, 207–262; Mills 1997, 160–187; Grethlein 2003, 255–330; Bernek 2004, 129–220, and Tzanetou 2012, 105–128 on the analysis of supplication and asylum in OC.

Representation of *stasis* in Thebes

Sophocles' drama oscillates between temporal planes. Passages that describe the beginning and early course of the internal conflict are mixed with references to ancient guilt and curses, as well as oracles and curses that reveal or hint at the future. Sophocles gradually and masterfully reveals the nature of the conflict through the characters' communicative interactions. From these, it becomes clear how the individual characters understand the conflict, their role in it, and their attitude towards it. OC offers two narrations of the origins of the internal conflict, the first in a relatively early phase of the play and the second in a relatively late one. The substantial details about the *stasis* in Thebes get narrated by Ismene (365–383) and Polynices (1291–1307). Although their accounts overlap to a large extent, Polynices' speech contains very important information which Ismene's account omits. But we start with Ismene's account (365–373):

ἀ δ' ἀμφὶ τοῖν σοῖν δυσμόροιν παῖδοιν κακὰ
 νῦν ἐστὶ, ταῦτα σημανοῦς' ἐλήλυθα.
 πρὶν μὲν γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἤρεσεν Κρέοντί τε
 θρόνους ἑᾶσθαι μηδὲ χραίνεσθαι πόλιν,
 λόγῳ σκοποῦσι τὴν πάλαι γένους φθοράν,
 οἷα κατέσχε τὸν σὸν ἄθλιον δόμον
 νῦν δ' ἐκ θεῶν τοῦ κάξ ἀλειψηροῦ φρενὸς
 εἰσῆλθε τοῖν τρεῖς ἀθλίοις ἔρις κακὴ,
 ἀρχῆς λαβέσθαι καὶ κράτους τυραννικοῦ.

*But I have come to tell you of the evils that now afflict your two unhappy sons. At first they agreed that the throne should be left to Creon and pollution of the city avoided, considering the nature of the ancient ruin of the family that oppressed your miserable house. But now by the action of one of the gods and of their accursed minds there has come upon the thrice-unhappy ones and evil rivalry to grasp at dominion and at royal power.*⁹

The city of Thebes had been striving to overcome the crisis which was caused by the revelation of Oedipus' patricide that led to Oedipus' exile and the shake-up of the legitimacy of power. At first, it seemed that the Theban elite, whether they were representatives of the Theban royal family (Polynices, Eteocles) or another powerful Theban family affiliated with it (Creon), have the will to act responsibly and to restore the stability that had been lost due to pollution and illegitimate power. Oedipus' sons, aware of the curse on their

⁹ The Greek text and all the translations of it are borrowed from Hugh Lloyd-Jones (1998).

family, willingly renounced the throne, leaving it to their mother's brother, Creon. His legitimacy could be based precisely on the fact that he was related to the ruling family and he himself remained unpolluted. Regarding the ancient pollution or ruin of the Theban royal family, Sophocles probably hints at mythical versions dramatised in Aeschylus' Theban tetralogy or Euripides' *Chrysippus*.¹⁰ In the latter case the father of Oedipus, Laius, was cursed by Pelops because he kidnapped (Apoll. 3.5.5.) and raped his son Chrysippus. In consequence of this appalling deed Chrysippus committed suicide (Σ Pho. 1760) out of shame. The content of Pelops' curse meant for Laius to remain childless or to be killed by the hand of his son (Hyp. Pho. 8 Mastronarde). In the former case, Apollo warned Laius three times not to have and offspring, lest the security of Thebes should be undermined (Aesch. Sept. 720–765). The whole family from Laius onwards brings pollution to the city of Thebes and endangers the city. The very fact that the members of the polluted family remain in the city thus implies continuing instability. Nevertheless, the attitude of the brothers has changed over time, as Ismene narrates, although we do not know how much time has passed between then (367, πρὶν μὲν) and now (νῦν δ'), which delineates the time interval of change, although we may surmise that the civic-minded determination of both brothers, seen from Ismene's perspective, did not last very long. In the second half of Ismene's speech, it is stated that Eteocles, the younger of the royal brothers, deprived Polynices, the older one, of the throne and ousted him into exile (375–376, θρόνων ἀποστερίσκει καὶ ἐλλήλακεν πατέρα). However, this chronologically vague description of the events lacks the facts of when, why, and how Creon's reign ended, when and how Polynices took the Theban throne, and when and how he was overthrown and sent into exile by Eteocles. The appearance of Creon on stage will bring another piece of information. At the time Creon is about to drag away both of Oedipus' daughters, who sustain and accompany him, in order to capture and fetch Oedipus and thus secure the victory for Thebes against the invaders. Creon states that he is the king of Thebes (851, τύραννος ὦν), which implies that he was restored to power after the expulsion of Polynices. Further questions may come to mind regarding Creon's attitude to the evil rivalry of Eteocles and Polynices (372, ἔρις κακὴ) for power and the throne. Why did Creon, who had the reins of power in his hands, not send both brothers into exile to keep the city of Thebes safe? In the first episode the matter remains unclear, but important information comes to light in the fourth episode, in which Polynices complains to Oedipus about the behaviour of his brother. Despite his initial determination to avoid ruling, Polynices decided to apply the right of primogeniture to the throne. Creon's actions and attitude

¹⁰ See Sommerstein 2010, 68–95, esp. 84–89 for Aeschylus' tetralogy and Collard-Cropp 2008, 459–472 for Euripides' *Chrysippus*. Cf. Avezzù's 2011, 255–256 commentary on line 369.

still remain unmentioned but Polynices describes his brother's deeds in the following way (1295–1299):

ἀνθ' ὧν μ' Ἐτεοκλῆς, ὧν φύσει νεώτερος,
 γῆς ἐξέωσεν, οὔτε νικήσας λόγῳ
 οὔτ' εἰς ἔλεγχον χειρὸς οὐδ' ἔργου μολῶν,
 πόλιν δὲ πείσας. ὧν ἐγὼ μάλιστα μὲν
 τὴν σὴν Ἐρινὺν αἰτίαν εἶναι λέγω.

Eteocles, the younger, expelled me from the land; he did not vanquish me in argument or come to the test of strength and action, but persuaded the city. Of this I think that the chief cause was your Erinyes.

Polynices complains that what we heard from Ismene as a description of personal rivalry did not remain on the personal level – speech *agōn* and single combat –, because Eteocles has involved the citizens of Thebes into their personal dispute. But a more important point emerges from Creon's above-mentioned statement and Polynices' narration of the sequence of events. Eteocles became the popular leader only after his brother broke the initial agreement.¹¹ The situation and the state of affairs thus turn out to be slightly different from Ismene's account in the sense that Eteocles did not lay claim to power and rule, as Ismene asserted, but he supported Creon as a ruler. That implies that Eteocles was well aware of the pollution and danger to the city and he abided by the very core of the initial agreement not to attempt to gain power. However, Oedipus, who became fixated on Ismene's initial report because it corresponded to his hatred for his own sons, whom he cursed, still thinks of Eteocles as a king (1354–1355), ignoring the political reality in Thebes (cf. 851).

Regarding the causes of fraternal strife as a metaphor for civil strife, we may say that the pollution of the royal/ruling family, which goes back far into the past, forms the pre-conditions of *stasis*, by which the set of conditions that enable the occurrence of *stasis* is

¹¹ As it is obvious, my reading corrects Avezzù's interpretation. Avezzù 2011, 350 argues that "in the background, a contrast seems to emerge between an oligarchic Polynices and a democratic Eteocles: the former distrusts tribunician oratory and would like to resolve the issue with the traditional means of dueling...and attempts to regain power by military means with the help of foreign oligarchs; the latter knows how to direct the moods of the polis and refuses to cede the throne by right of primogeniture (the fact that the younger prevails over the older in the name of equal rights is also a theme connected to the democratic mentality)." Even if we leave aside the fact that Creon was the legitimate king at that time Avezzù overlooks, as many others before him also did (e.g. Kamerbeek 1984, 181–182; Blundell 1989, 226–257; Kelly 2009, 62), the fact that the matter revolves around the pollution of the city and thus its stability and internal security. Eteocles could persuade the citizens just because there was an indisputable fact of a danger of pollution if an accursed and stained man from this family, regardless of who he would be, were to exercise power. Polynices completely avoids this crucial point in his account of events and instead of it he tries to present his exile as an illegitimate measure by the people of Thebes, manipulated by a deceptive orator.

meant. The pollution as something that transgresses the religiously and socially unquestionable amounts to a propensity to act corrosively or destructively. On the other hand, if and how *stasis* occurs is influenced and conditioned by the concrete decisions of the members of the royal family, or, if we want, the elite. In our case the precipitant or immediate cause was the decision of Polynices to lay claim to power and the throne even though he knew that he was not a person fit to rule, not to mention his violation of the agreement.

Exile and Asylum

Shedding blood in the ancient community required an appropriate reaction on the part of the perpetrator, the relatives of the victim, and judicial authority, whether it was the king, the aristocratic court, or the popular assembly. One of the ways of coping with the pollution stemming from bloodshed, apart from the regular punishment and spontaneous lynching, was a deliberate lifelong exile of the perpetrator. The polluted killer left the city, and the community was purified by his departure. “Staying within the community where the crime has been committed threatened that very community with an outbreak of violence” (Kucharski 2005, 34). During the *stasis* the members of a weaker faction were eliminated or sent into exile. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that exile was a central category of ancient political history (Forsdyke 2005). Exile has a key role in OC because first Oedipus is a convicted and polluted killer, and second, as a helpless exile Oedipus will secure victory as a revenge daimon for those who persuaded him to join their camp. However, exile occurs in three different individual stories (Oedipus, Theseus, Polynices).

After the revelation of the horrible deeds Oedipus asked the Thebans to stone him to death (433–435), as befits those who committed grave crimes against the community.¹² But he was not heard. Indeed, he continued living in Thebes for many years. Patently the Theban community was at a loss as to how to deal with Oedipus’ special case. In a passionate and angry response to Creon in Colonus, where Creon came to fetch Oedipus, Oedipus rebukes Creon (765–771) for not fulfilling his earlier wish to be exiled only to enforce his banishment after the passage of time. Oedipus accuses both Creon and the Theban community of insensitiveness because when his proverbial angry passion had disappeared and he had largely come to terms with himself he was unexpectedly exiled. In sum his exile was, contrary to legal expectations, involuntary. It cannot escape our attention that there are inconsistencies in Oedipus’ account of events: stoning

¹² On stoning as a form of punishment see Parker 1983, 196, and Rosivach 1987. Cf. Xen. Hell. 1.2.13, 1.7.22.

to death and exile are mutually exclusive options (Kelly 2009, 45–46, 59–61). But the shocked Theban community probably did not feel compelled to lynch Oedipus and the judicial authority, Creon or the Assembly, was at odds in an unprecedented case which involved the Delphic oracle. In fact, Oedipus will gradually accuse everybody in Thebes of banishing him from his native land: 440–441 the city/the Thebans (Ismene and the Chorus present on stage), 599–601 his own seed/his sons (complaint to Theseus), 768–771 Creon (passionate argument with Creon), and 1354–1357 Polynices (angry rebuke of Polynices). In Oedipus' eyes the Thebans and Creon were guilty of the very decision and his sons bear responsibility for not helping him. But these accusations prove that the decision to banish him from the land was rightful and legitimate as it also becomes plain from Ismene's remark that he cannot be buried on Theban soil (407) because he shed the blood of his kin.¹³ In sum, Oedipus feels dishonoured and his sense of grievance turns him against his community, kin, and friends. But his perspective on the events and the responsibility of various figures seems rather untenable because the Theban community, headed by the king, had every right to expel him on both a legal and religious basis (oracles). Besides, his exile and asylum were predicted by Apollo, as Oedipus himself discloses in the prologue (87–91) and it was intended for Oedipus' good.

When Oedipus reaches Colonus and the grove of the Eumenides (36–43), he continues to be a polluted person and he knows it, for Oedipus acknowledges it twice in his conversation with Theseus (600–601, 1132–1134), and yet during the dialogue with the chorus of the elders of Colonus, who decide if Oedipus can stay, Oedipus asserts that he comes sacred and pious (287, *ἱερὸς εὐσεβὴς τε*). Throughout the play Oedipus delivers three quasi-forensic defence speeches (258–274, 510–548, 960–1013), which aim to either rehabilitate him in the eyes of the Athenians (Chorus), who will decide about granting asylum to him, or to prove that the Thebans (Creon) treated him in an unfair way. His defence in the first two speeches leans on the thesis that he acted in ignorance in both cases of patricide and incest. The issue of incest may be scandalous, but it does not qualify as a legal issue. The main problem is posed by the killing. Oedipus had no chance to convince either the Chorus or the Athenian audience of his innocence because according to Athenian law, the defendant could only be acquitted if he killed in necessary self-defence (MacDowell 1963, 70–81; 1991, 108–120). Oedipus does not make this point in his first apology. On the contrary, he undermines his position by asserting that he retaliated for having been struck (271, *ὅστις παθὼν μὲν ἀντέδρων*). Therefore, in the light of this and the hints at the curse on the family, Oedipus' statement that he is not evil by nature can be relativised. As Kelly summarises, “the passage as a whole suggests

¹³ Similarly, the initial refusal of the Colonian elders to receive Oedipus into their country (226) confirms his general unacceptability and the danger of destabilisation.

temper and resentment more than anything else.” The argument of self-defence appears only in the third apology (992–996), but the audience must have known, because of the repeated references to the *Oedipus the King*,¹⁴ that Oedipus’ reaction went far beyond self-defence and was totally disproportional (OT 800–813). In other words, he is not so innocent and passive as he claims to be. On the other hand, the self-understanding he presents seems to be psychologically realistic in view of the horrors he must have come through. Nonetheless, what decides about his inclusion into the Athenian polis is not a question of guilt and innocence but the benefit he will bestow upon the Athenians (72, κερδάνη, 90, κέρδη; 288 ὄνησιν; 578, κέρδη; 605–628). In the key passage (604–623), Oedipus discloses to Theseus the oracles which predict the future military attack by the Thebans upon Athens. Oedipus, as a hero and a revenge daimon buried in Athenian soil, will destroy the attacking forces.¹⁵

The other two exiles mentioned above (Theseus, Polynices) have a specific dramatic function. In the case of the king Theseus, the experience of exile and hardships serves as an instrument for bringing pity into foreground. Theseus embodies the fame of Athens as a city of pity and a protector of the weak and fugitives. His expression of deep human sympathy and the awareness of the mutability and fragility of human life (567–568) find close parallels in Sophocles’ *Ajax*. However, in their essence, Oedipus’ and Theseus’ exiles and returns have nothing in common. Oedipus’ return began with patricide and continued with breaking a fundamental taboo, while Theseus’ homecoming was accompanied by heroic civilising labours (Athenian Heracles) and was accomplished in the political sphere by the unification of Athens.

Polynices differs from both. His departure into exile seems to be in a sense akin to ostracism. He was banished from the land because he posed a danger to the community by his extreme desire for power. When he comes to Athens as a suppliant who asks for a chance to speak with his father (1156–1162), who is now under the protection of Athens, he uses the rhetoric of exile and hardship to arouse sympathy in Oedipus. They are both dishonoured foreigners and exiles now lacking their daily bread and depending upon the goodwill of others (1335–1337). But the moment Polynices utters these words, this analogy is no longer valid. Oedipus has acquired such a position and guarantees (637) that he is one step away from total rehabilitation and a dignified end to his life. Moreover, Polynices unintentionally underlines the fundamental difference

¹⁴ On the intertextuality of Sophocles’ OC and OT see especially Seidensticker 1972; Bernard 2001, 58–83.

¹⁵ For the similar Athenian appropriation of another city’s hero (Argos-Eurystheus), see Euripides’ *Children of Heracles*. On the protective function of the appropriated hero inside Attica, see Allan 2001, 216–217 and Wilkins 2005, XXIV–XXV, 177–178. On the religious policy of Athens in connection with the fortification and protection of Attica during the Peloponnesian War, see Krummen 1993, 196–202.

between him and Oedipus regarding dependence. Oedipus no longer has to deal with dependency on others, while Polynices is completely dependent on Oedipus for his goals.

Friends and Enemies

Blundell demonstrated that the principle Help Friends/Harm Enemies lies at the very core of the plot of OC (Blundell 1989, 226; cf. Belfiore 200, 151–152). The maxim of popular morality and alliance treaties finds its earliest expression in the prologue, when Oedipus, in his prayer to Eumenides, renders Apollo's oracle (86–93). It was predicted that Oedipus would find peace in the land that was his finish line. There he would find the seat of dread goddesses and die. His death would bring an advantage to those who had received him and ruin to those who expelled him. Oedipus will be more explicit in a conversation with the Chorus in which he describes himself as a saviour of the city and hardship to the Thebans. The whole play then develops in a predictable way and the audience observes Oedipus fulfilling his goal.

Naturally, Oedipus' double thesis has implications for Athenian as well as Theban security, as the Thebans will never be able to conquer Athens once Athens receives Oedipus and the other way round. If Creon seizes Oedipus and stations him at the border of Thebes, the Athenians will never conquer Thebes. But Ismene, by quoting another oracle that Oedipus did not know, also shows the impact on internal stability and conflict in Thebes. It will not only be a tug of war between Thebes and Athens, but it will also be about power in Thebes (389–392, 448–454). Oedipus thus has the potential both to save/benefit or to destroy, whether internally or in foreign relations.¹⁶ Until very late in the play we observe especially his passion for revenge on Thebes and on his sons. Once he became affiliated with the new polis, to which he offered his military protective function/alliance (632, *δορυξενος*) in exchange for protection, he gained new friends and completely reconfigured all his personal relations and affiliations. Additionally, it should be noted that after Ismene's informing him about the dependence of the Thebans upon him, Oedipus broadened the original scope of his goal – to rest in peace and lie beneath the earth as a defensive protecting hero – and began to actively harm Thebes and his sons in his desire for revenge. Despite his constant reference to his passivity and ignorance in the past, now he acts in full awareness and can no longer rationalise his behaviour. His work was, first, unnecessary, albeit in accordance with the archaic ethical codex of epic heroes, and second, it revealed something pathological in his character which he denied

¹⁶ In this capacity, as has been noted many times, he resembles the *Semnai Theiai* (Eumenides/Erinys: Blessing/Ruin). See Winnington-Ingram 1980, 267, 275; Segal 1981, 375, and Kelly 2009, 72–73.

having. What is crucial for our topic is his curse upon his sons pronounced in passionate anger shortly after Ismene had revealed the meaning of the oracle (421–430):

ἀλλ' οἱ θεοὶ σφιν μήτε τὴν πεπρωμένην
 ἔριν κατασβέσειαν, ἐν δ' ἐμοὶ τέλος
 αὐτοῖν γένοιτο τῇσδε τῆς μάχης πέρι,
 ἥς νῦν ἔχονται κάπαναίρονται δόρυ
 ὥς οὔτ' ἂν ὅς νῦν σκῆπτρα καὶ θρόνους ἔχει
 μείνειεν, οὔτ' ἂν οὐξεληλυθὼς πάλιν
 ἔλθοι ποτ' αὖθις· οἳ γε τὸν φύσαντ' ἐμὲ
 οὕτως ἀτίμως πατρίδος ἐξωθούμενον
 οὐκ ἔσχον οὐδ' ἤμυναν, ἀλλ' ἀνάστατος
 αὐτοῖν ἐπέμφθη καὶ ἐκκηρύχθη φυγὰς.

Well may the gods not extinguish their destined quarrel, and may the decision be granted to me in respect of this battle on which they are now set, lifting their spears, so that he who now holds the sceptre and the throne may not remain, and he who has gone away may never return, seeing that when I their father was so shamefully extruded from the land they did not prevent it or defend me, but I was uprooted and sent away by them and was proclaimed an exile!

Oedipus' attitude towards his sons patently contrasts with Euripides' Oedipus in *Phoenician Women*, in which Oedipus repents his curse upon them (1610). Oedipus wishes his sons' death and gets drunk on the power he has over them (Bernard 2001, 191–221). His vengeful behaviour not only perpetuates the family curse but also the civil strife in Thebes, which thus becomes the hostage of Oedipus' wrath. Oedipus repeats the curse later in an answer to Polynices' persuading him to take sides with him in order to reconquer the throne (1370–1374). Polynices, who starts his sincere speech to Oedipus with an apology for neglecting to care for his father (1260–1270), even promises to bring him back home again regardless of the pollution. But this time the curse is imposed in the form of implication. If the army that Polynices has gathered against Thebes tries to conquer Thebes, not only will it fail, but the brothers will kill each other in a duel. In other words, the curse is directed against those who will try to violate the *philia* (Winnington-Ingram 1980, 207; Belfiore 2000, 152). And even though a few verses later the curse is repeated without taking the form of implication (1385–1389), it is clear that the predicted scenario can only be realised in the event of Polynices' free and conscious decision to insist on his intention.

Polynices, after being rudely rejected and disinherited by Oedipus (1354–1396), was about to leave and follow his original intention – to take revenge on his brother and

conquer the throne or die. Oedipus' curse and Polynices' intentions fit together like cogs. Antigone tries to dissuade him at the last moment (1416–1430):

ANT: στρέψας στράτευμ' ἐς Ἄργος ὡς τάχιστ' ἄγε, / καὶ μὴ σέ τ' αὐτὸν καὶ πόλιν διεργάσῃ.

ΠΟΛ: ἀλλ' οὐχ οἷον τε. πῶς γὰρ αὐθις αὖ πάλιν / στράτευμ' ἄγοιμ' <ἄν> ταῦτόν εισάπαξ τρέσας;

ANT: τί δ' αὐθις, ὦ παῖ, δεῖ σε θυμοῦσθαι τί σοι / πάτρην κατασκάψαντι κέρδος ἔρχεται;

ΠΟΛ: αἰσχρὸν τὸ φεύγειν, καὶ τὸ πρεσβεύοντ' ἐμὲ / οὔτω γε λᾶσθαι τοῦ κασιγνήτου πάρα.

ANT: ὁρᾷς τὰ τοῦδ' οὖν ὡς ἐς ὀρθὸν ἐκφέρεις / μαντεύμαθ', ὃς σφῶν θάνατον ἐξ ἀμφοῖν θροεῖ;

ΠΟΛ: χρήζει γὰρ ἡμῖν δ' οὐχὶ συγχωρητέα;

ANT ...τίς δὲ τολμήσει κλυὼν / τὰ τοῦδ' ἔπεσθαι τάνδρος, οἱ ἐθέσπισεν;

ΠΟΛ οὐδ' ἀγγελοῦμεν φλαῦρ' ἐπεὶ στρατηλάτου / χρηστοῦ τὰ κρείσσω μῆδ' ἐτάνδεα λέγειν.

ANT: Turn back your army at once to Argos, and do not destroy yourself and the city!

POL: Why, that cannot be! For how could I bring back the army again, when I had once shown cowardice?

ANT: Why must you be angry once more, brother? What profit do you gain by the ruin of your country?

POL: To run away is shameful, and it is shameful for me, the senior, to be mocked like this by my brother!

ANT: Then do you see how you are filling the prophecies of this man, who declared that you should die at one another's hands?

POL: Yes, that is his wish; and must we not comply?

ANT: ... And who shall dare to follow, when he has heard the prophecies this man has uttered?

POL: We shall not even report bad news; for it is the duty of a good commander to tell the better news, and not that which falls short.

The dialogue with Antigone revealed that Polynices was subject to the same passionate anger as his father was, which allows us to understand the mechanism by which various predictions/oracles get fulfilled on the basis of people's conscious and free decisions and at the same time to grasp the core of danger which Oedipus' family posed to Thebes. Both Oedipus and Polynices prefer the private over the communal and their archaic heroic

ethic of retaliation contradicts the normativity of citizenship of the fifth-century audience.¹⁷ Polynices wraps his burning desire for revenge in the inescapability of his father's curse and the issue of honour. Honour as a key category of the aristocratic ethic - which led modern anthropologists to name the culture of Greece as a culture of honour and shame - has an explosive potential. Nick Fisher argues that the desire for honour and the desire for revenge for a perceived dishonour were important variables for the explanation of *stasis* (Fisher 2009, 84–85).¹⁸ Obviously, these insults and offences against honour pertain rather or in greater measure to powerful people, who demand and expect to be respected, than to ordinary people. We can observe in OC the destructive effect of such a value system. But to be honest, Polynices, who poses as a representative of the codex of honour, does not adhere absolutely and strictly to this codex because he does not hesitate to lie to his peers and allies about the expected/predicted result of their campaign. In addition, he tries to sell the irrationality and brazenness of his actions to his sister as responsibility.

Avoidability and unavailability of *stasis*

Was *stasis* in Thebes avoidable or unavoidable? Despite the curses and oracles, all the key steps were taken by free agents in full awareness of the consequences. It was the concrete decisions of characters which triggered *stasis* in Thebes, even though there were preconditions for it. The conclusion, then, can hardly be other than that this concrete *stasis* was avoidable. The different question is if wars and internal wars are avoidable as such or not or what causes the fluctuation between war and peace, prosperity/stability and decay? Sophocles' OC contains at least two gnomic passages (607–620, 1534–1537) which offer a pessimistic answer to the first question and a limited response to the second one. In both passages the old Oedipus, who is on the verge of death, teaches Theseus the lessons of his experience. The first passage, though it mostly pertains to international relations, seems to be generally valid for any kinds of relations. Individual and communal life are subject to the all-powerful time (ὁ παγκρατής χρόνος). Over time, both categories face erosion and decay.¹⁹ It is just a matter of taking a long enough perspective. This kind

¹⁷ On the relationship or tension between the heroic past and the world of the classical polis and its institutions see Meier 1988, 7–53; Vernant & Vidal-Naquet 1990, XX, and Goldhill 2000, 60–65.

¹⁸ Fisher's argument largely follows Lintott's and his inquiry into the causes of *stasis* in the archaic and partly the classical period. Lintott 1982, 76 remarks that "even when an aristocratic politician was not planning a *coup d'état*, his life would have been closely tied to the preservation of his honour and status (*timē*) *vis-à-vis* both his equals and his dependents".

¹⁹ On the association of strife and old age in OC, as well as Theognis' motives on dormant *stasis* in OC, see Juffras 1988, 151–158. The point finds very strong articulation in the third ode (1211–1238). Cf. Reitze 2017, 601–627.

of pessimism is shared by both the lyrics and the tragedy: the inevitability of decay and suffering. I would call it in modern parlance a geological approach since this discipline revolves around pressure, time, and the tendency to erosion and decay. Naturally, time also performs creative activity, so decay and erosion are compensated for by the emergence of new individuals, communities, powers, alliances, loyalties, etc. In the second passage Oedipus reminds Theseus of the myriads of cities which were well governed and yet they easily succumbed to corruption/insolence (1535, καθύβρισαν). However, time as a quantity/variable says nothing about the specific mechanisms of erosion and decay. Oedipus offers a thesis which may be considered as a traditional theme of religious-moral Greek discourse. The origins of corruption lie in neglect of the gods or divine things (1537, τὰ θεῶν ἀφελς τις) and in the inclination to madness (1537, ἐς τὸ μαινέσθαι τραπῆ).²⁰ If we take it as shorthand for reckless and arrogant behaviour or thought then we may say that civic disintegration results from the weakening of normative behaviour. Even though the humans will not feel the immediate consequences of this in the more or less proximate future, these consequences will inevitably fall on them. Since almost all, if not all institutions were divinely sanctioned in the classical period, we can imagine the scope of the thesis.

One of the important themes in OC is certainly trust, trustworthiness, and not only when it comes to match between words and deeds, deception and frankness, but especially regarding oaths and pledges (Markantonatos 2007, 168–172). The theme is played out in the communication of the distrustful and uncertain Oedipus with the representatives of Athens. Oedipus fears that he will be rejected as a polluted suppliant, or that he will be handed over to the Thebans under pressure. However, despite the minor vacillation of the elders of Colonus, the Athenians and their king Theseus are the embodiment of trustworthiness and keeping their oath. The most articulate reminder of it can be found in the messenger's report (1590–1595) on Oedipus' preparation for death. The messenger mentions that Oedipus "stopped near the hollow basin, where lies the covenant of Pirithous and Theseus, ever to be trusted" (1592–1594). This covenant serves as a paradigm of trust and reciprocity. The fact that the theme is developed on Athenian soil in interactions with Oedipus, who symbolises the chthonic ambiguous power of benefit and revenge, may have resonated significantly with the Athenian audience of the time. It is generally presupposed that Sophocles wrote OC sometime between 409 and 406 B.C. At that time after the oligarchic coup of 411 B.C. the Athenians,

²⁰ See Avezzù 2011, 365. Avezzù calls to mind the classical example of the king Pentheus, who tried to suppress the pandemic cult of Dionysus (Eur. Bacch.). Oedipus' *gnōmē* also pertains to his father Laius, who neglected the repeated warning of Apollo and in unwise counsel or (erotic) madness, as it is said in Aeschylus' *Septem* (750), he sired a son.

in an atmosphere of distrust, took an oath of allegiance to the democratic constitution. The oligarchic coup in 411 B.C. was accompanied by the erosion of normative behaviour and trustworthiness in a broad sense of the word. The oligarchs, who were provisionally endowed with power under the promise of winning the war, betrayed the trust of their fellow-citizens. Instead, they started peace negotiations with the arch-enemy and violently suppressed the leaders of the democratic faction, including assassinations.

In connection with the normativity of behaviour, we need to call to mind the classical passage in Thucydides (3.82.8.–83.2):

Neither side paid attention to consideration of piety, but if men could cover an objectionable act with fine words it enhanced their reputation...Thus the civil war brought every form of wickedness to the Greek world, and simple goodness, which is a major constituent of nobility, was driven by mockery into non-existence. Forming up in opposing camps of an untrusting disposition became widespread. No word was reliable enough and no oath fearful enough to put an end to this (transl. Rhodes 2014)

The substantial difference between Thucydides and Sophocles lies in the fact that Thucydides portrays the erosion of normativity as a symptom of civil war, while Sophocles' Oedipus sees it as the main cause of civic disintegration. In short, normativity/piety or sharing and following the common rules, whether written or unwritten/religiously sanctioned, secure individual and communal prosperity. On the contrary, a departure from these amounts to the main cause of disintegration and decay. This is a fairly satisfactory answer to the question of what causes the oscillation between war and peace, prosperity and stability on the one hand and decline on the other. Tragedy as a genre, including Sophocles' OC, used to work in an affirmative way in this respect. The characters who challenge what would normally remain religiously or socially unquestionable, will inevitably meet their tragic fate.²¹

²¹ I would like to thank the organizers of the conference *Bürgerkrieg-στάσις. Antike und moderne Erschütterungen der Demokratie* (28. bis 29. Juni 2024) in Klagenfurt for the kind invitation to participate. My special thanks go to professor Alice Pechriggl for encouragement and inspiration.

Due to limited space, I avoided the comparison between ideal Athens, which stays and will always stay out of calamity, and Thebes. Especially the relationship between religion and politics (cultic and political associations) and the reconciliation of Poseidon and Athena, which may serve as a paradigm for how to overcome the conflict, would deserve a special chapter. For this topic, see Markantonatos 2007, 167–194.

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