The Tragedy of Oedipus at Colonus

A lecture given at St. John's College
Santa Fe, New Mexico
29 April, 1994

by Janet A. Dougherty

The Tragedy of Oedipus at Colonus

In Oedipus at Colonus, the former king of Thebes appears as a weary, blind old man who has been taught to endure, as he proclaims, by three things: his sufferings, his time in public, and his high birth. The first two of these go together, because at least his most recent sufferings (after his self-blinding) consist primarily in being forced to wander from place to place, seeking sustenance by begging, with no home and no privacy. He was cast out of his city by his brother/sons and his uncle/brother-in-law; his family provided no refuge from the city's rejection of him as a parricide and incestuous husband of his mother. He does have his daughter, Antigone, nearby to guide and care for him, but that means that she too has had to suffer public humiliation and has lacked for years now all the comforts and safety of a home. Oedipus is in no position to provide her with the protection of a father. Furthermore, Antigone must be for Oedipus a constant reminder of his incestuous marriage: she is both his sister and his daughter, and here she is acting as a nurse to him, almost taking on the role of a mother. The shame that would have kept Oedipus in private during his final years is instead the companion of his life in exile, without a city and the privacy it affords.

The homeless, citiless Oedipus is the same man whose crimes threatened to destroy the city of Thebes. We see an image of the danger to the city in the prurient interest of the chorus in

Oedipus' past: incest and parricide are fascinating, precisely for those who know they are crimes. There could be no city if these crimes, especially incest, were tolerated, for the city would have no claim upon the loyalty of its members if the family by itself seemed to offer them a complete life. During the course of Oedipus at Colonus, Oedipus is accepted by Theseus into Athens and defended against his enemies. But the relationship he bears to the city remains problematic. Throughout the play he rests in or near the sacred grove which the Athenians themselves avoid. He refuses Theseus' offer to share his hearth. Oedipus has come to Athens to die, and in dying there he delivers himself as a prize to the city. It is not at all clear how the corpse of this miserable old man can be a worthy gift.

Oedipus has united in a single life the highest and lowest things man is capable of. He has been both an honored king and a detested outcast, while his character has remained unchanged. It was his attempt to rule Thebes well and nobly while avoiding the fulfillment of the terrible prophecy about himself that led to his downfall. At the end of his life Oedipus is apparently honored by the gods. His manner of dying is strange, not to say incredible: he simply vanishes from one moment to the next, according to the account the messenger delivers near the end of the play. Theseus is left shielding his eyes and then "doing obeisance to the earth and at the same time to the gods of Olympus in the same speech" (l.1653-4). How Oedipus educates Theseus so as to make possible this response to his death is the

mystery we must try to penetrate if we are to discern the meaning of Sophocles' play.

No citizen of Athens has committed the acts or undergone the sufferings of Oedipus, yet all citizens everywhere are vulnerable just as he was. While our knowledge of ourselves and of others is necessarily limited, it is characteristic of men and women that we attempt to shape our own lives. Oedipus is fascinating because his ambition to shape his life was unequalled and his failure to do so was horrifying. In his failure he ignored the distinction between public and private, for he made the city his family, and destroyed both. In the family we are inevitably dependent, and only through the support of the family can citizens come into being. In the city, however, each man and woman must bear sole responsibility for his or her own acts: no personal tie can alter the legal status of a criminal, for example, or determine whether or not someone is qualified to vote. Without the private realm of the family no public realm could be created, but at the same time the security of the family depends upon the city's public strength. In this play we see Oedipus no longer able to act, for he has no city, although he still can speak for himself. His crimes taint him so that he can never be a citizen. Yet citizens must be capable of recognizing in Oedipus their vulnerability so as to avoid excessive harshness in judging one another. They must also be capable of forgetting that vulnerability so that they can make judgments without constant dread.

Theseus' task as ruler of Athens is to weave together the recognition that Oedipus is simply human with the forgetfulness that arises from the incomplete vision that enables men and women to live and act within cities. Oedipus must be seen as akin and yet fundamentally other than the men and women among whom he finally rests. And the city of Athens, although not each individual citizen, may be able to reflect the consciousness Oedipus displays.

Theseus accepts Oedipus into his city and in doing so allows Oedipus to become an image, for the Athenians and for us, of human being. He represents the highest and the lowest in man, and he recognizes in himself, more fully than anyone else could, the need for the distinction between public and private. He is a whole human being, fully conscious and thus separate from the city. He cannot be a citizen because he recognizes in himself the whole that the city strives to be. He could not tolerate living under laws framed by another man. But only with the aid of the city and of the distinction between public and private that it creates can the rest of us imitate the unity that characterizes Oedipus' soul. Without the city, we would lose even our partial consciousness. The city is not simply natural, however, and human beings are apparently capable of losing even their sense of what it means to have a soul. A city that can accept Oedipus as an image of man and hold that image within itself can help citizens recognize both what they are and what they are not. It can help them to achieve the limited unity of

soul that gives human beings the power to love and to give proper reverence for the gods. In his response to Oedipus' death Theseus demonstrates that it is possible for one who has not experienced Oedipus' sufferings to share in the wisdom they reveal.

Oedipus at Colonus is composed for the most part of a series of conversations between Oedipus and other characters, except for the last scene, which occurs after his death. The conversations that make up the play compel Oedipus finally to tell his own story. Oedipus arrives in Colonus knowing who and what he is. In the course of his wanderings, and with the help of the loving care Antigone has given him, he has entirely accepted his position as an outcast. He does not yet know either how he will come to rest or how he can benefit others. He must be pressed by the chorus and provoked by his enemies to recount the details of his actions and his sufferings. In doing so, he learns that the consciousness he has attained can instruct others. Oedipus' exile has given him an opportunity to learn what the gods expect of men. At the end of his life he sees that he can provide not merely an example for the Athenians to learn from - there is no neat lesson they can distill from his life- but an image for them of themselves and of the city, for all time.

Creon and Polyneices, like Oedipus, also tell their stories in the course of the play. The defects of their stories and the power of Oedipus' is the focus of the play. Theseus and the

Athenians must listen to all three men and resist the self-serving accounts of Creon and Polyneices, Oedipus' opponents, who wish merely to make use of him for their political ends in Thebes. Let us examine Oedipus' story as he reveals it for the sake of Theseus and of the chorus, which here represents the men of Athens.

I. In Oedipus' first encounter with the chorus of Athenian elders, he begs to be recognized "not as lawless, but as a suppliant." (l. 142) The city must defend itself against lawless intruders, but suppliants deserve its protection, and it is not obvious which category is appropriate to Oedipus, who seems unwilling to budge from the sacred grove in which he finds himself. When the chorus expresses incredulity at his offer of aid, Oedipus insists that what he says he "will say seeing all" (l. 74). The man whose unwitting deeds brought him to ruin now speaks and acts with full knowledge. The radical lack of self-knowledge and the arrogance that characterized the younger Oedipus have vanished. Oedipus no longer seeks for what he has not, nor does he strive to become other than he is. He knows and accepts the limits to his power. Although he is blind and in constant need of a guide, Oedipus is wise. Furthermore, he believes, in accord with a prophecy he has heard, that in dying on Athenian soil he will benefit the city; he calls for its ruler to come and receive the benefit he offers. But before Theseus arrives to speak to Oedipus, the chorus extracts from him a series of answers to their impertinent questions about his

past. Their first reaction when they hear his name is to cast him out of the city, despite the promise they have just uttered (ll. 173 and 174) to protect him from being led away against his will. Antigone tries to persuade them (ll. 250-254) to relent, considering that no mortal can resist when a god leads the way. Oedipus then joins in, announcing that a great benefit will accrue to Athens if they protect him (ll. 288-291).

Oedipus is altogether unwilling to speak further of his past. He does not see any value in satisfying the indecent curiosity of the chorus and prefers to await a more thoughtful listener. Oedipus has come to Athens to die; his main concern is to secure for himself a place where he may yield himself up to the gods' will. But the chorus, knowing the facts of his earlier life, combine prurient interest with their horror, and when Ismene has left to honor the gods to whom the grove is sacred, they press him for details (l. 510 ff.). Oedipus explains here that the law must hold him guiltless: he killed Laius, his father, unknowingly and in self-defense, and he married Jocasta, his mother, when she was offered to him as a wife by the city of Thebes. He never sought her. Oedipus denies that he is responsible (l. 540-541) for his crimes, despite the chorus' insistence that he is. Oedipus sees that in his life what men honor and what horrifies them are inextricably intertwined. Precisely when he was most honored in Thebes he was inadvertantly committing one of the acts that most repulse his interlocutors. And now, when the chorus questions him, they reveal their horror

and their respect for him at once: Oedipus' crimes are more disturbing because he was a skilled and benevolent king.

Incest and parricide are inexcusable violations of the family and the city. As a young man, Oedipus thought he knew this: he was horrified when the oracle prophesied that he would commit such acts. But in fact he failed to understand the nature of these crimes. Despite his efforts he could not avoid committing them because he strove to do so by leaving behind his family and becoming a wholly public man. Oedipus could no longer see clearly once he stood alone. As he strove for greatness his acts revealed his confusion: when he thought he depended on no one, a child only of chance, he was in fact returning to those from whom he came.

Oedipus could not recognize his family or his native city because he was certain that only haphazard wandering had led him to Thebes. Oedipus could do nothing but acknowledge the nature of his acts later, when he was powerless to efface them. Then he could see that incest and parricide are inexcusable because they obscure an individual's most fundamental dependency, thus undermining his ability to assume independence and responsibility for himself. When we distinguish family from city, we see in the family how needy we are. We may regard ourselves as free and rule ourselves without interference when we step outside the family, as we do continually. But the family remains as a background to all our activities and as a reminder that we are incomplete. Humans cannot be simply public beings, wholly

responsible and wholly rational. Nor can we tolerate being enmeshed entirely within the family, the center of our passions, once we have stepped outside of the family into the public realm. We must, then, allow ourselves to be dependent in order to achieve the limited independence of which we are capable. In straddling the two realms of family and city we to some extent develop the ability to see ourselves for what we are. One who commits incest and parricide both denies and destroys the relationships that point out our neediness. He claims he is free even when his acts are most determined by forces he does not choose and cannot simply control. Oedipus came to see himself clearly only in pain and suffering. He does see near the end of his life that the integrity of his soul, which enables him to accept the gods' interest in him now, depends upon his accepting that his sexual and familial ties make him a dependent and incomplete being. Any man's claim to be free and self-sufficient is a lie, or the consequence of gross self-deception.

Because Oedipus recognizes the character of the taint of his past, he sees that his superiority over others now changes it not at all. Now too he can recognize and defend himself as a man. For he knows that the soul of a man tends to confuse the high with the low simply because no man can have complete knowledge. He knows that the labels "high" and "low" are not arbitrary, although men and women invest them with meaning for themselves. Properly used, they enhance the ability of a human being to recognize and assume his proper place in the cosmos. Oedipus

sees that he is too tainted to be part of any city and at the same time he can accept with grace the end toward which the gods are currently leading him. He will be honored above all other men in his death. In his person the high and the low have come together.

It is not surprising that the chorus have such strong reactions to Oedipus. To see him in his filth and dependence must be appalling. Yet he has a compelling presence, for although he has borne incredible suffering for many years, he has remained unbroken by its weight. The extreme character of that suffering has distinguished Oedipus from other mortals. The strength of his soul is manifest in his ability to endure despite the violent alterations in his manner of life. This strength also enables him truly to revere the gods. For the gods require reverence of mortals even when they threaten to crush us with their power. In accepting that his crimes were the will of the gods, Oedipus is able to maintain his dignity and integrity while acknowledging the character of the acts he has committed. While Oedipus was unable to act independently of the gods' will, his soul is his own. It is not torn by resentment. Rather, Oedipus displays its unity in his reverence for the very gods who caused his suffering. Horror must give way to compassion and respect as we witness his response to the attacks of the chorus and his kinsmen in this play. As he confronts and then aids Oedipus, Theseus shows reverence for the gods who place Oedipus before him in his rags.

So that we may better appreciate the power of Theseus' acceptance of Oedipus, I will look briefly at Creon and Polyneices, and at the needs of the city and the role of the gods in the confrontation between Athens and Thebes. After discussing Theseus' understanding of Oedipus and of his own city, I will turn to Oedipus' departure from the city. For it is when he departs, becoming wholly an image, that Oedipus delivers the gift he has promised to Theseus.

II. Much of what is said and done in this play is a result of men's responses to decrees of the gods concerning Oedipus. Through Oedipus, the gods reveal their power and the natures of the individuals connected with him. Polyneices and Creon both come to claim Oedipus as their own after hearing that the side with which he is allied in the coming war over rule in Thebes will win. They fail to see beyond the battle for possession of the throne.

Oedipus is aware that he has been directed by the gods to die in some resting place from his troubles, and he knows that cannot mean that he must become in his death a participant in the conflict over power in Thebes. But conflict within and between cities is inevitable: Oedipus warns Theseus that the mutual respect of cities cannot be expected to endure, for " . . . trust dies, lack of trust buds forth, and the same wind never has come, not even among men who are friends, nor ranges again in the city" (ll. 612-14). He predicts that "spears will scatter abroad the present harmonious pledge of friendship <between Athens and

Thebes> at the merest word" (ll. 618-20). It is worthwhile to reflect upon the importance of words or speeches in the context of the city.

There are many examples in Oedipus at Colonus that show that words, especially names, can be quite powerful: The chorus fears Oedipus' name alone, Oedipus says, not his deeds or his body (l. 260); for lack of "a little word" from his sons, Oedipus was banished (l. 443); Theseus promises that his name will guard Oedipus if Theseus is not there to provide protection with his bodily strength (ll. 655-56). But mere words can also be deceptive. The most obvious examples are the gentle speeches Creon and Polyneices make to Oedipus. The things Creon proffers are "noble in words, in deeds they are evil" (ll. 781-82). Moreover, when Theseus threatens to use force against Creon, he warns that "I say these things to you by means of a tongue akin to my mind" (ll. 935-36), but even the firmness of his mind would be irrelevant unless he has the strength of arms and of men to back them up. And ultimately Oedipus' words are without efficacy unless the city can defend him. For words can be public as well as private, but only if the city provides a secure public realm can the speaker be confident that he may be heard. Whether Oedipus is to be honored as higher than any mortal, or treated as a pawn in the contest for power in Thebes, depends upon Theseus' strength in warding off Creon and his men.

Theseus does not have to rely on violence alone, or all of the time, but he must commit his entire power to defend Oedipus

before he can ever begin to experience the gifts Oedipus offers him. His compassion, his sense of the rightness of Oedipus' claim, are crucial. As a true ruler must, Theseus knows how to use words so that his speeches are deeds: they are effectual and they correspond to the truth, as far as Theseus can know it. Unlike Oedipus, who is forced by the chorus to recount his story because he has no place to hide (l. 200), Theseus says nothing out of weakness even when he takes back what he has said. Oedipus' account of his personal life might have a private place if he were a citizen of a secure city; Theseus' words, by contrast, are a public defense of the city he rules. Moreover, once Theseus has vowed to keep Oedipus' burial place a secret, it will remain a secret despite Antigone's pleadings near the end of the play. The gods have heard Theseus' promise, and he takes this very seriously indeed. Theseus' firmness, backed up with his power to use physical force, helps to preserve the power of words. His firmness comes from his reverence and his sense of the gods' support for his decisions. Words, far from representing an independent path to an understanding of the way things are, must be backed by reverence and defended with the use of force. The power of Oedipus' story depends upon its being spoken by a man who knows his place and upon its being heard by one who can hear it with both recognition of Oedipus' humanity and due reverence for the power of the gods.

It is noteworthy that Theseus himself never requires Oedipus to recount the story of his life in full. His acceptance of

Oedipus is altogether remarkable. Theseus knows who Oedipus is and has no prurient interest in hearing the details of his life. Despite his knowledge of the horrors of Oedipus' past, Theseus recognizes him as a fellow exile, saying : "I know full well that I am a man (aner) and that on the morrow of this day there will be nothing more for me than for you." (ll. 566-69). He implicitly acknowledges that he too might have been capable of the unwitting acts for which Oedipus is known. Unlike the chorus, Theseus can accept his kinship with Oedipus, even going so far as to offer Oedipus a place at his own hearth (ll.630-635). The anger Oedipus experienced when Laius confronted him at the crossroads and the violence it led to certainly are common to human beings generally. The vulnerability Oedipus showed in accepting the wife the city offered him and then fathering a family is no less characteristic of women and men. That his wife was later revealed to be his own mother does not change his motives in accepting her. They were primarily the need to share in a family (although Oedipus never acknowledged this need within himself) and the desire to be honored with a place of importance in the city. That he was able to love Jocasta as a wife and she to love him as a husband shows in an exaggerated way the preference we all have for those with whom we are already intimate. More than any other mortal, Oedipus must now be aware that there are strict limits to the knowledge a man can have of his own situation, limits that must be acknowledged in our efforts to rule ourselves and others. Theseus too recognizes

this. When Oedipus objects, Theseus quickly withdraws his criticism of him for not returning home, saying "Instruct me: for without knowledge I must not speak." (l. 594).

Theseus accepts Oedipus' assertion that his sons and Creon have betrayed him, and we the audience have an opportunity to witness that betrayal when Creon arrives. Here (ll. 770 ff.) Oedipus' anger provokes him to recount how his sons along with Creon refused to allow him exile when he desperately wanted it and then drove him away once he had become reconciled with his past. At that time he would have welcomed a private place within the city. Oedipus completes the telling of his story only in order to unmask Creon's lies. Oedipus attacks Creon, accusing him of injustice and of speaking " . . . considering it altogether fine to give a spoken word to unspeakable things . . . ." (ll. 1000-1001). Oedipus contrasts his unwilling errors against himself and his own with Creon's willingness publicly to "go through these things with your mouth" (l. 964). Of himself, Oedipus says " I unwilling married <Jocasta> and unwillingly I utter these words (ll. 984-86)". Oedipus cannot remove his unspeakable acts from the public realm by the way he gives voice to them, but he can point out the boundaries of appropriate speech. Creon seems to think his political aim is the only standard for what ought to be said, and he is willing to tell blatant lies to achieve that aim. This becomes clear as soon as he attacks Oedipus, whom he has just claimed he came for out of familial care. Creon is willing to act unlawfully for the same

purpose, and thus seizes Ismene and Antigone, and is about to seize Oedipus himself, in order to secure his power in Thebes. Such a violent challenge to Athenian authority Theseus simply cannot allow.

Theseus' response to Creon reveals Theseus' determination and his ability to protect his own city from destruction. In this case, he backs up his verbal response with effective acts. Theseus indeed rules "by word and by force," as Oedipus says (1.68) and knows when it is necessary to use each.

Polyneices too makes demands upon Oedipus to which the Athenians must respond. As Antigone predicts, Polyneices' words reveal the injustice of his deeds. Oedipus responds by "sowing" curses upon both his sons, disowning them and condemning them to the fate they cannot avoid, their mutual destruction. Oedipus here articulates and assents to what arises out of the natures of Eteocles and Polyneices. He alters nothing. Polyneices shows that he values nothing as high as his own power in the city, and is quite willing to destroy both himself and his city, and of course his brother, in the quest to obtain that power. Polyneices does display a kind of strength in his resignation to his fate, but it is misplaced. He is not perceptive enough to recognize the evil he has foisted upon his father, his siblings and himself, despite his duplicitous words of compassion when he thinks thay will serve his ends. Polyneices and Creon are alike in that they fail to recognize any truth beyond the simple fact of who rules in the city. They regard even the oracular voice of

the god as no more than a tool in the struggle for power. But the gods are true and independent beings. They, unlike human beings, do not rely upon the city in becoming who they are, and they do not allow men to force them to serve political ends.

The mistakes of both Creon and Polyneices arise from valuing the city above the truth as well as above their suffering kinsman, to whom they deceitfully profess love. They apparently believe that there is no standard beyond that of the city, and each is determined to identify the city as his own possession. Creon, Polyneices and Theseus are alike in recognizing that the lives of human beings, as contrasted with the lives of animals and of gods, necessarily include both speeches and deeds. The city, in which virtually all human life occurs, is thus the realm of speeches and deeds. It may even seem that men and women can neither speak nor act independently of the city. But the wandering Oedipus demonstrates that this is not the whole truth.

While Oedipus is not capable of any public act so long as he lacks a city, and while he is utterly dependent upon Theseus' city for defense, he is in full possession of self-knowledge. He can present others with his story, but they must be capable of recognizing its truth. Oedipus' nearly superhuman strength of character enables him to speak without distorting any of the events of his life, and Theseus' recognition of him as a fellow man enables him to hear the truth of what Oedipus says. Thus, Theseus can grasp the fact that Oedipus voluntarily committed no crime against the city, although his acts challenged the city.

Oedipus' parricide and incest may seem to have allied him with the beasts. His consciousness of those acts and his recognition of the role of the gods in causing him to complete them seem to bring him close to the gods. Perhaps he is a sort of Fury, as his resting place in the grove sacred to the Eumenides seems to suggest. But there is no direct evidence of the nature of the Furies in this play (in contrast with Aeschylus' Oresteia). There is a good deal of evidence of Oedipus' humanness: his love for his daughters, his anger at Polyneices, Eteocles and Creon, the kinship that Theseus recognizes. But the most important piece of evidence, I believe, is that his story is recognizable as the story of a man who erred, who suffered, and who needs both family and city. Oedipus once thought he could be entirely independent of his origins and of his fate, and entirely a public man. Now he sees that his neediness makes him both a private and a public person. He craves the love of his daughters, and he can find no resting place unless Athens offers him one.

Oedipus' Theban relatives cannot grasp the possibility that Athens can adopt him; perhaps thay are too impressed with the myth of the sown men, the story of the origin of Theban citizens. In Thebes the potential independence of citizens is concealed by the acceptance of the story that the Thebans are descendants of men who were born of the earth sown with the seed of a dragon. Thebes is more like a family than a city, as Oedipus' incest and the familial conflicts that ensue reveal. Since it does not recognize the distinction of family and city, Thebes leaves no

room for families. Instead, rulers like Creon attempt to rule all Thebans by law and by force with no concern for them as private beings. A healthy city must leave room for the family: it must have both a public and a private realm. Because Theseus founded Athens, he recognizes the artificial character of the public realm. Theseus knows a city must be defended from threats that arise both within and without its boundaries, and it is often not clear even where those boundaries lie. According to Plutarch, Theseus actually created the city of Athens out of several independent towns by destroying the public buildings of each. He persuaded the leaders of these towns that he would recognize their independence by ruling democratically (see Plutarch's Lives, p. 15): he would be only their commander in war and the "protector" of the common Athenian laws. Thus, Theseus could enjoy being the first member of a greater community than had hitherto existed there. The integrity of this new community must constantly be articulated and its members persuaded that they would not be better off separate from one another as before. All cities share in this character to some extent.

Theseus as a founder of a city understands more fully than Creon the role of laws in creating a city. Because he understands that role he also recognizes the limits of the power of the laws. He knows that the family has its own needs. But he learns more from Oedipus and from the history of Thebes about bonds of affection that transcend the city. And he recognizes

the character of a human being who, despite his neediness, is independent of the city and even sets a standard for it. Theseus learns from Oedipus what it means to be a fully conscious human being.

Creon and Polyneices, by contrast, fail to recognize that it is Oedipus' story rather than his body that is the key to preserving political power. While these men treat Oedipus' body as yet another object for their ambitious strivings, they completely ignore his story. But Oedipus more than anyone else could teach them what it means to be human, and that all political striving ought to serve human beings. The city can provide a tolerable place for humans only by reflecting their integrity, their ability to recognize the truth when they see it and to take responsibility for their acts insofar as they can. The distinction between public and private promotes the development of such integrity. It allows citizens to distinguish the high and the low and to acknowledge the gods above them and the passions that move them. Since men and women can never rule themselves entirely, it is their consciousness of and acceptance of the forces upon them that prevents each from being a mere locus of events. Tyranny destroys the integrity of its subjects' souls as it refuses to acknowledge their character.

III. In Athens, then, the private realm is distinguished from the public. But in Oedipus at Colonus they seem almost inverted, for Oedipus embraces his daughters unabashedly and in public when they are first rescued from Creon's men and returned

to him. When he parts from them to die, he publicly proclaims the strength of his love for them, which no man can feel for them more than he has (l.1617-18). There is no shame mixed with his love. In speaking with the chorus, he has referred earlier to his daughters as "two ruins" (l. 532), but those words are words of pity, not of shame. Although Oedipus' story entails the shame of parricide, incest, and exile, the shame does not taint the love of Oedipus and his daughters for one another. Oedipus loves them as a father loves his children. Similarly, they love him in return. Oedipus is who he is and has done what he has done. His love for his daughters is good because it arises from him as a man and as a father, not as a criminal. He is not utterly crushed by the recognition of what he has done, as he would be if his acts exhausted his being. Oedipus' ability to love reveals the integrity of his soul.

Theseus says little about Oedipus' displays of affection for his daughters when they are returned to him, but that little expresses respect and acceptance. For Theseus recognizes the rights of this family as he does of any family. He would not have wondered if Oedipus took up even more time in celebrating his daughters' return from capture by Creon's men. Knowing that he no more than Oedipus could have escaped his fate, Theseus sympathizes with Oedipus. He allows himself to be moved in the ways Oedipus is moved by the devotion of his daughters and the churlishness of his son. The ruler of Athens is shaped by his brief friendship with Oedipus: he allows his passions to be

guided by this extraordinary and disconcerting man.

But while Oedipus moves Theseus and excites his admiration, can the lessons of Oedipus' life really instruct anyone who is not, as he is, separated from the city by his fate and beloved of the gods? I think the answer is that by arousing Theseus' love, not merely his admiration, and not merely the compassion I spoke of earlier, Oedipus guides Theseus so as to enable him to rule long and well. The city can recognize as friends and enemies those who support and those who endanger it, but its standards for the loves and hates of citizens are ultimately arbitrary if the city's welfare is all that is recognized as good in itself. A ruler must guide the city toward what is good rather than making the city the sole standard.

Love (<u>philia</u>), then, in Sophocles' view, is not merely a private affair. Love is the movement of the soul toward the good as we see it, however dimly. Although we may not grasp the good as it is in itself, we can recognize it in the soul of another. Oedipus thus acknowledges the good of his daughters' devotion to him. He displays the strength of his soul as he recognizes himself in them, at the same time showing reverence for the power of the gods who nearly destroyed him when he thought he could rule himself. But the gods also left him free to give himself entirely for the benefit of those he loves. To give himself to Antigone and Ismene he must become for them an image of human strength. Oedipus' daughters are too close to him to recognize him as an image not only of them in particular but of human being

generally. They are without a city as long as he is, and the city must reflect and perpetuate the image of Oedipus and his ability to love, if it is not to fade from the memories even of those who hold him most dear. For this, Oedipus needs Theseus, and he can benefit Theseus in turn. For the city may fail to recognize the human ability to love, and thus decline into despotism. This occurs if the city fails to perpetuate a true image of the soul of man, acknowledging only the needs of the body and serving the ambition of whoever rules. This account of the city reflects the tragic view of man. For tragedy presumes that it is not possible for humans to ascend beyond the need for one another to grasp things as they are in themselves. Tragedy itself, then, is the highest form of speech. It presents human beings with their radical limitations and at the same time it is devoted to the cultivation of self-knowledge. The tragic poet reveals the importance of love and himself displays the proper sort of love for human beings.

Tragedy, love (philia), and true speech generally are fragile and therefore need the support of the city. They also transcend its boundaries: they have the power to unite human beings whether or not they are fellow citizens. But this power enables all three to indicate the defects of a particular city. Therefore they may present serious challenges to the self-understanding of any city in which they arise. They, like the family, must be given freedom to develop in private, but they inevitably affect the public realm on which they depend.

As in Oedipus' life, love (philia) can easily be incestuous, for it is one's image in the soul of another that provokes love. If one fails to recognize the lovable image as an image, and therefore other than oneself, if one fails to see that as an image it points to the character of human being generally, love is incestuous. Similarly, words can be made to turn back on themselves without reaching out to reflect the way things are. The speeches of Creon and Polyneices exemplify such a use of words. They treat the city as complete in itself and use it to justify every act they find expedient. But the city is only a medium for human life, suspended among the inhuman forces that always impinge upon us. Incest in speech as in the family endangers the city by closing it to the recognition of the middleness that characterizes human beings.

Oedipus himself indicates that it is not possible for Athens simply to accept his incestuous family as part of the city. But Oedipus has not transcended his need for others: even though he is fully conscious, he must suffer as long as he remains citiless and without a home. In this respect even at Colonus Oedipus is a tragic figure. The sort of compromise solution that Aeschylus offers in the Eumenides cannot work here. Oedipus' suffering can never be alleviated. We can not simply rule ourselves and we cannot escape the vulnerability of Oedipus. Those who remain behind him must preserve his image and with it the power to love, if we are to be able to rule ourselves at all.

Oedipus says he has found reverence in Theseus "alone of

men, along with fairness and the avoidance of deceit." (lines 1128-30). Theseus is willing to allow Oedipus to guide him as he learns how to speak to the gods and, ultimately, to men. When, in his graceful death, Oedipus displays both dignity and openness to a beyond that darkly and mysteriously awaits him, he provides a model of the way Theseus must behave as a ruler. In his death, when mortals are most at the mercy of forces beyond themselves, either physical forces or the passions of men, Oedipus is fully in command of himself. The dying Oedipus provides a model of what it means to rule and to be ruled. He fully accepts what is and even leads the way in fulfilling what he knows must be accomplished. He hesitates only in order to bid a proper farewell to those who love and need him, his daughters and Theseus. When the chorus questions Antigone as to what Oedipus did in the privacy of the grove, she says "he did such as he willed" (l. 1707). For once Oedipus acted knowingly, calmly, and with full accord between his mind and his actions. This is an extraordinary achievement for a human being.

As he himself says earlier in the play (l.109), Oedipus is a mere image of what he once was. When he departs into the sacred grove, Oedipus vanishes from the sight of men. As we approach the end it is clear that the main action of this play is Oedipus becoming wholly an image. Oedipus is about to die "all at once" (l. 1615) as he puts it, succumbing gradually to no bodily illness. The messenger refers to him as an <u>aner</u> (manly man) and goes on to say that his death was wondrous <u>if</u> he is one of the

mortals. The spot where he dies must remain secret, in Oedipus' words addressed to Theseus, "so that in lieu of spears and allies I might stand to you" (l. 1524-25). Finally, Oedipus occupies no specific place. His body disappears somehow. In his death, Oedipus will again serve the city, although not the city of his birth. Oedipus will remain an image for Athens. His story "pervades everything (l.306)"; it will not vanish. He must vanish from sight for his life to become a possession for others.

It is not clear what happens when Oedipus dies, or even that he dies in the ordinary sense of the word. The messenger speculates that perhaps an attendant of god came to him, ". . . or the painless threshold of the earth kindly stood apart from the nether world" (l. 1661-62). In departing this life Oedipus has fully come to terms with both the gods of Olympus and the older gods hidden below the earth. He once thought he could supplant the Olympic gods in ruling himself, and that he was invulnerable to the darker forces they overthrew, the older gods. His self-knowledge places him out of the reach of those errors now. Oedipus accepts his place as a man and commits himself entirely to those he loves, to his daughters and to Theseus and the city of Athens who have given him a final home. In doing so, he displays an integrity and an ability to love that sets him apart from all other human beings. Theseus can honor both sets of gods in one prayer upon Oedipus' death because he acknowledges his vulnerability and hence his resemblance to Oedipus and because he responds to Oedipus' strength of soul with unreserved

friendship (philia). The words of Theseus' prayer are mysterious, but it is clear that this is an example of the kind of speech that Oedipus alone can inspire Theseus to utter.

IV. Most of what Theseus learns from Oedipus involves the proper use of speech. The laws of the city are the most obvious use of speech to rule men and women. A city must be governed by laws, and for the most part laws are concerned with the acts citizens commit or fail to commit. For a city to exist at all, its laws and its rulers must command respect, and without the city we would all live as Oedipus and Antigone have, wandering, dirty, and vulnerable, or worse. Any ruler must recognize this, and that is why Theseus is so outraged at Creon's flagrant violation of Theseus' own authority. Even if he had justice on his side, Theseus says, he would not behave as Creon has (ll. 925-28).

Theseus then acknowledges that the laws of a city are not always just. They cannot be, for each citizen must be held responsible before the laws for the acts he commits whatever his intentions might have been. Whoever rules in a city must remain open to the limitations of the laws in this respect even while defending the city's integrity. The city is incomplete; it excludes and yet cannot ignore both other cities and the gods. Therefore it must frequently reform itself. Rulers must both witness the reality their city excludes and defend it against attacks from outside. The sacred grove of the Eumenides at Colonus helps to remind the Athenians of one set of gods, and yet

the chorus seems to forget their nature when they nearly cast Oedipus out. The life of Oedipus manifests the power of the gods in that the family drew him back to itself precisely as he fulfilled the oracle of Apollo. Oedipus confronts Theseus with these truths when he comes to Colonus. It is up to Theseus to find a place in the city for stories like that of Oedipus which point the way to a proper distinction between public and private, city and family, even as they show that the distinction is artificial. It is demanded by the needs of the individual human beings we strive to be.

Theseus responds to Oedipus' death by praying to both sets of gods at once, and this may indicate that Oedipus has taught Theseus that somehow they are one. At least he has shown Theseus that the human soul is the locus of the powers of both sets of gods, and both must be revered at once. It appears then that Oedipus gives much more to Theseus than to his two daughters upon his departure from life, for Antigone and Ismene are attached to Oedipus as an individual and not as an image that may reveal to them who they are. Antigone especially seems to think Oedipus is "all she has." When the sisters have Oedipus with them, they are unlikely to recognize in him the source of their own power to love. Oedipus then gives to all three essentially the same thing: the power to love or hold dear (<u>philein</u>). Oedipus himself tells his daughters that in loving alone "all hardships loosen" (ll. 1615-19,) and encourages them to remember him as one who loved them more than any other could. Before he departs for

good Oedipus commands Theseus on the one hand and Antigone and Ismene on the other to swear an oath in which Theseus promises to do what is best for them and they to accept his care. In defending Oedipus Theseus has thus taken on yet further responsibilities. But it is such responsibilities that will keep Theseus from forgetting the needs of those who live under his rule. Theseus will pass down the political lesson Oedipus has taught him while Oedipus' daughters will remember their father as a man capable of recognizing who he was and of ascending beyond his plight through the intense love he bore for themselves.

Theseus' ability to distinguish between mere power and the things that enhance it on the one hand and worthiness on the other is in evidence in his openness to Oedipus' story. His friendship with Oedipus, in turn, enhances that ability. Under Theseus' influence the city in general can share in this openness. When the chorus nearly banish Oedipus from Colonus, we see that it costs them some strain to remain open to his story, however fascinating they find it, but they have managed because they recognize their leader's worth and can defer to him. In this play Sophocles reflects upon the place of a powerful and even shocking account like that of Oedipus' life in the city, Athens in particular, and perhaps on the place of poetry in general. And the story of Thebes shows that poetry has indeed a crucial place in the health of the city. The literal mindedness of Creon, Eteocles and Polyneices will ruin them, even if it does not entirely destroy Thebes. If they had truly held Oedipus dear

they might have been able to alter the laws to make a place, a private place, for him within the city, and in doing so they might have made their power secure. In treasuring something other than political power, they might have maintained legitimate and peaceful rule.

It may seem odd that love for Oedipus, a man who has committed crimes that clearly threaten any city, could help preserve political power. But Sophocles shows that the needs of the city are neither clear nor simple. To rule well one must recognize that human beings cannot overcome entirely their blindness and consequent dependence. A ruler must see that humans are "middle" beings: their power is always limited by the gods they picture as above them and the darker forces "below." The ruler who most displays reverence is one who can be moved by Oedipus' suffering, his recognition of the power of the gods, and his dignity, without ignoring the repulsive character of his deeds. Such a ruler may share in Oedipus' wisdom without suffering and acting as he did. Oedipus' wisdom is very unlike the wisdom of Socrates, for example: it depends upon an experience of man's almost intolerable weakness in the face of the gods and an acceptance of that weakness. Such wisdom includes the recognition of the need to distinguish family and city, for the family can provide a refuge from public life even while it instructs citizens to recognize the distinction between high and low. The health of the city in turn requires the proper guidance of the affections that come into being within the

family. Poetry has the power to convey this wisdom by confronting us with an example of someone who acquired it in pain and misery. Theseus may be ignorant of much that the philosopher king of the Republic knows, but he has allowed Oedipus' story to shape his soul. This will enable him to rule Athens well, if Sophocles is correct.

In Sophocles' poetry, Athenians could, without sacrificing the order of their lives, confront the disturbing truth that the most horrible crimes may be committed by the man most worthy of honor. The entire city came to witness both tragic and comic plays at the yearly festival of Dionysus. As a group the citizens could acknowledge the fragility of the barriers the city must erect to the violence and the passions that arise without the sanction of laws. Like the Athenian elders of the chorus, they would probably be inclined to repudiate any individual who had suffered the horrors of Oedipus. Insofar as Sophocles educated them, however, they would not, like Eteocles and Polyneices, banish such individuals, forcing them into public ways. Nor would they, like Creon and Polyneices, attempt to seize them for their own ends. Like the chorus, rather, they would accept the guidance of Sophocles and provide protection for human suffering and the wisdom that might arise from it. Acceptance within the city will not defuse the passions that brought Oedipus down, and may not prevent them from causing destruction. If the city recognizes in Oedipus an image of itself, however, it may be able to reform itself after it has

been shaken by these passions. In Oedipus at Colonus, Sophocles provides Athens with an opportunity to become an image for itself.

As a poet, Sophocles himself could not simply be a citizen among others, for he confronted truths disruptive enough to shake the city's foundations. At the same time, he was dependent on the city for an audience, and his poetry was designed to educate citizens in truths the laws of the city could not recognize. The poet, then, is almost an exile within his own city. He speaks to the citizens in a voice they can comprehend, but he speaks of truths that would destroy them if they were to confront them for themselves. Sophocles, like Theseus, had to give Athens an awareness of the limits to her wholeness while helping to maintain its integrity against external threats. It is no accident that Oedipus at Colonus was Sophocles' last play. Here he must present before Athens the nature of his enterprise.

By arousing the passions of citizens and guiding them so as to contribute to an understanding of the harsh truth about human beings that the city cannot afford to ignore, the poet can take part in keeping the city together. Sophocles' tragic poetry is a model of the speech that must supplement the rule of laws. Theseus' prayer to the two sets of gods is his own poem, inspired by the story of Oedipus. We must find our own means of weaving together the truths that threaten to destroy our cities. Sophocles suggests that if we truly love what is worthy, this is not an impossible task. In reading Oedipus at Colonus we may

begin to educate ourselves to discern what is worthy of our love amid repulsiveness and squalor. Among human beings, the high and the low are sometimes locked in an incestuous embrace.