

Classics / WAGS 38: Third Essay

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Length: 1250-1500 words

Office hours:
Tues. 10:00-12:00
Fri. 11:00-12:00

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Oedipus Complexly

Oedipus the King = OK

Oedipus at Colonus = OC

The Darker Face of the Earth = DFE

All of these topics address remakings and responses, such as modern adaptations of tragedy, Sophocles' response to Aeschylus and to his own earlier plays. As ever, the objective is to get beyond where the subject has been left in class discussion, the reading notes, or the e-mail questions/comments. It is meritorious to be aware, at least at some points, of the workings of specific scenes as theater or film and of how the remaking casts fresh light on the original.

The following topics go in many directions, and some are far more straightforward than others. None, however, is intrinsically "easier" than the others. The more self-evident and unproblematic the match-up, the further I expect to you to go with it. With some of the more daunting possibilities (e.g., working from Sophocles' text to Pasolini's images or to Dove's mythic history), it is harder to get started but easier to be interesting and original. Feel free to propose other topics.

I. Foundation myth (two options)

Ia. Athens: *The Furies* and *OC*

The productions of the *Oresteia* (458 BCE) and of *OC* (401) bracket the glory days of Athenian democracy. Through the exiled figures of Orestes and Oedipus, respectively, both *The Furies* and *OC* move the unresolved conflicts of tragedy to Athens for resolution under the sign of the Furies.

► **How have the cosmic struggles of *The Furies* – symbolized in Apollo, the Furies, and Athena – been distilled into the single figure of the blessing/cursing Oedipus in *OC*? How is Oedipus transformed and transforming? If he witnesses to Zeus’s justice, how is that justice different from what was foreseen in *The Furies*? What kind of space will he occupy in Athens and Athenian life?**

Ib. African America: *The Oresteia* and *DFE*

Augustus Newcastle has a founder’s name (combining both Caesar Augustus and Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey Douglass) and represents a composite of heroic antebellum figures. Like Orestes, he conspires to overthrow a powerful household and the order that it represents. Like Oedipus, he fails to understand how much of himself that household represents. *The Libation Bearers* and *DFE* are the two works in which we have seen a ritually powerful slave chorus.

► **How has Dove shaped a “tragic” foundation myth for African American culture around the tangled history of a single family in ways based on- or homologous to- the *Oresteia*? How does violence figure in the achievement of self-knowledge in the two cases?**

Some possible questions: In what ways is Amalia a Clytemnestra? an Electra? a Fury? What are the powers of the slave chorus over Orestes and Augustus? How is the “African” background comparable to the Dionysian in tragedy? What is the relationship of violence and knowledge? What cultural possibilities are opened by the fall of the old cultural order (tyranny or slavocracy)?

(Yes, *DFE* is a remaking of the Oedipus myth, but this question asks about the play’s larger cultural project as it is similar to that of the *Oresteia*. Don’t feel obliged to discuss Oedipus if the topic is not helpful.)

II. Either Way, You Lose: *DFE* and either *Antigone* or *OK*

Amalia: Well then, this will be my last story –
[...] You will wish
You had never been born. (*DFE*, p. 155)

Jocasta: Oedipus, unhappy Oedipous!
that is all I can call you, and the last thing
that I shall ever call you. (*OK* 1171ff.)

Augustus: It's too late.

Amalia: Don't you think I see the suffering?
Don't you think I know I'm the cause?
But a master cannot allow himself
the privilege of sorrow. A master
must rule, or die. (*DFE*, p. 37)

Creon: Suppose you do not understand?

Oedipus: But yet

I must be ruler.

Creon: Not if you rule badly. (*OK* 629ff.)

In her character Amalia, Dove has retained the outlines of the role of Sophocles' Jocasta. Like Jocasta (and many slave mothers) Amalia has had an infant taken from her. Both husbands (Laius, Louis) scar the infant as they send him away. Jocasta has resigned herself to fatalism (Jocasta: "Best to live lightly, as one can, unthinkingly." v. 979); Amalia has settled for luck ("I was happy once. / I traded it for luck" p. 92). When they learn of their partner's identities, both women acknowledge their sons (above: "last story," "last thing") and kill themselves, sparing Augustus and Oedipus the need to kill them.

Yet in terms of will, desire, and social power, Amalia has come a long way from Jocasta. Because of the historical circumstances, in claiming agency and self-definition this staunchly untrafficked woman ends up on the wrong side of another sort of traffic—in slaves—and finally asserts herself in terms of patriarchal power and black powerlessness.

► Analyze Amalia's circumstances and choices in terms of a Sophoclean protagonist, either Oedipus of *OK* or Antigone, or elements of both, if that proves fruitful.

Some possible angles: Has there ever been a right thing for Amalia (Oedipus, Antigone) to do that would not backfire? Knowingly or unknowingly, Oedipus and Antigone deal with the pollution (taint, shame, curse) of incest and parricide, a stigma more powerful than questions of guilt and innocence; what is the equivalent in Dove's historical world? How are powerful families (ruling families, the master's family) uniquely vulnerable?

III. Talking Statues: *OK* and Stravinsky's "Oedipus Rex"

► Assess what Taymor's staging has and has not managed to replicate from the original staged version of *OK* (as we can imagine it). Unlike most modern stagings of tragedy, Taymor's production has masks, dancing, and music. On the other hand, the separation into singers and dancers, the radical de-emphasis on words (not many, and in Latin), and the final dismantling of the costumes could be taken as the creation of a parable of identity and art (or whatever) *about OK* or the iconic cultural role of *OK* rather than being a version of *OK*. Be as specific as possible about how particular scenes work or do not work in the same way (entrances, exits, gestures, metrical (Soph.) or musical (Strav.) interactions).

IV. Oedipus in Action: *OK* and *OC*.

If Electra's comings and goings matter little to anyone else, Oedipus may be the figure whose entrances and exits have the most impact. Power, constructively or catastrophically, tends to be wherever he is.

► Compare the protracted action of Oedipus' arrival into the grove at Colonus and his departure into its depths (*OC*) with his first entrances and disputed final exit in *OK*. How do Oedipus' movements express the contradictions (or ironies, if you will) of his nature?

Rationale:

One of the reasons for the singular popularity and influence of *OK* is that it is so bound up in abstract issues that scholars and readers can play with: questions of knowledge and sight; riddles of identity; and ironies of all sorts. Apart from new clarities about innocence and pollution, *OC* on this score seems comparatively flat. But if one remembers that ideas in drama have to be enacted as bodies moving in space, *OK* and *OC* become more similar, and *OC* becomes a richer play.

Relationship to place:

The setting of *OK*, before the palace, is a midway point (or liminal, if you will) between the *polis* proper (reached by the *eisodos* on one side) and the wild (reached through the other *eisodos*), namely, Mt. Cithaeron, where Oedipus was exposed, as well as the crossroads, where he slew his father Laius. The messenger from Corinth would come from this other *eisodos*. The wild world reached by this *eisodos* is obviously beyond Oedipus' control, and has ready associations with Dionysus (but Dionysus was conceived in the *polis*, to a princess of the previous dynasty).

The Grove of the Furies in *OC* is similarly liminal: outside the urbanized center, but still

cultivated (e.g., the olive trees) and is a cult center vital to the well-being of the *polis*. Colonus also proves to be in a buffer zone where forces from both Thebes and Athens can dispute over Oedipus.¹

There is another complexity in the setting of *OK*: As in all the palace settings (e.g., *Agamemnon*, *Antigone*) an axis runs from the domestic space behind the door (out of which Jocasta comes and to which she returns, finally to kill herself) to the public space in front of the door.

What is the role of domestic space in *OC*? Oedipus in *OC* has unique power over the fate of *poleis*; what can he do for his own family?

(An essay could be devoted to the *polis* / *oikos* distinction in the two plays, and its relationship to gender roles, including questions of mobility and power.)

Relationship to daughters:

Mirroring scenes at the ends of the plays (recounted in the messenger's speech in *OC*).

Oracles:

An oracle from Apollo at Delphi motivates action in both plays. A secondary character (Creon in *OK*; Ismene in *OC*) enters to announce the new prophecy.

Speed: Oedipus' quickness of response is one of his first prominent characteristics in *OK*. *OC* has much to say about the issue of time and learning.

V. *Antigone at Colonus*: *Antigone* and *OC*

Chorus:

The savage spirit of a savage father
shows itself in this girl. She does not know
how to yield to trouble. (*Antigone* 513-515)

Oedipus at Colonus (406 BCE?) functions as a prequel for the *Antigone* (442?): The good

¹A fair question: Aren't all such palaces in tragedy in some sort of middle position? The front of the palace in *Antigone* is fairly similar to *OK*: again, there is communication with the *polis* through one *eisodos*, and with the country through the other (where Antigone buries Polyneices and where she is sent to be immured). But in the *Agamemnon* there seems to be only one offstage other: the way back from Troy.

Lemnos in *Philoctetes* is a particularly clear midpoint: a wild place, tamed only by Philoctetes' presence, between Troy and Greece, with a clear direction about which direction he is to go and the large irony that he can have almost magical powers over the Big Show at Troy (enough to win the war) but can barely survive on this little island.

daughter Antigone, having lost her father, goes back to Thebes to intervene in the conflict between her brothers. Before Theseus returns with the final word on Oedipus' demise, Antigone sings a *kommos* with Ismene and the elders of Colonus that recalls her role as mourner in the *Antigone*, but also contains a conflict with Ismene about Antigone's desire to see Oedipus' grave that mirrors the opening scene of that play. Antigone: "Bring me where he was, / and then kill me" (*OC* 1971f.).

This topic, however, concerns another connection between the *Antigone* and *OC*. As the above quotation indicates, when Antigone starts arguing with Creon, the Theban elders start hearing her father's voice – not the voice of the successful king and rescuer of the *polis*, but the harsh, besieged figure he became. By the time of *Antigone*, the curse has moved to another generation, starting with Polyneices' and Eteocles' killing of each other (shades of Laius and Oedipus).

► **How does Oedipus' role in *OC* mirror that of Antigone in the *Antigone*? Or, to put the story in narrative sequence, how does Antigone (in the *Antigone*) come to resemble her exiled, monstrous, and powerful father (*OC*)?**

VI. The Traffic in Jocasta: *OK* and "Edipo Re" (which you watch on your own)



Sylvana Magnano, Franco Citti

Martha Graham in "Night Journey" takes the Sophoclean Jocasta who wills not to remember, know, or expect and restages her as the consciousness that projects the whole *muthos*. The story, because always-already known, tells itself without the words over which Oedipus, Teiresias, and the Theban elders preside. One might argue that Graham has replaced the male will to know with female desire – a modern reinterpretation, to be sure, but reminiscent of the enveloping consciousnesses of figures such as Aeschylus' Cassandra and Clytemnestra and Sophocles' Electra. Graham includes no Sphinx. Teiresias wears his clairvoyance under a terrible mask; Graham hoofs her wrinkles among younger versions of herself, the chorus.

Pasolini similarly expands Jocasta's part to balance Oedipus's:

Scene 3. On the banks of the Livenza. Exterior. Day

“[Cut 18] Having drunk his fill, the child raises his clear, sparkling eyes, and sees, along with us his mother’s eyes.”

In cut 18, the camera (which is the adult’s memory of his infant subjectivity) lingers for almost a minute on the Madonna, who looks back lovingly, knowingly, and more insistently than a Madonna should. Thereafter Sylvana Magnano says little, but gives remarkable face (or is it mask?). Giocasta is visibly trafficked, in a cart to the newly arrived rescuer, whoever he is. This Giocasta also lets her hair down. The distance between Sphinx and mom has also diminished (Edipo attacks both).



► **How does Giocasta’s face integrate the narrative and provide a center of consciousness? How much is Pasolini recovering mythic or psychological material from *OK* (or, possibly, elsewhere in Greek tragedy); or, on the other hand, how much is he imposing a modern sensibility? Is he revivifying an ancient narrative or just describing the kind of violence that sons do to fathers (while turning into them)?**

Pasolini opens the door (parts the curtains) for all manner of theoretical approaches that you may want to pursue – Freudian, Marxist, Lacanian, queer, whatever. Just spell out your assumptions for me at the outset.

About “Edipo Re”

A translation of the script is in Frost: *Oedipus Rex: A Film*, translated by John Mathews. 850.3 P2646 edY Ma.

Like Dove, Pasolini explores the power of the Oedipus myth when it is referred to another time and translated to another medium. Rather than move the core *muthos* to another time and set of characters, Pasolini sets a relatively straightforward, if abbreviated, staging of *Oedipus the King* into the narrative frame of his own life, starting with something like his own

Classics 38: Third Essay (13.IV.01)

birth in Bologna in 1922 and ending with an allegory of his adult life. Rather than being compressed into retellings, the events leading up to Oedipus' fatal day of discovery are told in a linear fashion: exposure as an infant, adoption by Polybus and Merope in Corinth, being accused of being a foundling, journey to Delphi, violent encounter with Laius, victory over the Sphinx. What unifies the ancient and modern segments is implicit reference to Pasolini's own life from a Freudian perspective, with elements of Marxism.

Therefore "Edipo Re" works from three "texts":

- 1) Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*;
- 2) The Freudian interpretation of the myth;
- 3) Pasolini's autobiography.

Visually the film is paradoxical. On the one hand, what we see is more realistic than what can be enacted on stage. Rather than have a chorus (more or less eliminated here) sing in funereal tones, we see extensive shots of funerals. The "city" that everywhere frames Oedipus' thoughts becomes recurring panning shots of a town in Morocco (an antiquity, a cultural "other," primitive and "authentic" – but possibly reminding us of our own Eurocentric, touristic, colonizing gaze). The dream-like, psychologically resonant notion of sleeping with mom becomes scenes in the sack. Plague-ridden bodies litter the landscape. Like Edipo, we may see more than we want to.

On the other hand, the depicted past here is seen on the screen of memory, and the act of looking is constantly problematized to keep alive the possibility that these images may derive from memory, fantasy, psychic projection. I raise this issue here because the technique may be elusive in a first viewing. The camera begins with the infant's-eye-view in the first movement. Thereafter it jumps and cuts disconcertingly. Characters cover their eyes. The sun blinds. Scenes get lost in darkness. The choreography of the camera echoes Edipo's own jumpy, evasive movements. The camera likes to pan; Edipo closes his eyes and spins at the crossroads rather than make a decision.

The chorus has been eliminated, but groups are everywhere present, usually in ways suggestive of the workings of gender, class, and politics. The tenuous power of the royals is set off against powers of various throngs, congregations, mobs. They usually have songs or chants, but we cannot understand the words.



First movement:

After a momentary shot of a milestone pointing to “Tebe” (Thebes), the film starts in Italy in the 1920s with the birth of a son to an army officer and his wife, essentially Pasolini’s circumstances. In a way unusual in cinema, the subjectivity of the infant governs the camera at times. When the father, aware of the underlying conflict between fathers and sons, grabs the infant by the ankles, the film cuts to the exposure of the infant Edipo (“swollen foot”). The father’s thoughts are indicated, as in silent film, on a title. Here the subtitles are illegible. Father’s inner voice: “Here he is, the child who is gradually going to take your place in the world. Yes, he will hound you away and take your rightful place. He will kill you. He is here for no other reasons. He knows it.”

The images in this brief, dream-like section are hard to catch: Watch for textiles (curtains, dresses), perhaps to symbolize both the feminine (dress, veil), as well as the screen (veiling, disclosing reality). The verdant valley (mom) will recur, as will the panning shots of the sky.

Second movement:

The next portion of the narrative, shot in Morocco, depicts the events that lie behind *Oedipus the King*. Pasolini and the designer Danilo Donato designed the costumes to be “barbaric and arbitrary.” Aztec and Sumerian symbols mark the royal robes. In the background are folk songs from Romania, where Pasolini had planned to shoot, chosen for their “ahistorical” and “atemporal” blend of Russian and Middle Eastern qualities.

Along the way, Epido has his first meeting with Tiresio. Again, titles that subtitles lose. Edipo’s inner voice: [First title:] “The others, your fellow citizens and your brothers, suffer, weep, seek salvation together . . . And you, you are here, blind and alone, and you sing . . .” [Second title:] “How I wish that I were you! You sing of that which is beyond destiny.”

The dialogue with the Sphinx also gets lost in the subtitles:

A youth explains the monster: “Just think. It came from the bottom of an abyss, no one knows where. . . Everything was going so well . . . Who could have imagined . . . No one has the courage to throw it back into its abyss. Even though he who does is to become the husband of Giocasta . . .”

Sphinx: “There is an enigma in your life. What is it?”

Edipo: “I don’t know. I don’t want to know.”

“I don’t want to see you.”

“I don’t want to see you– I don’t. . . want to hear you.”

Sphinx: “It’s useless, it’s useless. The abyss you are pushing me into is within yourself.”

Third movement:

Here the film follows the episodes of the play closely. Instead of having a chorus, there

are interludes, often sexual, in a range of locations, as well as attention to the mask-like face of Giocasta, who becomes as much a center of consciousness as Edipo. Well, mother knows. . . .

Fourth movement:

The film cuts back to contemporary Bologna, where the blinded Edipo is led not by Antigone but by “Angelo,” who was the messenger (Greek: “anghelos”). Together the two (a symbol of Pasolini’s divided self?) walk through the Bologna of his student years; a factory (his Marxist commitments); finally a return to the verdant valley of infancy (also indicating his Freudian phase). Edipo ends as a flute player (cf. Tiresio, as first seen). The flute may indicate the poet-prophet. It may also go back to a tradition of pastoral-homoerotic verse that starts with Virgil’s *Eclogues*, which itself evokes (mildly) images of Pan and satyrs.

Some larger questions:

Has Pasolini turned Sophocles’ allegory about self-knowledge into an allegory about sexual identity? Is the enigma that the Sphinx diagnoses sexual orientation?²

How have women been transferred from being only the viewed to being viewers as well?

Why does Pasolini bracket the narrative in the modern world? Which part of the film is dreaming which part?

What do you make of Edipo’s resistance to being framed, confined, crowned, defined?

²In a preface to the published screenplay, Pasolini distanced himself from unseemly thoughts about his mother, with whom he continued to be close: “I want to stress the fact that now, at forty-five years of age, I have emerged from the wilderness of Freudian and Marxist dogma. *But where have I got to?* I have certainly never dreamt that I was making love to my mother. Perhaps I should refer the two or three readers who have stayed with me as far as this to a couple of lines from the *Usignolo della Chiesa Cattolica* (The nightingale of the Catholic Church): *il sogno in cui mia madre / s’infilava i miei calzoni*. [. . . the dream in which my mother slips into my trousers]. If anything, I have dreamt rather of making love to my father (against the chest of drawers in the wretched little bedroom my brothers and I shared) and perhaps to my brother as well. And I have dreamt of making love to women of stone. Of course I’m not counting the dreams that have recurred several times throughout my life, where I climb endless, dreary flights of stairs in dreary homes. I am looking for my mother who has disappeared.” (pp. 9f.).