

Hum 110

4 November 2009

Robert Knapp: *Oedipus Tyrannos*: Tragic Form and Function

Introduction

The Gospel at Colonus

Oedipus as classic

Mentally crossbred moderns; cross-cultural (not multi-cultural)

Alioune Diop; Wilson Harris; Rohde, Olson, and Chang

Traditions behind *OT*

Odyssey (11.271-80); lost Theban epic; Aeschylus; the sphinx (shesepankh)

Modern cultural use of *OT*

Francis Bacon; Pier Pasolini; Tyrone Guthrie

Aldine Sophocles (1502); Palladian theatre (Vincenza 1585)

Every modern use references “Greece” and something “inscrutable in our own origins”

Problem of self-knowledge and of relation between polarities

fate and character (*daimon* and *ethos*); tradition and enlightenmen, *mythos* and *logos*

Oedipus as “classic”

Immanuel Kant: “we extol, and rightly so, the words of the ancients as models, and call their authors classical, as if they form a certain noble class among writers which gives laws to people by the precedent it sets.” (*Critique of Judgment*, 32.283)

Matthew Arnold: “It [culture] seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, where they may use ideas, as it [culture] uses them itself, freely,—nourished, and not bound by them.” (*Culture and Anarchy* 1.31)

Jacques Derrida: “What is it in a 'great' work . . . that resists erosion? . . . What resists immediate degradation is this very thing, the text or in the text, which is no longer on the order of meaning and which joins the universal wealth of the 'message' to unintelligible singularity, finally unreadable (if reading means to understand and to learn to know) . . . It is this . . . that permits it to resist degradation—never forever, but for a long time. Enigmatic kinship between waste, for example nuclear waste, and the 'masterpiece.’” (“Biodegradables” 845)

OT derives its cultural usefulness and its ability to resist perfect assimilation from the way in which form and content mirror one another in slightly distorting ways.

Aristotle: unity of action, with events occurring in accordance with probability or necessity; action as a matter of causal and logical sequence. Coincidence of moment of reversal (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnorisis*). *Hamartia*: missing the mark.

Two sequences of events: an historical sequence and a dramatic sequence. Oedipus becomes visible sign of own intellectual error. Swollen foot—*oiden* and *pous*—punning in relation to *oida* (I know).

Think about how *OT* relies on particular detail and exploits dramatic irony.

Plot structure:

Prologue: Oedipus, old priest, young children (metaphoric reappearance of the three ages in riddle); “dead man’s murderers” [plural]

Parados: A prayer; ironic comparison between Athens (which survived its own plague) and Thebes (rival city always politically troubled)

Episode I: “certain wayfarers” [plural]; curse upon self; contrast between kinds of knowledge (bird sign vs. human wit); contrast of motives (personal kindness vs. reasons of state)

Stasimon I: Chorus refuses to choose between kinds of knowledge; punfully mentions the feet (*podai*); imagines the murderer as beast in savage forest

Episode II: Creon’s moderation ironically contrasted to Oedipus’ intellectual rigor; Jocasta’s proof of the emptiness of prophecy ironically backfires because of detail; the grammatical plural acquires more significance, with only the honest slave as a witness.

Stasimon II: “When such deeds are held in honor, why should I honor the Gods in the dance?” (The chorus in and out of character, both Theban elders & Athenian youth)

Episode III: Messenger from Corinth brings “sad” news which makes Oedipus & Jocasta celebrate, then “good”

- news which makes Jocasta flee while Oedipus celebrates his “low” birth as fortune’s child (more dramatic irony)
- Stasimon III: Choral ode to Cithaeron (mountain where Oedipus was exposed)
- Episode IV: Reversal and recognition: Oedipus tortures the slave/herdsman into revealing that Jocasta gave him the infant with pierced ankles.
- Stasimon IV: Choral ode evokes savagery of O’s fate, using archery as figure for epistemological success and error.
- Episode V: Narration of catastrophe; Oedipus claims agency in own fate; Creon reminds him that he can’t master everything.
- Exodos: “Count no man happy till he has passed the final limit of his life”

Historical conditions:

- Tension between world of Teiresias and (rationalizing?) world of Oedipus
 - Play explores connection between different realms (Vernant): realm of the gods and realm of the subhuman, of the *pharmakos* or scapegoat
 - Greek (or better Athenian) inventions of philosophy, political democracy, historiography, and tragic theatre.
 - “Culture of public discussion” (Meier)
 - Oedipus a symbol of Athenian dynamism, inventiveness, rational will to power, and of vulnerability to error (Knox)
- Stravinsky: *Oedipus Rex*

Further Reading:

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