

## OEDIPUS AT COLONUS AS A DIVINE COMEDY

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### ABSTRACT

*Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus was the last play written just before the playwright's death in 406 B.C. In the play, Sophocles turns back to the figure of Oedipus whom he had once portrayed as the ideal type of Athenian intelligence and daring. In a deeply made analysis of Oedipus at Colonus it is clear that the play fits into the category of divine comedies. The term divine comedy can be considered as a subcategory of a larger genre, and this particular play is a kind of different writing which has its own characteristics. The anarchic cultural milieu of the latter half of the fifth century comprises the moral universe that surrounds Oedipus. The anarchy of the age is mirrored in the unwanted fate of Oedipus that the gods arbitrarily impose upon him. The main theme of the play focuses on the spiritual transformation of Oedipus into a godlike figure and a hero. The polluted, blind and poverty-stricken Oedipus is transformed into something more than man, something godlike. The divine power operates to prepare Oedipus for what he will become. As a divine comic hero, Oedipus has the ability to suffer and endure the adversities. His endurance in adversity makes Oedipus an honorable man and ultimately leads him to heroism. Harmony and order come to Oedipus at the end of his long period time of sufferings, because the gods will it and Oedipus accepts their will. The play ends in a sublime reconciliation between Oedipus and the gods.*

**Keywords:** Divinity, Divine Comic Hero, Athens, Sophocles.

### ÖZET

*"Oedipus at Colonus" Sophocles'in M.Ö.406'da ölümünden kısa bir süre önce yazdığı son eseridir. Oyunda, Sophocles bir zamanlar ideal Atinalı zekâsını ve cesaretini temsil eden "Oedipus" karakterine geri döner. Oyun derinlemesine incelendiğinde bu oyunun ilahi komedyâ kategorisi içinde olduğu anlaşılacaktır. İlahi komedyâ daha geniş bir alanın alt kategorisi olarak ele alınabilir ve bu incelediğimiz eser kendine has özellikleri olan farklı bir eserdir. Beşinci yüzyılın ikinci yarısındaki karmaşık kültürel ortam Oedipus'u çevreleyen ahlaki evreni oluşturur. Dönemin karmaşası tanrılar tarafından ona dayatılan Oedipus'un kötü kaderinde yansıtılır. Oyunun ana teması Oedipus'un tanrısal bir figür ve kahraman olmasını sağlayan ruhsal dönüşümü üzerine odaklanır. Kirlenmiş, kör ve fakara Oedipus insandan öte, adeta tanrısal bir*

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YDÜ Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, C. IV, No. 2, (Ekim 2011)

varlığa dönüşür. Kutsal güç Oedipus'u sonunda dönüşeceği şeye hazırlamak için devreye girer. İlahi komik bir kahraman olarak Oedipus çile çekme ve zorluklara katlanma yeteneğine sahiptir. Zorluklar karşısındaki direnci onu onurlandırarak adını kahramanlar arasına yazdırır. Uyum ve düzen Oedipus'a uzun süreli çile çekme süreci sonunda gelir çünkü tanrılar böyle buyururlar ve Oedipus da onların buyruğunu kabul eder. Oyun tanrılar ve Oedipus arasındaki görkemli bir uzlaşıyla sona erer.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İlahilik, İlahi Komik Kahraman, Atina, Sophocles.

Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* was the last play written just before the playwright's death in 406 B.C. This particular play of the most powerful Greek writer was not performed until five years after his death. He was born in the village of Colonus, and in the last month of his long life he turned back to the figure of Oedipus whom he had once portrayed as the ideal type of Athenian intelligence and daring. He wrote about the same hero's old age, the recompense he received for his sufferings in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and in doing so he left this timeless masterpiece to the world of literature. Certainly a great number of critics wrote about this specific play of Sophocles as one of the most beautiful Greek tragedies throughout the centuries. And it is also doubtless that many scholars will discuss the same play again as a masterpiece tragedy of its writer. However, in a deeply made analysis of *Oedipus at Colonus* it is highly possible that the play fits into the category of divine comedies. *Oedipus at Colonus* deserves to be considered and studied as a work of divine comedy for it has almost all the characteristics of the so-called genre.

*Oedipus at Colonus* is a remarkable achievement of its writer. Sophocles himself lived in the city of Athens when it was going down to ruins and the morale of Athens was corrupted, it really turned to be a nasty place. The anarchic social, political, and philosophical forces were driving Greek society toward a tragic situation. Sophocles predicted that Athens would face a certain defeat and an inevitable extinction. There is a close association of Oedipus with Athens since Sophocles wrote the play not only about the divine comic hero but also Athens. This anarchic cultural milieu of the latter half of the fifth century comprises the moral universe that surrounds Oedipus. The anarchy of the age is mirrored in the unwanted fate of Oedipus that the gods arbitrarily impose upon him. This play suggests that the gods predetermine men to evil and arbitrarily heap inhuman burdens upon them. The gods are already a presence in the play before the action begins and human motives are brought into conflict. The oracle clearly confers on Oedipus a power of undefined limits. Even though the gods seem to remain outside of the actions their role is nevertheless always existent throughout the

play. Oedipus soon recognizes that the gods have given him the freedom to act with impunity. However, divine oracles control the action from the beginning to the end, “and even though they seem to be absent the gods still stir up the inner shufflings and caprices for human motives, as if to make them the hidden agencies secretly working out some incomprehensible divine purpose” (Forrer: 333). In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus displays a heroic endurance against irrational and unbearable evil. He suffers stigmatization by the gods.

The play exemplifies the belief that there exist two different worlds in terms of religion; the natural and supernatural, human and divine, separate yet often interpenetrating and at times united by the events and sufferings Oedipus goes through. The main theme of the entire play seems to be focused on the spiritual transformation of Oedipus into a godlike figure and a hero. It is not always possible to consider *Oedipus at Colonus* as a totally separate play from the earlier one *Oedipus the King*; it is a sequel to the first play in many ways. It shows how a lifetime of sufferings comes to an end of peace and power, it displays the power of the gods to exalt an outcast, and it brings about the idea that they who seemed cruel and relentless can grant rewards to a person such as Oedipus and make amends. The subject of *Oedipus at Colonus* appears to be the passing of Oedipus from a human being to a heroic and supernatural status.

At the beginning of the play the outcast reaches Colonus and knows that his wanderings are over. At the end the messenger tells the manner of his disappearance in which a magical, even mystical power exists, a sense that the gods are at work and the miracles are happening. Paradoxically, *Oedipus at Colonus* is about the transformation of a polluted, blind, poverty-stricken Oedipus into something more than man, something godlike. We know that Oedipus was in conflict with the gods for he broke their laws, but these conflicts are all resolved in the final reconciliation when the gods decide to take him. On the other hand, even his own conflict with himself, his sense of uncleanness and degradation is overcome. At the end of his transformation and the point when the gods accept him what Oedipus learns is that the gods do not hate him but love him, that they wish to exalt him. So, the chaos of his life, pierced by shame, hatred and contempt comes to an order. It is a complete reversal of what Oedipus was earlier. As a scholar puts it, “divine comedy possesses the traditional comic action which moves from bad fortune to good fortune, from calamity to harmony” (August: 91). The play first shows the abject poverty of Oedipus and then the special attentions, which the gods pay to him. He grows in strength and stature until he is able to find his way without guidance and help even though he is still blind. The divine power

operates to prepare Oedipus for what he will become. It sustains him throughout the play and makes him exercise his new power. Even before the very last moment of the play we should look on Oedipus as the one who is already on the way to a half divine state.

As a divine comic hero, Oedipus has the ability to suffer and endure the adversities. His endurance in adversity makes Oedipus an honorable man and ultimately leads him to heroism. In a way, Oedipus is reborn, because “the divine comic hero is marked by an ability to suffer, to endure some form of death, and to be reborn” (August: 95). He displays his supernatural, even godlike power at a time of life when most men are incapable of prolonged fortitude. His superior strength is recognized and rewarded by the gods who prolong it in the grave and make it also a means to protect Athens. Harmony and order come to Oedipus at the end of his long period time of sufferings, because the gods will it and Oedipus accepts their will. The play ends in a sublime reconciliation between Oedipus and the gods. As one of the scholars said, “the close is not in humble acquiescence but in strength and power and knowledge” (Bowra: 355).

The story is basically of an old man whose death will be his own glorification. Furthermore, the play also has the divination of Oedipus as the master theme. When Oedipus appears on the stage as a blind, aged beggar he is far from being a divine person. However, Oedipus’ suffering, his innate nobility and time have taught him the strength of patience. He needs little and receives less. He has learned to be content through his transformation. Time operates as an element that teaches Oedipus endurance. In consequence, the play is a preparation and a ritual of purification and transcendence of Oedipus. The gods, being just, have always intended to make amends. Oedipus, who has been exiled from human interactions as well as from his country, will now be raised above humanity. The deification of Oedipus is the one event in the play clearly initiated by the gods. In death, Oedipus regains the kingly authority denied to him in life. Despite his blindness Oedipus is now able to lead his daughters and Theseus unerringly to the place where he must die. He almost seems to be divine by virtue of his heroic endurance of unbearable suffering. The intervention of the gods indicates the awesome power over both Oedipus and human life in general.

The dramatic course of the play *Oedipus at Colonus* is from bad fortune to good fortune. As soon as Oedipus enters the play it is obvious that he is an outcast. He is a blind old man and helpless. He has been guided by his loyal and frail daughter Antigone all through the years. He is a powerless man. Oedipus is

now an exile and cut off from divine protection. This moment of the work marks the opening catastrophe of the divine comedy. Thus we have the opening calamity since Oedipus is involved in an estrangement; an estrangement between him and the divine. As August states in his article, “the opening calamity of a divine comedy always involves an estrangement between the human and the divine; the final harmony always involves their joyous reconciliation” (91). It has already been several years since Oedipus was expelled from Thebes. He appears on the stage as a broken, blind old man in filthy rags, led by his caring daughter Antigone. His dialogue with Antigone is almost a cry in search of a resting-place as he tells;

My child, child of the blind old man – Antigone  
 where are we now? What land, what city of men?  
 Who will receive the wandering Oedipus today?  
 Not with gifts but with a pittance...it's little I ask  
 and get still less, but quite enough for me.  
 Acceptance-that is the great lesson suffering teaches,  
 suffering and the long years, my close companions,  
 Yes, and nobility too, my royal birthright.  
 (Fagles: 283).

Unlike in this opening scene of the play, Oedipus will have the supernatural power which will allow him to lead people and will be turned into a prophet in the end. Oedipus stumbles into guilt situation. But his guilt is really shame rather than being a consciously made serious mistake. He did not know what he was doing. There was no possibility that Oedipus could have avoided what he had done to his real father and mother. It is actually the misfortune of Oedipus that he found himself in terribly unpleasant situations and had to suffer as a consequence of his killing Laius and marrying his own mother. Under the light of this knowledge which he was not aware of he defends himself by crying;

But no, no-  
 how could you call me guilty, how by nature?  
 I was attacked-I struck in self-defense.  
 Why even if I had known what I was doing,  
 how could that make me guilty? But in fact,  
 knowing nothing, no, I went...the way I went-  
 but the ones who made me suffer, they knew full well,  
 they wanted to destroy me.  
 (Fagles: 299).

Since Oedipus is completely an outcast and about to be driven to his death the scene arouses the feelings of pity and fear. But strikingly enough, we have a complete reversal of these feelings of pity and fear. For example, instead of Furies destroying him we have the gods summoning him. The Furies become his allies. So, the feelings of pity and fear are transformed into the feelings of relief and joy. Hence the action of the play will come to an end with the return of the exile Oedipus himself. At this point of the play the difference between tragedy and divine comedy seems to be clear enough. Whereas “tragedies achieve their effect by arousing, then purging, fear and pity,” says August, “divine comedy arouses similar feelings, but it achieves its own effect by a reversal which transforms them into relief and joy-relief in the knowledge that life’s tragic possibilities can sometimes be avoided, joy in the knowledge that suffering, although it must be endured, can be transcended” (93).

Throughout the play we have the quality of recognizing that we are only human. Now the hero is completely different from what he was in the earlier play *Oedipus the King* for he learned that he is no more than a human being. In his journey of spiritual transformation, Oedipus certainly comes to an understanding that he is nothing more than a mortal and in doing so he absolutely achieves the virtue of humility. Oedipus perceives that he has human limitations, now his strength is humbition. With the same understanding of his humanity, however, Oedipus achieves godlikeness. His recognition of his humanity brings him the gift of godliness at the end. It is important for Oedipus to be aware of the fact that he is a human being and he has the characteristics of what other human beings have. It is through this awareness that he achieves to be a god-like figure. “The principal strength of divine comic heroes is a humbled awareness of their human limitations. Paradoxically, by recognizing their humanity, divine comic heroes achieve godlikeness” (August: 94).

We know that mentors such as Antigone and Theseus guide the divine comic hero of the play, Oedipus, throughout his journey from bad fortune to good fortune. In some way or another, these mentors possess something that the hero does not have or a wisdom that he lacks. Antigone has the sight both for herself and Oedipus, for instance. She knows what to do in any situation. She has the wisdom to handle things around her by herself. She knows how to act and what to do when the stranger approaches at the beginning of the play. Apart from Antigone as a mentor figure, Theseus likewise possesses the same wisdom to be considered as another mentor. He is aware of the fact that he is only a human being and he has compassion on Oedipus, he protects him. Theseus is the man of

justice. He states that he is only a man, he knows his limitations and he believes that he is nothing more than a mortal as he goes on to say;

I too, I remember well,  
 was reared in exile just like you,  
 and strange lands, like no man else on earth,  
 I grappled dangers pressing for my life.  
 Never, I tell you, I will never shrink  
 from a stranger, lost as you are now,  
 or fail to lend a hand and save a life.  
 I am only a man, well I know,  
 and I have no more power over tomorrow,  
 Oedipus, than you.

(Fagles: 318).

Oedipus is an earthly character. He asks about his sons when Ismene enters the play and talks to him. Ismene explains him that the gods will rise him up. In response to her remark about his own future, Oedipus says that the gods first reduced him to nothing and now they will rise him up. In both these scenes of the play the humorous elements of a divine comedy emerge. They are almost the comic remarks of Oedipus when he states;

And the boys, your brothers, where are they?  
 Can't they do their part?

(Fagles: 303).

and

So,

when I am nothing-then am I a man?

(Fagles: 306).

Even though there are comic remarks in the play as seen in the above dialogue, the prevailing tone of the play is serious. As August claims, “although humorous elements may exist in divine comedy (just as they may exist in tragedy), the dominant tone of divine comedy is a serious one, as in tragedy” (96). When Oedipus proclaims himself a savior for Athens the chorus begins to treat him with respect. He asks the permission of the people to stay in Colonus. But he is informed that he must carry out rituals for the goddesses on whose untouchable ground he has trespassed if he wishes to stay in Colonus. The chorus describes the purificatory ceremonies that ought to be performed to him in detail. At this particular point of the play, the image of ritual and ritual movement enters. The

details of the ritual, which are described by the chorus, set the tone for the religious mystery. The actual ceremony of purification restores Oedipus to proper contact with the goddesses. Ismene is sent to make the proper sacrifices and to perform the ritual for Oedipus.

Then I'll go, I'll perform the rites.  
Where do I find the place? I have to know.  
(Fagles: 313).

As the play proceeds Oedipus is seen more and more extraordinarily a powerful man, he has the power to bless and curse, he has the power to affect the fate of Athens, and since he will become a god-like he will be able to protect Athens. By his new power of cursing and blessing Oedipus pleases his friends and sends his enemies into trouble and even to their deaths as it is obvious when he begins to say;

Die by your own blood brother's hand-die!-  
killing the very man who drove you out!  
So I curse your life out!  
I call on the dark depths of Tartarus brimming hate,  
where all our fathers lie, to hale you home!  
I cry to the great goddesses of this grove!  
(Fagles: 365).

Oedipus gradually becomes accepted both by the people of Athens and the divine powers. When he stumbles into the worst possible goddesses surprisingly enough they do not destroy him but they become his allies. Traditionally, Furies are conceived as a group of earthly goddesses who are terribly frightening. They are the goddesses of revenge who go after someone if he or she murders a relative or someone in the family. In Oedipus' case, though, they turn out to be the friends of this suffering hero. Little by little, everybody involves with Oedipus. The chorus looks up to Oedipus as the greatest man at the end of the play, to give an example. Oedipus manages to reconcile himself with the Furies. Besides, the exchange between chorus and Oedipus is rather a confession. He is evidently working out a shame. As the play progresses the setting changes and marks the course of the action from bad fortune to good fortune. It is at this point that we see Oedipus change his environment. We happen to have a wonderful picture of Colonus at the end. Everything seems to change around Oedipus as he changes. In his journey of spiritual transformation, the play mainly focuses on Oedipus and on his growing as a character.

When Oedipus dies the recompense he receives is the power and immortality as something more than human. Oedipus dies, but only to become an immortal. The blind, old man sees more clearly than those do who have eyes and he prophesies like the prophet Tiresias in the earlier play. Oedipus, who was despised and rejected, turns out to be the man without whom his enemies cannot do. And they come to take him away such as Creon and Polynices. From the very beginning of the play, death has been Oedipus' declared goal; he has been a wanderer looking for the place where it awaits him, his promised rest. This death, even though he does not know it, is to be his recompense for his suffering. Oedipus' tomb is to be a holy place, and the city in whose territory he lies buried will win a great victory on the site of his grave. Oedipus makes history by his choice of a burial place, and eventually he becomes a presence to be feared by some and thanked by others. All these realities show again that the divine comic hero, Oedipus, rises to an eminence that is truly godlike. Unlike the fallen Oedipus in the first play *Oedipus the King*, now he is called by the gods to join them at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*.

You, you there, Oedipus-what are we waiting for?  
 You hold us back too long! We must move on, move on.  
 (Fagles: 380).

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the hero assumes the attributes of divinity, and this time he is made equal to the gods. Now, Oedipus knows surely, sees clearly since the gods gave him back his eyes, but they are the eyes of superhuman vision. "The rebirth of the heroic Oedipus in this tired, blind, old man emphasizes and defines once more the line drawn between man and god, states again in images of overwhelming beauty and terror, that the possession of knowledge, certainty, and justice is what distinguishes god from man" (Knox: 148).

Oedipus is the man in whom a new strength is growing; power and knowledge that will make him equal to the gods. Oedipus clearly has a physical weakness in the play. He cannot protect himself against cruel Creon when he threatens him, so Oedipus asks for the help of Theseus. Even though he is physically weakened, Oedipus now bears a new dimension of spiritual strength. He judges men justly and exactly, knows fully and sees clearly. Oedipus' power is power over the future, the defeat of Thebes and the death of his own sons. Oedipus both foresees and determines the future. Obviously, he has gained power, which does not normally belong to human kind. Such power is not supposed to walk the earth in mortal shape. Thus the thunder crashes and Oedipus' time has

come. At this point the light image appears as an element of the divine comedy. The thunder and lightning summon Oedipus.

Listen  
thunder, the sky-oh god...  
(Fagles: 370).

As he approaches to the end of his life, Oedipus, the blind old man, whose every painful step had to be guided since the beginning of his blindness, leads his daughters and Theseus off stage with certainty. Oedipus, who was once a flawed and unfortunate person, achieves greatness and leads the way;

Follow me, O my children,  
come this way. I stand revealed at last, look,  
a strange new role for me-I am your guide  
as you were once your father's. On, onward!  
No, don't touch me, let me find that sacred grave myself  
where the Fates will bury Oedipus in this land!  
This way, come, walk on! This is the way  
they lead me on, Hermes the Escort of the Dead,  
Persephone, Queen of the Dead.  
(Fagles: 376).

Oedipus, who was initially in the hands of misfortune and an exile, rises to an eminence that is truly godlike. "The last of the Sophoclean heroes, the most fiercely angry of all those intractable figures who defied the limits set to human power and assumed the attributes of divinity, is here recognized by the gods as their peer and welcomed to their presence. The gods of Sophoclean tragedy, the most remote and mysterious creation in all Greek literature, here show their respect for the hero in unmistakable terms; they gave...-but to Oedipus, who suffered most and longest, they give, in the death he longed for, immortal life and power" (Knox: 161-162).

The gods, who destroyed Oedipus once, now acknowledge his dignity with their heavenly thunder. The timeless divinities are seen as the lords of time. Upon his acceptance by the gods, Oedipus obtains the timeless existence, in other words, he becomes like one of the gods in eternity. As long as time continues the endurance of Oedipus continues, but while time remains the same his endurance grows greater. Oedipus has time as his constant companion, now time stands by him as a medium of greatness and even as a teacher. Time teaches every man what he really is, and in Oedipus' case time has rather confirmed his high spirit

and strength. In a way, it has brought the man to pass, as it brings all things to pass especially the most unexpected (Whitman: 198). We know that the gods are free of time, they are deathless and ageless. The helpless and aged Oedipus, who has been the prey of time, will eventually become a timeless blessing in the end. Thus he will achieve eternity through his timeless existence.

The hero of the play does not deny that he is tainted since he had killed his father and married his mother, in fact. But he insists that he is not a guilty man in a moral sense. What Oedipus has in mind is not rebelliousness but a clarification and an enhancement of the notion of moral responsibility. The justice of his argument is approved, because at his death he receives divine recognition and his tomb becomes a seat of beneficent power. Oedipus seems to have retained his pride and integrity although he enters the play as a blind old man who has walked a long way. At the moment of his departure from this world, he walks on and out with a clearer vision than his guides, to the destined spot where he is transformed to a new and eternal existence. At the end of the play, Oedipus is either swept up or the earth opened up and took him in her grave, a rest of eternal peace. These are the possible movements, which bring the images of descent and ascent into the play. At any rate, he has been accepted by the gods and maybe taken up by one of them or went down to the earth. Nobody really knows what happens to Oedipus but his passing from this world is said to be a marvelous one and the ending of his life results in harmony. At the end of his long time sufferings what Oedipus is presented with is godliness, a place among the gods. Oedipus' divine ending and the divine intervention is stated in the words of the messenger as;

But by what doom  
Oedipus died, not a man alive can say,  
only Theseus, our king.  
No blazing bolt of the god took him off,  
no whirlwind sweeping inland off the seas,  
not in his last hour. No, it was some escort  
sent by the gods or the dark world of the dead,  
the lightless depths of Earth bursting open in kindness  
to receive him. That man went on his way,  
I tell you, not with trains of mourners,  
not with suffering or with sickness, no,  
if the death of any mortal ever was one,  
his departure was a marvel!

(Fagles: 381).

As it is described “not with suffering or with sickness, no,” by the messenger himself, Oedipus leaves the world after he has achieved a certain purification and a spiritual transformation.

As soon as Oedipus is accepted by the gods and took his place among them the chorus comes back to the theme of serenity. The final words are calmness, resignation, etc. The weeping ceases.

Come, my children, weep no more,  
raise the dirge no longer. All rests  
in the hands of a mighty power.

(Fagles: 388).

*Oedipus at Colonus* has long been studied and taught as a work of tragedy throughout the years. Moreover, many scholars tended to look at this particular Sophoclean work of art from the same point of view and produced lots of critical writings about the play. But from another point of view, it is possible to consider this masterpiece play of Sophocles as a divine comedy. It includes nearly all the elements of divine comedies in its entirety. *Oedipus at Colonus* evidently possesses characteristics such as the traditional comic action which moves from bad fortune to good fortune, from catastrophe to harmony, the songs of chorus, images of light, ritual, and many others that make the play a divine comedy.

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