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COMMENTATIONES AD LITTERAS GRAECAS SPECTANTES

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TIME AND AGE AS PROTAGONISTS IN SOPHOCLES' *OEDIPUS COLONEUS*

ABSTRACT. Schade Gerson, Time and Age as Protagonists in Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus*.

Sophocles' second Oedipus-play clearly relates to the first; it holds, however, a particular place in literary history, for it was the last play to be included into the canon of classical Attic tragedy. Moreover, the play shows another peculiarity: though the idea that death can be preferable to life is familiar to all Sophoclean protagonists, Oedipus was the only one allowed to get old, a process depicted quite realistically by old Sophocles. Oedipus' self-explanation, however, that he suffered himself more than he really acted, resembles much a Catch-22 situation: if that were the case in those days, as Oedipus says that it was, he then was crazy and didn't have to do what he did; but if he didn't want to do what he did then, he was sane and had to do it, because the gods wanted him to do it. The proposed new reading of the play shows how time and age work on Oedipus' frame of mind: a desire for whitewashing is acted out in a blame-game, awareness of what is to come is coupled with rather a hesitant manner as though he is slightly unsure of himself (what he is not), and eventually, being out of touch with time and fearing to be left alone make Oedipus curse, for he had been treated unjustly: Oedipus comes close to Shakespeare's King Lear, though he does not go mad, he only becomes bad and dangerous to know.

Keywords: Time, Age, Classical Tragedy, Oedipus, King Lear, Macbeth.

> I am not particularly sorry for Arthur. … But he is very sorry for himself.
> 'Tell me, William,' his last letter concluded, '*what* have I done to deserve all this?'
> Christopher Isherwood, *Mr Norris changes trains*

In the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the protagonist is crushed by the discovery that, without knowing it, he has committed two crimes. He killed his father and shared his mother's bed. From now on, parricide and incest are a stain upon his name. It does not matter that the protagonist's unconscious sins were due to the agency of

an inherited curse, and that he is morally innocent. “He has sinned, and he must suffer” as Richard Jebb put it in 1886.[1] After the lapse of several years, we meet with the unlucky protagonist again. In the course of time, “he has read the facts of his past life in another light” as Samuel Butcher, another Victorian, wrote in 1891.[2] Now in the *Oedipus Coloneus* consciousness of the stain has become subordinate to another feeling, which in his first despair had not consoled him, his moral innocence.[3] In the end, old Oedipus has come to look upon himself as neither pure nor yet guilty, but as a person set apart by the gods to illustrate their will, away from common use for their own mysterious purposes. Now Oedipus strongly desires a whitewash for himself.

Born in the early 90s of the 5th century BC, the author of the plays was past his 60th birthday when the *Oedipus Tyrannus* was on stage. Yet he was to live for more than thirty years. He died in 406/05, and his *Oedipus Coloneus* was performed posthumously in 401. Between Sophocles’ death and the performance of the *Oedipus Coloneus*, however, Athens succumbed to the Spartans. Attic tragedy as she was came to an end, and the *Oedipus Coloneus* was to be the last piece inserted into the canon of classical tragedy; it marks the end of an era and is its tombstone. Paradoxically though, the play itself is concerned with a tombstone that cannot be found.[4] Moreover, Oedipus’ grave was in Colonus,[5] where Sophocles was born (*TrGF* T 1. 1).

Paradox and contrast are prevalent throughout the play: A repulsive old man, cursing his sons, performing a pious act in a sacred, quiet, and truly peaceful place that is in stark contrast to the surrounding noisy world full of enemies and lies. Secret innocence under the veil of culpability, superior pureness of a thoroughly polluted individual, an obscure holiness of a saint marked for his life – all that in a tragedy written by a former priest that Sophocles was (*TrGF* T 1. 11). No information, however, has come down to us why Sophocles returned to his protagonist. Whether he regarded his first Oedipus-play as such a classic as later Aristotle in his *Poetics* judged the *Oedipus Tyrannus* to be, we do not know. The only thing we can be sure of is the fact that Sophocles’ second Oedipus-play is clearly reflecting his first.

The *Oedipus Coloneus* can be read as a movement from the lowest to the highest point: to a blind, dirty, old man, who suffered most and longest, the gods give, in the death he longed for, immortal life and power.[6] The inverse movement, however, from zenith to nadir, is clearly the leitmotif of the earlier *Oedipus Tyrannus*, which depicts a splendid man brought down to the lowest

[1] Jebb 1900: xxi.

[2] Butcher 1893: 130.

[3] Of which Oedipus speaks to the chorus in a lyrical intermezzo (*OC* 510–548).

[4] Cf. Marx 2012.

[5] Cf. Handke 2003: 143–159.

[6] Cf. Knox 1964: 143–162.

possible point ever. Because this is exactly the point at which the *Oedipus Coloneus* begins, both plays are clearly linked. Other parts are connected too:[7] if it were a modern film, a suitable title might be 'Oedipus reloaded'. Actually, what does it mean when we speak of an aesthetic of reversal or a series of mirrorings?

In the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, a road divided at the place where the disaster happened (*OT* 733), and where Oedipus' fall began. Again a road divides in the *Oedipus Coloneus*, at the very place where Oedipus kept his strange appointment with heaven, and where his rise ended. Then Oedipus killed his father "at the place where three roads meet" (*OT* 716). Now Oedipus stops "in one of the many branching paths" (*OC* 1592). Then it was this mention of three roads which stroke the first note of alarm in the mind of Oedipus. Now he sits down, undoes his filthy garment and tells his daughters to bring water for washing and libation.[8]

Common to both plays, two other scenes form an important part respectively. On the one hand, an impressive episode of approximately the same length is situated at the same point in both tragedies (the second episode, *OT* 513–862 & *OC* 720–1043).[9] At its centre stands Creon, whom Karl Reinhardt regarded as the most dreadful character in all surviving Sophoclean plays we are able to study in detail.[10] On the other hand, both plays contain a choral song on the nothingness of men,[11] which was classified by Friedrich Nietzsche (but not by Wilamowitz) as a testimony to the so-called Greek pessimism.[12] Aside from these connecting points, the link between the two plays is known to the protagonist, too. Sophocles could have remained silent on Oedipus' earlier life instead of which he deliberately made his hero speak about it.

Addressing Oedipus by the words "now the gods are lifting you up, though earlier they destroyed you" (*OC* 394 νῦν γὰρ θεοί σ' ὀρθοῦσιν, πρόσθε δ' ὤλλυσαν), Ismene in the second Oedipus-play clearly expresses the leitmotif of a reflected movement. By his brisk repartee Oedipus dismisses this curving trajectory as divine manoeuvring, declaring it to be "a poor thing to uplift when he is old a man who has fallen when he was young" (*OC* 395 γέροντα δ'

[7] Cf. Seidensticker 1972 (2005: 1–28), and Kelly 2009: 45–51. In this century, Kelly's book is already preceded by two other monographs: W. Bernard, *Das Ende des Ödipus bei Sophokles*, Munich 2001, and A. Markantonatos, *Oedipus at Colonus: Sophocles, Athens, and the World*, Berlin/New York 2007; Patricia Easterling's commentary is eagerly awaited.

[8] It is there where the god calls him "You there, Oedipus, why do we wait to go? You have delayed too long!" (*OC* 1627sq.). And it is from there that "the man was taken away with no lamentations, and by no painful disease, but, if any among mortals, by a miracle" (*OC* 1663sq.).

[9] The total number of lines is 1530 for *OT*, 1789 for *OC*.

[10] Reinhardt 1971: 271.

[11] In the first play, the chorus bewail the king's fall (in the fourth stasimon, 1186–1222), in the second, glancing forward to some new vexation for Oedipus (in the third stasimon, 1211–1248), the chorus turn the audience's thoughts towards the approaching end.

[12] Cf. Billeter 1911: 137–145.

ὀρθοῦν φλαῦρον ὃς νέος πέσῃ). By stating this fact so concisely and abruptly, however, Oedipus appears as being fully aware of the whole show, and the contrast between physical blindness and inward vision becomes not only visible but is also highlighted. Being aware of the game before it actually starts, knowing other people's plans better than they themselves do, anticipating by a mental vision things barely noticed by others – all this may be registered as another, a second characterization of old age, and again a very realistic one (as was the first, i.e. the endlessly ongoing blame-game, probably the worst of all domestic rituals).[13]

To a person who anticipates, as Oedipus does, the fact that this second Oedipus-play unfolds with amplitude, a lack of hurry, comes as no surprise. On the contrary, one would say that this slow movement suits an older person's character, a fact which contrasts much to the speed of the first Oedipus, when Oedipus was absolutely unaware of what was to come (and being much younger).[14] This smooth unfolding of the scene's content and the slow disclosing of what is to come make ideas and images appear one by one.[15] Sophocles may well have used this device[16] in order to illustrate a different way of perceiving the world, which he regarded as particular to old people. After the desire for whitewashing and the acute awareness of what is to come we note a third characterization of old age: a certain slowness, hesitation and reserve that appear at the same time

[13] Constantly harking back to the paradox that it is when the physical ability of seeing degrades, we suddenly see much clearer, is one of the play's major themes (Jebb 1900: xxii). The idea was not unknown to contemporary Athenian intellectuals: at the end of Plato's *Symposium*, a text which describes events at a tragedian's party in 416 BC (Sophocles was still alive, but not invited), Socrates reminded Alcibiades of exactly the same topic, declaring that the intellectual sight begins to be keen when the visual is diminishing (219 a 2–4 ἥ τοι τῆς διανοίας ὄψις ἄρχεται ὀξὺ βλέπειν ὅταν ἡ τῶν ὀμμάτων τῆς ἀκμῆς †λήγειν ἐπιχειρῇ†). Oedipus was very close to that point, closer than ever. As he did, everybody must reach the lowest possible point ever in order to understand who one really is and which the impact was of what one did unknowingly or barely noticing it. His suffering taught him much, but that we learn by suffering only was already known to the tragedians. Aeschylus, for instance, in his *Agamemnon* (performed in 458), let the chorus express the idea that Zeus turned 'learning by suffering' into an effective law (176–178 *in lyr.)* (Ζῆνα) τὸν φρονεῖν βροτοὺς ὁδώσαντα, τὸν 'πάθει μάθος' θέντα κυρίως ἔχειν. Finally, good sense came to Oedipus against his will, just as the chorus in the *Agamemnon* says (180sq.) καὶ παρ' ἄκοντας ἦλθε σωφρονεῖν.

[14] In the second Oedipus-play, e.g., there are scenes within scenes, one featuring Antigone encountering Ismene, a scene broadly introduced on which nothing in the play depends. In addition, the chorus exchange their opinion with some actor in several intermezzi, splitting episodes into halves (the first and the fourth). Both phenomena may be seen as a tendency to create a play inside of a play, which contributes to the impression of abundance: cf. Reinhardt 1971: 260–262, and Winnington-Ingram 1980: 248–279.

[15] Eduard Fraenkel introduced the term *guttatim* for a similar mode of expression in the watchman's prologue of the Aeschylean *Agamemnon* (Fraenkel 1950, II: 2).

[16] Described by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff in his son's monograph (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1917: 356–358).

as full, ample and rich. Again we state a quite realistic tendency in Sophocles' portrait of old Oedipus, and Sophocles' variety of tone does not in the least indicate a defective style.

In general, there is always a good chance to discover something realistic in Sophocles, who himself confessed that he was very much interested in portraying characters. After he had outgrown the pompous style of Aeschylus, he says, he adopted a harsh and artificial manner, which he finally exchanged for a third style, which he considered as "very much suited for the expression of character" or as "very much expressive of character" (ἠθικώτατον εἶδος).[17] Because his dramatic activity extended over more than 60 years, during which he wrote more than one hundred plays, we may reasonably expect already the first Oedipus-play to represent his mature style, and certainly the posthumous second Oedipus-play to be "equally removed from turgid grandeur and affected ingenuity."[18]

Declaring in the opening lines of the prologue (1–116) that "time has long been his companion" (7sq.),[19] Oedipus recalls a main theme of Sophoclean tragedy.[20] Later in the play, Oedipus is to return to the subject of all-powerful time in his remarks on the theme that "friends become enemies, enemies become friends" (*OC* 612sq. "the same spirit never remains between friends" καὶ πνεῦμα ταὐτὸν οὔποτ' οὔτ' ἐν ἀνδράσιν / φίλοις βέβηκεν).[21] The line is much reminiscent of the Sophoclean Ajax (*Aj.* 678–683) who, in turn, was very much aware of time's might, too. The opening of his monologue is clear on that point (*Aj.* 646–648, as rendered by George Young in 1906): "All things obscure the slow uncounted hours / Bring forth to light, and cover all things plain; / And nothing is so strange it may not be."

Throughout the play, the themes of time and old age are constantly alluded to, and they are in fact inseparably intertwined.[22] Oedipus, however, is not only spoken of as an old man but also called "a wanderer, not a native" by the chorus

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[17] Plutarchus, *On Progress in Virtue* 7. 79 (*TrGF* T 100).

[18] Butcher 1893: 91.

[19] Although addressed by Antigone as "an aged man" who should better relax (19sq.), right from the beginning the protagonist of the second Oedipus-play is in no way dimmed by his incapacity, neither as the strong character he is supposed to be on stage nor as the brave Sophoclean hero among the group of other heroes and heroines being at the centre of earlier Sophoclean plays.

[20] Cf. Winnington-Ingram 1980: 256.

[21] On friendship and enmity as central themes in the second Oedipus-play cf. Blundell 1989: 226–259.

[22] The chorus, consisting of old men from the Attic district of Colonus, ask Zeus "who is the old man" (143), who lived for so many years such a dreadful life (151sq. δυσαίων / μακραίων). Interrogating Oedipus in their conversation, the chorus use 'old man' again several times (209, 292, 305). Oedipus too speaks of Antigone who accompanies him as of a person guiding an old man (348 γεροντοαγωγεῖ). This word is very rare, and seems restricted to Sophocles (in *fr.* 487 said of Peleus) and some parodies of his.

(124sq., similarly 165, again 1096), another leitmotif of the play. Oedipus seems to belong to another age, he seems delayed, and quite similarly, old people are regarded as being out of touch with modern times. They constantly ask what time it is, how it could be that it is already so late. They want to keep one's company, of course, as Oedipus wanted not to be left alone. This fourth characteristic of the effects of time on age is again terribly realistic.

Already in the first episode (254–667) Oedipus proposes his line of argument, his new interpretation of his own past which haunts him (266–274): surprisingly, he asks the chorus how he can be regarded as evil, he who only struck back when he had been struck. Continuing that even if he had acted knowingly, he would have not been evil, he insists on the fact that he got to where he came to in all ignorance (273 νῦν δ' οὐδὲν εἰδὼς ἱκόμην ἵν' ἱκόμην) – 'what have I done to deserve all this', as an ordinary conman may have put it. By stating that those who have ill used him knowingly destroyed him, Oedipus offers something radically new. Before exposing this argument in more detail, however, a frail Oedipus (461) wishes that Ismene would never leave him alone. His miserable body (576) has not the strength to move unaccompanied or without a guide (500–502). Because his sons refused to help him (441sq.), instead of which they "chose to wield the sceptre and to be monarchs of the land" (448sq.), Oedipus curses them – another theme repeated throughout the whole play.[23] This fear of being marginalised and the real experience of having been forced out of a community, combined with the strong feeling of being treated unjustly, is one of Oedipus' main characteristics in the play. One needs not to get old to suffer heavily from these impressions, though old age is hardly alleviating these sufferings. Time has run out and is gone irretrievably for ever, leaving us behind, as we meditate on its power to deceive us. A fifth characteristic, again a real one, may be noted, but from now on things become repetitive. The motifs are all exposed, and variation begins.

In the following second episode (720–1043), Oedipus surprises us again by saying that he killed his father in ignorance (548 "unknowing I came to this" ἄιδρις ἐς τόδ' ἦλθον). Of course he was not aware of what was going on, but why

[23] For the first time Oedipus speaks of it while addressing Ismene, his loyal daughter. He had been driven away and became a wanderer forever (444 πτωχὸς ἠλόμην ἀεί), because "they" did not allow him to remain although he himself wished to do so, as Oedipus says, repeating the same fact later to Theseus (591 ἀλλ' οὐδ', ὅτ' αὐτὸς ἤθεον, παρίεσαν). Oedipus mentions his hard luck again; directly addressing Creon as "you pushed me out and drove me into exile" (770 τότ' ἐξεώθεις κἀξέβαλλες), he uses similar words he is to repeat later to Polyneices, who made him "cityless" (1356sq. τὸν ... πατέρα ... ἀπήλασας / κἄθηκας ἄπολιν). By (re-) connecting with his faithful daughter, Oedipus resembles King Lear who turns to his daughter Cordelia. She remained at his side, while Lear's two sons had betrayed their father. Oedipus though does not become insane; neither is he 'confronted' with his dead father in a way disturbed Macbeth is by the ghost of his friend Banquo, whom he got killed but whose phantom 'returns', sitting in Macbeth's place, being 'visible' only to himself.

is it now so important? The answer is given by Oedipus himself, i.e. by his obsession with his own past, the age he reached, and all-powerful time – ὁ παγκρατὴς χρόνος (609) – which submerges all other things.[24] It is in the course of this episode that Creon seemingly adopts the already familiar tone by addressing Oedipus as a "long-suffering" (740 ὦ ταλαίπωρ' Οἰδίπους) old man at whose sorrows he much grieves (744 μάλιστα δ' ἀλγῶ τοῖσι σοῖς κακοῖς, γέρον). But Creon, a feckless hypocrite, is of course lying. He is attacked by Oedipus for his tricks which consist in offering something "sounding good, but in essence bad" (782 λόγῳ μὲν ἐσθλά, τοῖσι δ' ἔργοισιν κακά).[25] Oedipus considers Creon's words as worthless, his personality as that of a pervert whose sclerotic mind is warped, twisting every argument to his advantage (761sq.). In Oedipus' view, Creon is keen on producing a reality he forces other people to share: an invasive sociopath, who has no conscience, a conceited Machiavellian, to whom others are but pieces on a chessboard, a manipulative narcissist, bursting with malignant self-love and rancid with self-regard.[26]

In the course of this second episode, Oedipus reaches a new step in his argument. He who claimed in the first episode that he did not notice what was going on (548 ἄιδρις) now assures us that he endured all the killings and marriages against his will (964a ἤνεγκον ἄκων). Involuntarily, constrained, unwillingly he slew his father and begot his mother, "for", as he continues, "it was the pleasure of the gods" (964b θεοῖς γὰρ ἦν οὕτω φίλον). In his view, Oedipus did what he did altogether not only ignorant of what he was doing and to whom he was doing it (976 μηδὲν ξυνιείς), but also unwillingly. He cannot understand why anyone can reasonably find fault with it (977 πῶς ἂν τό γ' ἆκον πρᾶγμ' ἂν εἰκότως ψέγοις). He suffered *so much* by what he did *so much* against his will that Oedipus is even unwilling to speak about it (987sq.). He does not appreciate in the least being forced to do so by Creon. On the contrary, Oedipus feels so much

[24] On the image of time as begetting countless days and nights (*OC* 618) cf. Lloyd-Jones/Wilson 1990: 107sq. (comparing *OT* 1214sq.). Trying to explain his impression to Theseus, to whom he repeats his statement on his sufferings (595), Oedipus goes a great length indeed (607–628). Oedipus also promises to Theseus that he will learn in time what the benefit is that Oedipus came bringing (580 χρόνῳ μάθοις ἄν). That splendid Attica is the right place for those benefits is asserted by the chorus in the first stasimon, the "Ode to Colonus", which praises Attica (668–719).

[25] Reinhardt 1971: 272 ("la stigmatisation de l'imposture").

[26] In Theseus' view, "advancing years are also depriving Creon of sense" (930sq. καί σ' ὁ πληθύων χρόνος / γέρονθ' ὁμοῦ τίθησι καὶ τοῦ νοῦ κενόν). Creon, in turn, replies with a pompous gnome: "Anger knows no age, and death only puts an end to it; and no pain afflicts the dead" (954sq.). It looks odd that Creon now seemingly justifies his own irascibility, whereas earlier he deplored that of Oedipus, who in his view yielded to his anger, which has always been his ruin (852–855). Creon is very sure that Oedipus shall realise that in time (852 χρόνῳ γὰρ ... γνώσῃ τάδε). But there is hardly any reason why Creon should explain that his advancing years will not prevent him from giving rein to anger, and "on the ground of sententious irrelevance" the lines are thought to be interpolated (Lloyd-Jones/Wilson 1990: 245).

provoked by Creon that he in turn attacks him. Asking Creon what he would do when a stranger tried to kill him (993sq.), Oedipus provocatively proposes two ways of behaviour: “Would you ask if the would-be killer was your father, or would you strike back at once?” Eventually reaching the bizarre apogee in this plaidoyer *pro domo*, Oedipus imagines that the gods can not find fault with him. Slowly but surely a strategy behind becomes visible:[27] if that were the situation in those days, as Oedipus now says that it was, he then was crazy and didn’t have to do what he did; but if he didn’t want to do what he did then, he was sane and had to do it, because the gods wanted him to do it.

During the ensuing third stasimon (1211–1248) the chorus characterize age by a tripartite asyndeton (1236sq.): “powerless, unsociable, friendless” (ἀκρατὲς ἀπροσόμιλον / γῆρας ἄφιλον). The Greek word for unsociable had been coined for this line, and some old people are not sociable indeed. The following fourth and last episode (1249–1555) shows slimy and shallow Polyneices, another Tartuffian abyss of hypocrisy, keen on persuading his father to join his side in the fight against his younger brother Eteocles who drove him away. Polyneices, however, pleads in vain, merely giving his father the opportunity for another outburst. Suddenly turning on his son, Oedipus delivers an appalling curse, dooming both his sons to die at Thebes by each other’s hands.[28] The whole scene gives a splendid opportunity to an actor: suffering has wrought on Oedipus, but his nature is not unhinged; Oedipus is neither confused nor disordered but simply wanting strength, and he is somehow deficient in power to control emotion. We may imagine him as trembling with age, shaky from head to foot, and as being swayed by his violent grief, his bitter feelings of regret, remorse and sorrow. But he has not gone mad (as Lear) nor does he suffer from hallucinations (as Macbeth), it is just that Oedipus’ “old fiery temper is indeed still ready to blaze forth.”[29]

In this final episode the chorus refer to time which sees always all things (*OC* 1453sq.), a theme familiar from the first Oedipus-play. Already then time had been characterized as “all-seeing” by the chorus (*OT* 1213b ὁ πάνθ’ ὁρῶν χρόνος) who has found Oedipus out “against his will” (*OT* 1213a ἐφηῦρέ σ’ ἄκονθ’).[30] Then it sounded as if the chorus were already anticipating the second

[27] The chorus’ task is always to reflect on what is going on, to speculate about the outcome, to be suspicious, and the ensuing second stasimon (1044–1095), the “Battle Ode”, is marked by such an apprehensive mood. Somehow anticipating the events, or carried away by wishful thinking, the chorus predict the speedy triumph of those who want to rescue the captured Ismene and Antigone (1070–1073). At the close of its chant the chorus prey to Zeus and Apollo.

[28] In a lyric passage the chorus are commenting on the dread doom which they have just heard pronounced (1447–1499). Thunder and lightning announce a coming storm which invigorates Oedipus even more, but only for a last time. He knows his hour to have come (1472sq., 1508), and to Theseus alone he will reveal the place appointed for his grave (1520–1524).

[29] Butcher 1893: 130.

[30] In the course of a stasimon focussing on the nothingness of men (1186–1222) which itself in

play; now the theme is enlarged and somehow explained: time does not only see always all things, but overthrows some and causes others in turn to rise up next day (*OC* 1454sq.). We know that already from Oedipus himself, meditating on "all-powerful time" (609 ὁ παγκρατὴς χρόνος), which submerges all other things, in lines spoken to Theseus. The fact, however, that the chorus now adapt Oedipus' reasoning indicates an attachment to him and to his way of perceiving his life. The theme itself is common to Greek thought. Sophocles' contemporary Herodotus, for whom some believe Sophocles wrote an ode,[31] speaks prominently of it in the introduction to his *Histories* (1. 5), stating that many cities that were once great have now become small and those that were great in his time were small formerly.[32] Oedipus seems to allude to the Herodotean proem, saying that countless cities, even though well governed, easily slip into insolence (1534sq. μυρίαι πόλεις / ... ῥᾳδίως καθύβρισαν). He himself certainly did. Going to his sacred tomb (1545 ἱερὸν τύμβον), Oedipus leaves all that behind, and the fourth and last stasimon (1556–1578) shows a chorus praying that "the stranger"[33] may arrive at the house of Styx without pain.[34]

As the effects of time and age were well known to other Sophoclean heroes, also the idea that death can be preferable to life is known from all surviving Sophoclean plays:[35] Ajax kills himself on stage, Antigone looks forward to meeting her family in Hades (*Ant*. 897–899), Philoctetes shows how life with physical and mental pain can be unliveable, for the dying Heracles death is better than an ignoble, tormented life (*Trach*. 1173), and when Electra got the urn from the stranger who pretended that the casket would contain Orestes' body, she too wanted nothing else than to die and not to be excluded from her brother's tomb (*El*. 1168–1170).

The end for Oedipus, however, is something special, as were time and age to him. Of all the Sophoclean heroes and heroines he was the only one allowed to get old. It is from him that we learn how it feels being "an ancient man on whom

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turn is reflected by a stasimon in the second Oedipus-play (1211–1248).

[31] On the epigram which states that Sophocles wrote an ode in his 55th year for someone named Herodotus, cf. Page 1981: 304sq.

[32] In Herodotus this change is part of a broader scheme of reciprocity; cf. Gould 2001: 283–303.

[33] As Oedipus is still called in 1562 & 1577; cf. also 1569sq. πύλαισι / ... πολυξένοις of Hades' gates.

[34] The messenger ends his speech quite unusually (1665sq.): if his narrative is thought incredible and foolish, he says, he would not care to win over the incredulous. He started seeing as blind Oedipus went into "the eternal darkness by which he is clothed" (1701 τὸν ἀεὶ κατὰ γᾶς σκότον εἱμένος). Deadly night is now lying upon the eyes of those who survived him, after Oedipus had been carried away into the invisible, "viewless fields" of the nether world (ἄσκοποι δὲ πλάκες 1681sq.). His "bed is shady for ever" (κοίταν δ' ἔχει / νέρθεν εὐσκίαστον αἰέν 1707sq.), and darkness has become "a treasure", as Theseus puts it in 1752 χάρις ἡ χθονία νύξ.

[35] Cf. Instone 2007.

distasteful ancient dirt has settled”, when “on his sightless head the uncombed hair flutters in the breeze” as his son describes him (*OC* 1256–1259). Paradoxically until the end, Oedipus *becomes* a man, when he *is* no longer (*OC* 393), and as an object of admiration and awe (*OC* 1665) he begins living on, as he passes away. He learned the lessons of his life by heart, though he had to get old to understand what time and age had to teach him.

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