

## Boeotian Cultic Associations in *Oedipus at Colonus*

*Oedipus at Colonus* begins with Oedipus, blinded, exiled, and seeking refuge as a suppliant. The play ends with Oedipus' mysterious interment in the earth and an undisclosed tomb in Colonus and his status as a protector and hero of Athens. Oedipus exemplifies the duality inherent in a cult-hero, namely the ability to provide both a benefit, κέρδη, to allies and detriment, ἄτη, to enemies (*OC* 92-93). There is ongoing debate as to whether the cult of Oedipus at Colonus reflects a reality or a Sophoclean invention, since there is no concrete evidence predating the *Oedipus at Colonus* (Calame 1998; Edmunds 1981; Kearns 1999; Scodel 2006). By contextualizing this ending against other regional mythic cult traditions, I maintain that the setting of the play at Colonus reasserts the primacy of Athens.

I propose that, through the network of mythic and cultic associations between Poseidon Hippios, Demeter Erinys, Oedipus, and the Semnai Theai, Sophocles both reasserts the cult center in Colonus while simultaneously reconciling a range of other traditions. It is significant that Sophocles mentions the sanctuaries of Demeter and altar of Poseidon in close affiliation with the grove of the Eumenides. A variant of Oedipus' death, given by the Alexandrian Lysimachus, places him not in Athens but rather in Eteonos (FGrH 382F2). Demeter and the Erinyes hold strong chthonic connections to one another and Oedipus to each independently (Edmunds 1981). In Boeotia, the mythic tradition involving Demeter presents her as a vengeful chthonic force under the cult-title of Demeter Erinys after her assault by Poseidon in the form of a horse (Johnston 1999). The role of Poseidon Hippios and Demeter Erinys was antagonistic in the Boeotian and Arcadian variants, in which Demeter is noted for her chthonic character and anger. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, neither Demeter nor the Eumenides exercise their ability to harm—on the contrary, the Eumenides accept Oedipus and Demeter is a generative force. The topical

descriptions of Colonus and the grove of the Semnai Theai and the shrine of Demeter Euclea (OC 1600-1) ground the dramatic action in a realistic place and mythic space.

Oedipus' successive supplication of the Eumenides, after his purification, and Polyneices' successive supplication of Poseidon Hippios sharply contrast Oedipus' anger and rebuke of his son. Kearns in particular notes the interpretative difficulty of Oedipus' tomb, whether under the Areopagus (Paus. 1.28.6-7) or in Colonus. Our accounts of Oedipus' tombs are regional variants place Oedipus at either Thebes or burial places within the sanctuary of Demeter. The establishment of a hero-cult in Athens contributes two-fold to the narrative of Athens as pious as well as most capable of receiving and incorporating suppliants (Burian 1974; Kowalzig 2006; Scullion 1999). Tragedy recontextualizes the mythological, establishes a ritual aetiology, and in turn connects heroes and their cultic power with Athens. Evidence of a cult of Oedipus at Colonus before Sophocles' *OC* is specious, although Androtion (FGrH 334 F 62) includes of narrative linking Oedipus to Demeter and Athena Poliouchos. The Athenian aetiology for the cult of Oedipus more clearly glorifies the city when set against Boeotian cults and myths. Sophocles specifically emphasizes the beneficial aspects of the gods Poseidon, Demeter, and the Semnai Theai at Colonus, while reserving the more vengeful aspects of cultic figures for Oedipus. Even then, the anger of the chthonic hero is explicitly against Boeotian (Theban) forces, whereas Athens benefits from both the nearby gods and Oedipus as hero.

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