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### Truth And Self At Colonus

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## Truth and Self at Colonus

GRACE LEDBETTER

Two questions about Sophocles's most mysterious surviving play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, loom large both in the critical literature and, one can easily imagine, for readers more generally. The first asks whether in this play Oedipus, the polluted, banished, suffering embodiment of unspeakable horror, ends truly transformed into a divine savior and healer. The answer eludes us because, while Oedipus's recognized prophetic powers and his apparent apotheosis promise to imbue Athens with future benefit, the lasting trauma of his life asserts itself repeatedly throughout the play and, along with his steely curse that will bring violent death to his own sons, suggests that perhaps Oedipus has not been entirely transfigured, that he perhaps continues to play his accursed role in the house of Labdacus. As Martha Reineke puts it, "Substantive change cannot be tracked from *Oedipus the King* to *Oedipus at Colonus*. Oedipus' story remains subject to a double telling; the face of the polluting monster and blind savior are one."<sup>1</sup> The second question resonates with an experience

1. Reineke (2014, 129). Reineke (126–29), presents a clear and compelling account of the scholarly work on both sides of this debate.

that many have had reading the play: What actually *happens* in this long play other than the miracle of Oedipus's death? Read in one way, the play consists of digressions and delaying tactics (Will Theseus receive Oedipus into Athens? Will Antigone and Ismene be captured? Will Creon and Polynices persuade Oedipus to return to Thebes?), which, although they pose no deeply tragic threats or tensions, entertain the audience reasonably well until the "winged thunder of Zeus" (1460) marks the commencement of the real action.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter I address both of these questions with an interpretation that at once locates one of the play's fundamental concerns and accounts for why the polarity of savior/polluted monster resists resolution. I argue that the business of this play finds Oedipus defining and distinguishing multiple images of reality, or "truths," in an effort to meet the challenges to his conception of himself posed by his traumatic past. Oedipus works to define and ultimately succeeds in defining himself as a complex and differentiated subject who withstands difficult tensions, and in doing so reaches a state of psychic health. All in all, the figure and characteristic activity of Oedipus while he is in Colonus can be said to articulate a therapeutic process that centers on his establishing a complex but ordered picture of his various images of truth and reality. I argue that a recent psychoanalytic theory of the self, when used as a heuristic device, illuminates and helps to resolve some of the play's most intractable problems of interpretation, as it reveals a unified purpose connecting nearly every scene. The ideas about psychic health that I discuss, even though they derive from a contemporary psychoanalytic theory, engage (in a different way) many of the philosophical issues that, for example, Plato addresses in his notion of a healthy

2. See, for example, Waldock (1951, 219) on "filler" scenes in the play. Except when noted otherwise, all translations are from Lloyd-Jones (1994) and refer to the line numbers of the Greek text.

soul that has distinct parts that function together without conflict and as a harmonious whole.<sup>3</sup>

In her recent psychoanalytic and philosophical study, *Truth Matters: Theory and Practice in Psychoanalysis*, Shlomit Yadlin-Gadot defends a theory of truth that takes into account both the history of philosophical notions of truth and the role that ideas of truth play in psychoanalytic theory and practice.<sup>4</sup> Yadlin-Gadot's theory proposes that different theories of truth in the history of philosophy (for example, truth as correspondence, truth as coherence, truth as subjectively constructed) each hold a kind of validity that accommodates different basic psychic needs. Her thesis thus maintains that truth is multiple and, among other things, "an inherent group of distinct and definable organizing principles of the psyche."<sup>5</sup> By defining six "truth axes," which function as epistemic assumptions, characteristic self-states, and images of reality, Yadlin-Gadot lays the groundwork for a view of therapy that aims to express and clarify the different selves and their well-defined boundaries and open up a space for them to exist together and become more familiar to each other. As Yadlin-Gadot puts it, "The overarching need for truth is expressed across several dimensions of the subject's life. Each truth axis creates an image of reality and a truth within it that ensures the provision of a deep emotional need which motivated the formation."<sup>6</sup> Seen in this way, the self "gradually evolves from this organization, acquiring progressively its unity, continuity and coherence."<sup>7</sup> If the word "axis" gives us trouble, it may be helpful to think of the truth axes as sets of beliefs

3. See especially *Republic* 4.443b8–445e4. For example, "Virtue, then, as it seems, would be a kind of health and beauty and good condition of the soul, and vice would be a disease, ugliness, and weakness" (444d10–e2).

4. Yadlin-Gadot (2016).

5. Yadlin-Gadot (2016, 1).

6. Yadlin-Gadot (2016, 125).

7. Yadlin-Gadot (2016, 272).

(held with certainty) regarding a particular dimension of one's life. The theory requires us to accept a number of claims about truth: that it is not one and absolute, that it is "inextricably tied up with the subject and determined by his needs," that it is "a dynamic product of a long and gradual process of ordering," that "different notions of truth do not invalidate each other," and that we have a basic desire for truth that is resilient even in the face of postmodern critiques.<sup>8</sup>

Each of the six truth axes creates its own image of reality—its own point of certainty—with regard to a particular psychic need. (1) The need to manage factual reality and negotiate the mind-independent reality around us constructs a "factual reality" and finds its philosophical correlate in correspondence theories of truth, which Yadlin-Gadot identifies with Russell, Moore, and early Wittgenstein. One's image of factual reality characterizes the way one views oneself in the third person, the way one perceives others as (accurately) perceiving oneself. (2) The need to lend internal coherence to perceptions of self and world is met by an image of "coherent truth," a truth about both personal identity and perceived externality whose elements are checked for truth value by inner consistency. Yadlin-Gadot discusses Spinoza's and Hegel's early versions of coherence theory, but could just as easily have broadened the discussion to include idealist, realist, and antirealist versions.<sup>9</sup> (3) An image of reality *as shared by the self and select others*, along with a point of certainty about that reality, fulfills our need to construct a shared interpersonal truth. This intersubjective self is always set against a singular or plural other, which can be experienced as either a comfortable "we" or a threatening "them." Anxieties of alienation and lack of belonging, or conversely, feelings of being supported by social agreement, motivate this particular need. In the history of philosophy, William James, Husserl,

8. Yadlin-Gadot (2016, 64).

9. See Walker (1989).

Dewey, and Rorty can be said to defend a version of truth as intersubjective, or reality as a set of intersubjective practices. (4) What Yadlin-Gadot calls the “subjective-existential” axis of truth finds articulation in what some scholars have urged us to see as the existential theory of truth developed by Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Marcel.<sup>10</sup> In Kierkegaard’s version, truth is a subjective moment, a movement from false to true that articulates an individual, authentic sense of truth, free from the gaze of the other: “Each subject must find both personal truth and integrity and an individual way to achieve it.”<sup>11</sup> At the basis of this subjective-existential truth is the need to maintain loyalty to one’s authenticity and to counteract experiences of shame and fears of annihilation. (5) The need to promote goals calls for a “pragmatic reality,” one in which we can see ourselves as working toward a future interest and calculate the ways that reality would benefit the self in the future. One place to view this mode of thinking philosophically is in the theories of both William James and Peirce, which view the truth as what the future proves to be true. (6) The final truth axis, the ideal, constructs a reality that contains features we aspire to and believe in, features that we value as ideals. The Platonic theory of forms stands as one influential representative of this kind of theory of truth.<sup>12</sup>

According to Yadlin-Gadot, these six truth “axes” (and we can alternatively think of them as sets of beliefs regarding a particular dimension of life) must be recognized, defined, and separated by the subject in order to reach a state of psychic health. The therapeutic goal beyond that point consists in seeking to achieve a dialogue among the various axes, ameliorate conflict among them, and become

10. See Cannon (1996).

11. Yadlin-Gadot (2016, 55).

12. For Yadlin-Gadot’s discussion of the history of philosophical notions of truth, see 39–55. For her basic definitions of the six axes, see 1–13.

familiar with what are, as it were, the different “languages” spoken by these different aspects of the self. The subject must aspire to become equally familiar with all languages of the self. An example might help us to get a better idea of how the different truth axes function in this theory of the self:

Imagine a familiar situation of a parent and his child returning from a PTA meeting in which problematic things have been said about the child. The parent’s mind is probably racing with questions: Who, truly, is this child of mine? Who is my child as he is perceived by his teachers? Who is my child as he perceives himself to be? Also, who is the “objectively perceived” child described in the assessment done last year at that top notch institute? Or: What should I do with this child? Do the images of these different children converge into one figure? And in a paraphrase: Will the “true” child please step forward? Had the “true” child stepped forward, regardless of being disappointing or pleasing to the parent, the latter would have experienced the relief of clarity and comprehension. The price of this relief would have been the loss of the complexity and multi-dimensionality of his understanding of the child.<sup>13</sup>

In the theory I am considering, there is no single “true” description of who the child is, nor are there an unlimited number of true descriptions of who the child is. The child’s self, and all of our selves, are composed of six distinct images of reality: how I view myself “factually,” or as viewed by others; my view of myself as sharing a reality with certain other people; my view of myself as coherent and consistent; my view of my “authentic” self (who I really am *to me*); my view of myself as working and acting toward particular goals; and

13. Yadlin-Gadot (2016, 144).



my view of myself as aspiring toward certain ideals (which could be moral ideals, ideals of love, ideals of career, etc.).

My purpose is not to defend or to raise objections to Yadlin-Gadot's theory; I do not wish here to question, for example, whether indeed we should be talking about "truth" rather than "belief," or whether Yadlin-Gadot's particular six axes are correct or exhaustive. I wish still less to evaluate her account of theories of truth in the history of philosophy. I wish only to show how her theory, as it stands, can be used as a heuristic device to shed light on Sophocles's play, in particular how it can help to sketch a picture of the dying Oedipus as a man working to (re)construct the six images of reality as Yadlin-Gadot defines them in an attempt to compose a unified and healthy self—before he dies.

## FACTUAL REALITY

We know that Oedipus has come to Colonus to die, but who exactly *is* Oedipus at this point in his life? His early identity as a wise, worshipped king who grieves for the suffering of his city has been shattered by the successive traumas of recognition, pollution, self-inflicted violence, exile, and poverty. At the end of *Oedipus the King* Oedipus's view of himself has crystallized into a single dominating identity: in his own view he is "utterly lost" (*meg' olethrion*, 1341); "most accursed" (*kataratotaton*, 1345); "the one among mortals most hated by the gods" (1345–46, 1519); "abandoned by the gods" (*atheos*, 1360); his lot is "an evil even beyond evil" (*presbuteron eti kakou kakon*, 1365); he is the "worst" (*kakiston*, 1433). Oedipus's view of his utter wretchedness, together with what he sees as the singularity of his abject state (he is the "one" most hated by the gods, the "worst"), signal a rather extreme version of what Yadlin-Gadot's theory considers the hallmark of an unhealthy psyche: a "monologic"



or “epic” state wherein the language of one of the truth axes dominates, “thus creating authoritarian discourse.”<sup>14</sup> In this case, it is the factual axis, how Oedipus views himself as perceived by others (“most hated by the gods”), that eclipses all other possible ways of defining himself, for example, how he might have previously seen himself as aspiring to certain ideals. Oedipus’s state at the end of *Oedipus the King* reaches an extreme of trauma where even the possibility of giving content to the other truth axes—what goals he is working toward, the ideals he aspires to, the interpersonal world he shares with others, a coherent view of himself—all appear to have been obliterated.

Near the beginning of *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus fully acknowledges a sense of loss of his former self: his fame and fine reputation have “flow[ed] away in vain” (258–59). But time has passed and Oedipus has received an oracle from Apollo that has guided him to Colonus, promised an end to his suffering and that he would become a blessing to those who accept him as a suppliant, and a curse to those who have cast him out (91–94). What I would like to suggest is that, throughout the course of this play, Oedipus goes through a process of articulating and thereby reconstructing the various components that make up his self.

The axis of factual truth consists not of the way others view Oedipus but rather of the ways that Oedipus accepts that he is viewed *truly* by others—in other words, what he takes as factually true about himself when he views himself objectified as a third person or as viewed by another. The difficulty with which Oedipus, while he is in Colonus, accepts the most brutal facts about himself emerges as palpably as his intermittent construal of himself as a third person. When the chorus asks him who he is, he blurts out, “Do not, do not ask me who I am! Do not question me enquiring further!” (210–11). The same alarm seizes him suddenly much later in the play when he

14. Yadlin-Gadot (2016, 269).

has momentarily forgotten that he is polluted: "Yet what am I saying? How could I, who was born to misery, wish you to touch a man in whom every taint of evil dwells? I cannot wish it, neither can I allow you to do it! Only those mortals who have experienced these things can share the misery!" (1132-36). Oedipus accepts that he is viewed this way by others, and he makes that clear in his third-person formulation to the chorus: "Do you know the son of Laius . . . and the race of the Labdacids . . . the unhappy Oedipus?" (220-22). As we shall see, however, Oedipus defines precisely what he does and does not accept about this view of him as a polluted monster. He will accept as fact that he is polluted, wretched, and repulsive. However, he will not accept the claim that he is guilty. We will return to this point later.

Alongside his factual view of himself as polluted and wretched, Oedipus makes it every bit as prominent that his image of factual reality includes a facet of equal salience and certainty: that he is a father. He does not, however, merely assert this fact; he defines it in such a way that he officially withdraws his fatherhood from his sons and embraces it as an articulated notion of mutual love and filial piety that he shares with his daughters. Throughout the play, Oedipus scorns and rejects his sons for not taking care of their suffering father, while he praises his daughters for caring dutifully for their father and for sacrificing much in order to do that (see, for example, 337-56, 421-60, 599-601, 1348-96). The play brings to the fore Oedipus's identity as a father, as it deals so frequently with his relationship to his children and dwells with great poignancy on both his cursing his sons and the mutual love between himself and his daughters. Oedipus refers to himself as a father more than once in the third person. Of Antigone he remarks, "The unhappy one gives second place to her home comforts, if her father can be cared for" (351-52; see also 442, 1104-5). Near the end of the play, in a culmination of the contempt he has expressed for his sons, he officially disowns Polynices: "Be off, spat upon by me who am no longer your father, villain of villains,

taking with you these curses which I call down upon you" (1383–85). The counterpart to this rejection comes near his final moments with his daughters: "From none did you have love more than from this man, without whom you will now spend the remainder of your lives" (1617–19).

One final component plays a significant role in Oedipus's notion of factual reality about himself in the play. Oedipus asserts with certainty that the gods consider him a future blessing to Athens and a vengeful curse to his sons and Thebes (287–88, 576–78, 787–90). Oedipus has received this knowledge through Apollo's oracle, and Theseus honors Oedipus's claims. Oedipus thus sees himself as recognized by the gods (and Theseus) as wielding a special power, as *deinos* (141), in such a way that will affect mostly the future, although his mounting confidence and the mystifying circumstances of his death at the end of the play begin to demonstrate this power.

Although it causes him considerable suffering, Oedipus manages to tolerate the fact that he is polluted and monstrous. Rather than deny this fact about himself, he holds it in the balance and offsets it by asserting, defining, and emphasizing his view of himself as a father, as well as his divinely acknowledged power as both a future blessing for Athens and a curse for Thebes. Oedipus's ability to tolerate the less pleasant facts about himself becomes possible as he works in this play to introduce and articulate the countervailing facts of his redefined fatherhood and his newfound divine power.

## COHERENT REALITY

What Oedipus clearly *cannot* live with as a fact about himself is the supposition that he is guilty and to blame for the murder of his

father and for committing incest with his mother. He denies that he is guilty, and he defends his position vehemently (974–1002). We can understand that, for him, several inconsistencies prevent him from including these ostensible facts in his own notion of what is true about himself. He cannot be guilty of murdering his father and at the same time demand filial piety of his children (which he does). He cannot be guilty of these crimes and at the same time be plausibly deemed a blessing for Athens. He cannot coherently claim to possess the virtues of character he does and at the same time be guilty of these crimes. Perhaps most significant, he cannot logically make sense of the fact that he is deemed guilty and at the same time had no knowledge of what he was doing and no choice because of the gods' ordaining and causing his transgressive acts. Oedipus resolves this tension not by simply denying that he is guilty but by affirming more profoundly his lack of agency: "Know that my actions consisted in suffering rather than in doing" (266–67). His proclaimed state of suffering allows him to accept the gravity and evil of the deeds; they have caused and continue to cause him painful suffering, and yet he removes the source of incoherence that would prevent the fulfillment of his psychic need for a coherent self and a maintainable consistency of all the truth axes. Oedipus does not explain further the distinction he relies on between suffering and doing. Does he mean to say that the gods have determined his actions and that he had no choice in the matter? Does he mean to say that he acted in ignorance of the fact that Jocasta was his mother and Laius his father and so he cannot be said to have chosen to do what he did? From the perspective we are taking, what matters about Oedipus's rationale is that he himself feels a sense of certainty about it; he considers it true that he is exonerated. That the oracle foretelling his crimes turned out to be both unavoidably fulfilled and something that he suffered unwillingly or in ignorance would not strike a Greek audience as strange.

## INTERPERSONAL REALITY

Sophocles devotes considerable portions of *Oedipus at Colonus* to depicting how, in his final days, Oedipus distinguishes the threatening "them" from the comforting "we," and thus establishes an interpersonal reality that fulfills his need for intersubjective truth and allows him to counteract some of his feelings of alienation and lack of belonging. His image of intersubjective truth consists in his certainty that he shares a sense of truth about facts, ideals, and so on *with a particular group of people*, and may not share that sense of truth with others outside of that group. By the end of the play, a distinction has been drawn clearly and defended: the people that Oedipus thinks share his interpersonal reality and the elements of truth it includes are his daughters, the chorus, and Theseus. Those he has excluded by rejecting them for articulated reasons include Creon together with Oedipus's own sons, Eteocles and Polynices. In the course of the play, Oedipus has had to earn his alliance with the chorus and with Theseus, just as he has had to publicly reject his sons and Creon in order to definitively exclude himself from their judgment. Oedipus's need for belonging is frustrated by his alleged guilt, the pollution he carries, his physical suffering, and his exile from Thebes. The success and rhetorical force with which he draws the line between those who share his reality and those who do not constitutes much of the therapeutic work accomplished in this play.

Oedipus's close connection to the supremely loyal Antigone and their shared alienation announces itself from the very start of the play as he declares, "We have come as strangers" (12-13) and "This girl sees for me" (33-34), the latter suggesting a vital dependence. As soon as Ismene arrives, Oedipus is quick to mark her inclusion in their alliance: "And it is from these two, who are maidens, that so far as their nature allows I have sustenance and a safe place to live and help from my family" (445-47). Notably, Oedipus's daughters

are the only ones in the play who touch him physically (329, 1113, 1620–21), a point that is emphasized by the scene I have already discussed, where Oedipus suddenly realizes that, given his polluted state, he cannot touch Theseus as he wishes to (1132–38). Both daughters treat their father with kindness and sympathy (19–21, 508–9) and share both his suffering and the happiness of their mutual familial love: “Sad supports of a sad man!” (1109);<sup>15</sup> “For what was never dear was dear, when I had him in my arms!” (1698–99).<sup>16</sup> Oedipus’s daughters thus share his view that he is worthy of sympathy as someone who has suffered greatly and is therefore worthy of being accepted by Theseus as a suppliant. The sisters share in their father’s suffering, and Antigone explicitly echoes her father’s denial of guilt by explaining to the chorus that he acted “unwittingly” (240) and was controlled by the gods: “For however hard you look, you will not discern a mortal who, when a god drives him, can escape!” (252–54). Furthermore, in a striking asymmetry, Antigone chastises Polynices for his anger (1420), while she does no such thing in the face of her father’s protracted expression of anger against Polynices (1348–96), even though she had held out hope that Oedipus would feel pity for his son (1280–83).

Oedipus’s indignant speeches to Creon and Polynices denounce these men and, in doing so, specify the ways in which Oedipus does not share an image of reality with either of them. Creon insinuates an interpersonal reality that he and Oedipus share based on their familial ties: “It is not one man only who sent me, but all the citizens who commanded me, because family ties caused me to mourn his sorrows most in all the city” (737–39); “Is not the reproach bitter that I have levelled, woe is me, at you and at myself and at all our

15. Translation mine.

16. See also 330–31: Oedipus: “Ah children, sisters!” Ismene: “Ah unhappy state!” Oedipus: “Do you mean hers and mine?” Ismene: “Yes, and my own, unhappy as I am!”



family?" (753–54). Here Creon invokes a view of reality wherein he and Oedipus owe each other loyalty and feel each other's emotions because they are relatives. Oedipus angrily rejects Creon's claim that he shares Oedipus's sorrow and suffering:

Why do you try once more to catch me in the trap that would most pain me if you caught me? In time past when I was suffering from my private griefs, and it was my desire to be sent out of the land, you refused to grant me the favor I desired, but when I had had enough of my passion, and it was my wish to live at home, then you pushed me out and drove me into exile, caring not at all at that time for the kinship you now talk of! (763–771)

While Oedipus takes Creon to be deceiving and manipulating him by proposing that they share the loyalties that typically exist along with bonds of kinship, he rejects Polynices by disowning him and thereby breaking the bonds of kinship: "Be off, spat upon by me who am no more your father. . . . I call upon the hateful paternal darkness of Tartarus to give you a new home" (1383, 1389–90). Polynices appeals to his father to show sympathy for his son, but Oedipus now denies that they are father and son.

The chorus and Theseus come not only to accept Oedipus and show him kindness but also to consider him part of their collective reality. Soon after meeting Oedipus, the chorus communicates their wish that he share in the city's collective likes and dislikes: "You are a stranger, poor man, in a strange land; bring yourself to loathe what the city is accustomed to dislike and to respect what it holds dear" (184–87). Oedipus quickly agrees to do so. With the news of who Oedipus is, the chorus at first fears him (233–36), but he and Antigone win them over (237–91). Antigone succeeds in arousing their pity (254–55); Oedipus skillfully combines strategies in order to gain the chorus's sympathy: he asks them to distinguish between



his name and his nature; he redefines his transgressive actions as "suffering" rather than "doing"; he appeals to his "sacred" nature as a suppliant and their corresponding duties; and he promises to bring benefit to the citizens of Athens (258-91). He thereby earns their respect, and eventually their sympathy, which he repays by carrying out their instructions for performing religious rites according to their custom and thereby entering into their form of life (461-92). Having heard that Oedipus has a request to make of him, Theseus greets him with empathy: "I have not forgotten that I myself was brought up in exile, as you were, and that in exile I struggled against such dangers to my life as no other man has met with; so that I would never turn aside from helping to rescue any exile such as you, since I know that I am a man, and that I have no greater share in tomorrow than you have" (562-68). Oedipus persuades Theseus to grant his request for protection and a final resting place at Colonus by placing his promise of divinely ordained future benefit for Athens in the context of the existential meditation at 607-23 that we will examine later and which suggests that one day Athens's relationship with Thebes will deteriorate and Athens will stand in need of the divine protection and advantage that Oedipus offers. By the time Creon threatens Oedipus and his daughters, Oedipus views himself as firmly ensconced in collective loyalty: "But who could catch me against the will of these allies?" (815).

## SUBJECTIVE-EXISTENTIAL REALITY

As Yadlin-Gadot defines it, the subjective-existential truth axis fulfills the psychic need for an authentic image of the self—a sense of who one truly is to oneself (who I really am *to me*) and provides the experience of familiarity and intimacy with oneself: "The need for authentic existence is ensured by means of the subject's link to what he perceives

as his true self."<sup>17</sup> This self is prone to particular vulnerabilities—the experience of shame and the fear of annihilation—and thus aims to counteract those vulnerabilities. Although Oedipus never speaks directly of an “authentic” self or who he “truly is,” he fully articulates the sense of existential angst and the fear of annihilation that Yadlin-Gadot identifies as the particular vulnerabilities this truth axis counteracts:

Dearest son of Aegeus, for the gods alone there is no old age and no death ever, but all other things are submerged by all-powerful time! The strength of the country perishes, so does the strength of the body, loyalty dies and disloyalty comes into being, and the same spirit never remains between friends or between cities, since for some people now and for others in the future happy relations turn bitter, and again friendship is restored. And if now all is sunny weather between Thebes and you, time as it passes brings forth countless nights and days in which they shall shatter with the spear the present harmonious pledges for a petty reason. Then shall my dead body, sleeping and buried, cold as it is, drink their warm blood, if Zeus is still Zeus and his son Phoebus speaks the truth. (607–23)

Here Oedipus attempts to persuade Theseus that he cannot take anything for granted about Athens’s future, and he accomplishes this through a protracted poetic musing on the threat of meaninglessness, the inevitability of death, and the transience of the goods in life. Later in the play, Oedipus also frankly acknowledges and accepts the *shame* of the incest (*hautēs oneidos*, 984). Because Oedipus thus explicitly confronts the essential pressures that figure into the formation of a “subjective-existential” or “authentic” self, it is reasonable to ask

17. Yadlin-Gadot (2016, 125).

whether the play offers any clues about, if not an “authentic” self, then at least the particular beliefs about himself he holds and articulates in order to counteract his fear of annihilation and the shame he carries with him. Oedipus’s confidence that his influence will continue after his death through his special, divinely appointed allotment as the object of a hero cult grants him an unusually powerful antidote to mortality. We might assume that he deals with his sense of shame with his belief that he has *suffered* the incest and the patricide rather than acted as an agent. And perhaps that is right. But there is another candidate for Oedipus’s “authentic” self that presents itself in a somewhat surprising and prominent manner. I have already discussed the ways in which Oedipus’s role as a father to his daughters—and his rejecting the role of father to his sons—figures prominently in his image of factual reality and his presentation of himself in the play. We can say, in fact, that Oedipus is preoccupied almost from beginning to end with his own fatherhood and in particular with the exemplary behavior of his daughters and the love he feels toward them. The behavior of his sons has, to his mind, withdrawn him from any paternal relation to them. Two further points suggest that for Oedipus, loving fatherhood provides the image of reality that he chooses to count as his “personal truth” that is not necessarily acknowledged by others. (In fact, most are likely to view Oedipus’s fatherhood as deeply problematic.) According to Yadlin-Gadot’s theory, the subjective-existential self finds its temporal mode in the present. Fatherhood for Oedipus characterizes a state in the present (while his role as a “blessing” for Athens will take place in the future), and furthermore a state that has (in the case of his daughters) withstood the radical upheavals that have devastated his life and sense of self. Perhaps the most telling portrayal of Oedipus’s subjective-existential truth axis comes just before his death, when he embraces his daughters for the last time. In this moment Oedipus starkly faces the fear of annihilation that he had articulated so clearly to Theseus earlier. Oedipus must choose his final

words to his daughters, the one thing he will leave them with, the most important thing to say. He does *not* say "I have become a savior and a blessing for Athens" or "I am not guilty, I have suffered" or "I once more curse your brothers," all of which would be in keeping with the play's discourse. Rather, he zeroes in on what he wants to be summed up in the face of death:

My children, on this day your father is no more! For everything is at an end for me, and no longer shall you have the irksome task of caring for me. It was hard, I know, my daughters; but a single word dissolves all these hardships. For from none did you have love more than from this man, without whom you will now spend the remainder of your lives. (1611–19)

Here Oedipus not only provides soothing words to his daughters; he also leaves them with a particular image of himself as a loving father. Of course, his chosen notion of his own fatherhood must overcome the reality of the incest and its threat to characterize him as a father who is also a brother. In his own eyes, Oedipus overcomes that threat by acknowledging rather than denying the shame of the incest (984), and at the same time maintaining that he did not knowingly commit incest and is therefore in that regard not an actor, but a sufferer (266–67). By contrast, he actively chooses his paternal relation to his daughters. The question of whether we find this reasoning compelling is not relevant to the fact that Oedipus has established for himself a sense of truth about the matter. His self-characterization at this particular moment at the end of the play—as at every moment—must be seen as a choice. In this case it is one that exemplifies generosity and other-directedness rather than self-absorption or defensiveness. As we shall see, the virtue Oedipus displays here also plays an important part in his ideal reality, the truth axis that resonates with values he aspires to.

## PRAGMATIC REALITY

From the moment he arrives at Colonus through the end of the play, Oedipus's speech and actions are suffused with a sense of purpose shaped by his goal of persuading Theseus to let him remain and die there so that he can fulfill the oracle's prediction. Oedipus's sense of pragmatic reality, his sense of working toward a future goal, therefore resonates emphatically throughout the play, and the achievement of that goal serves as the play's culmination, although the alleged benefit that Oedipus will bring to Athens will reveal itself only in the future. Oedipus projects certainty of purpose and, of course, his belief that the gods have sanctioned and ordained this purpose: "I shall never again leave this seat. . . . It is the token of my destiny" (45-46); "For he [Apollo] told me, when he predicted all that evil, that this should be my respite after long years, when I came to the land that was my final bourne, where I should find a seat of the dread goddess and a shelter, I should there reach the goal of my long-suffering life, bringing advantage by my settlement to those who have received me, and ruin to those who had sent me, who had driven me away" (88-91); "Lead me then, daughter, so that we may tread where piety dictates, speaking and listening to others, and may not be at war with necessity" (188-91); "But they [Polynices and Eteocles] shall get nothing from me as an ally, neither shall they ever have benefit from this Cadmean kingship; that I know, from hearing this girl's prophesies, and from interpreting the ancient oracles which Phoebus has at last fulfilled" (450-54).

## IDEAL REALITY

Whatever ideals Oedipus may have striven for in the past as the ruler of Thebes have had to be either abandoned or pursued in a different context. At Colonus, Oedipus expresses his own ideals in his interactions with Creon and Theseus, as well as in his portrayal

of his own piety and connection with the divine. By rebuking Creon for his dishonesty, manipulation, lack of shame, and lack of respect for justice (761–808), Oedipus identifies himself as someone who aspires to the opposing values of honesty, scrupulous speech, discretion, and justice. Furthermore, in his confrontations with both Creon and Polynices, Oedipus claims to see through their duplicity, and in doing so displays, and lays claim to, a particular kind of discerning wisdom. Creon's vices find their nearly exact counterpart in the virtues Oedipus attributes to Theseus and his people: "I have found in you [all] alone among mankind piety and fairness and the absence of lying speech!" (1126–27); "May you be blessed, Theseus, for your nobility and for the righteous [*endikou*] concern that you have shown for us!" (1042–43). Oedipus explicitly claims that his own behavior embodies the justice entailed by keeping one's promises (1489–90, 1508–9), piety and reverence for the gods ("for I come sacred and reverent" [287]), actions that benefit others (576–78), and the ideal of familial love that we have already seen him articulate powerfully in his final words to his daughters.

## THE THERAPEUTIC PROCESS

In the case studies Yadlin-Gadot discusses, a neurotic patient characteristically suffers from focusing too exclusively on one truth axis and neglecting the others. For example, a patient might be so intent on living according to certain ideals of love or achievement that he or she fails to incorporate any robust or certain sense of factual or coherent truth.<sup>18</sup> In this case, therapy requires introducing the patient to the practice of exploring the other truth axes and their relationships

18. See Yadlin-Gadot (2016, 191–238).



to each other. What is the therapeutic process that Oedipus goes through in this play that results in his having articulated and sorted out the six aspects of his self? I have already mentioned that at the end of *Oedipus the King* Oedipus's view of himself has shrunk into a single dominating vision of the man most hated by the gods. Of the intervening years before *Oedipus at Colonus*, what we know is that much time has passed, and perhaps that has given Oedipus the opportunity to reconstruct his view of himself. But in the course of *Oedipus at Colonus* there is a process that occurs and is dramatized. The outward manifestations of this process have been justly described by many scholars as a gradual gaining of confidence and power, as a process of Oedipus's becoming heroic throughout the course of the play.<sup>19</sup> Bernard Knox charts the crucial shifts from the beginning to the end of the play: Oedipus begins the play in a self-effacing state of humility (110, 144-48); he has the grounds for a new confidence, having received that oracle from Apollo; the chorus notices that he "seems noble but unfortunate" (76). Ismene comes with news of another oracle, and now Oedipus understands that it supplements the oracle he has received and that it is his burial place that will bring about his future influence. The ritual ceremony he directs to propitiate the local goddesses (the Eumenides) restores and ensures his relationship with them. When he comes face to face with the accepting Theseus, who behaves with ideal dignity and generosity, Oedipus's confidence grows even more, so that, when he speaks to Theseus about the future defeat of Thebes, he assumes a formidable sense of authority. He condemns Creon justly and with vindictive wrath. According to Knox, Oedipus the hero is now reborn: he repudiates his sons with a "daimonic, superhuman wrath,"<sup>20</sup> and with an almost

19. See, for example, Bowra (1944, 309); Knox (1964, 143-62); Birge (1984, 11); Kowalzig (2006, 82).

20. Knox (1964, 159).



numinous sound in his speech. Theseus recognizes him as a true prophet, and Oedipus has now become the hero that he will continue to be beyond his death.<sup>21</sup> Others agree that in *Oedipus at Colonus* we witness "the actual process of the passing of Oedipus from a human to a heroic state."<sup>22</sup> This general description of the changes we witness in Oedipus throughout the course of the play seems right to me, as far as it goes, but these accounts focus on the changes in Oedipus's behavior. I would like to suggest that there is more to say about what happens to Oedipus internally as part of the process of becoming heroic. In articulating the six truth axes, as I have shown he does, Oedipus sorts out, separates, and defines the six separate dimensions of his self. This narrative he tells about himself is not occasioned by a specific experience; nothing in particular happens in response to which Oedipus says, "I hereby change my view about myself." The events in the play that would seem to encourage his confidence and sense of power—for example, Apollo's oracle and Theseus's acceptance—may very well be important in encouraging him to formulate the views of himself that he does. However, what I would like to emphasize is that Oedipus presents articulate and elaborate rationales for everything he claims about himself—his view that he is a sufferer and not an agent, his rejection of Creon and of his sons, his belief that he is successfully pursuing particular ideals. He is in this way absolved and defined by his own rational self-insight, by the distinctions he grasps, and by his ability to rewrite plausibly his view of who he truly is. In the end, with all six truth axes defined and separated, it would appear that he stands in a state of psychic balance and health with a full and nonconflicting disclosure of the different dimensions of his self. One might think that Oedipus's remaining anger toward his sons poses a

21. See Knox (1964, 145–62).

22. Bowra (1944, 309).

conflict, or at least a question about psychic balance. But Oedipus's anger is both an appropriate and, we might say, healthy component of a Greek hero's character. More important, his anger is not a symptom of a conflict that has been left unaddressed. If it were, it would count as an indication of neurosis. But Oedipus suffers from no such neurosis. He attains, in fact, a model of psychic health by addressing all of the truth axes and allowing them to coexist. Oedipus does not sanitize his view of himself or tie everything up neatly. His ability to maintain a complex image of himself and accept the tension introduced by his pollution and misfortune attest all the more to his therapeutic success. He does not deny the facts of his wretched past, but accepts them and counterbalances them with nodes of certainty that fulfill his various psychic needs. He does not need to reconcile his image of himself as a polluted monster and a savior because he can accept that he is both. The play does not explain why the gods have chosen to grant Oedipus special divine status and power. It does not need to because Oedipus simply accepts the fact that the gods have ordained it and he persuades Theseus of this fact.

The pragmatic axis governs the whole of the play insofar as Oedipus gradually fulfills the oracle's prediction that he will come to a place where he is destined to die in some mysterious way and, after death, become a blessing to Athens and a curse to her enemies. The dramatic action of the play from beginning to end unfolds a growing sense that Oedipus will accomplish these goals through scenes where, at the same time he persuades Theseus and the Athenians to accept him and definitively aligns himself with Athens (by rejecting Creon's and Polynices's demands that he return to Thebes), he also overcomes obstacles to psychic health by articulating the various truth axes, and thereby builds up a stronger, more balanced, and clearly defined conception of himself. The strength of the self he articulates is rooted in the fact that all of his basic psychic needs are met. The action of the play could thus be said to, among other things, map out a series

of psychological challenges successfully mastered: the threats of enduring guilt, shame, alienation, purposelessness, fear of annihilation, and lack of aspiration. The play in this way portrays Oedipus's increasingly heroic nature as not only a matter of realizing his divine purpose and gaining confidence and power but also, and perhaps more systematically, reformulating through a process involving both reason and imagination the image he had of himself that had been so thoroughly damaged by the traumatic events of his past. The passages that I have referred to and quoted as evidence of Oedipus's engagement in defining the six truth axes permeate every scene of the play.

## CONCLUSION

*Oedipus at Colonus* ends with a mysterious and powerful event that the entire play anticipates. But that event, Oedipus's death, points toward an unknown future that has more to do with Athens and the etiology of a hero cult than with Oedipus's life.<sup>23</sup> The play, I have argued, is concerned every bit as much with the reconstruction and definition of Oedipus's self through the acknowledgment and definition of his different truth axes as points of certainty. The play shows us how a man who has suffered the most devastating traumas achieves the healthy integration of his different "selves" whereby all basic psychic needs are met. Oedipus is not cured by his own suffering or by his becoming a "sufferer," but rather by his own intellectual insight applied to his various images of reality and truth. His past traumatic experiences, although tragically inflated, can stand for any developmental challenge that requires a reorganization of the psyche.

23. On the hero cult of Oedipus see Edmunds (1981); Kearns (1989, 50–52); Lardinois (1992, 322–27). On Greek hero cults generally see Burkert (1985, 203) and Currie (2005, 47–59).

It should be clear by now that formulating the problem of this play by asking whether or not Oedipus is transformed into a savior does not do justice to the complexity of what transpires at Colonus. Oedipus is indeed a savior—in addition to many other things. The sorting out of his sense of truth constitutes the primary action of this play and allows him to transcend the need to simplify his polyvalent self. A far cry from a play full of diversions and thin plot structures, *Oedipus at Colonus* systematically unravels a masterful playing out of successful self-definition and psychic health in the face of the most challenging circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

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