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**Oedipus in the Berkshires: Greek Tragedy and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain***

Reviewers and critics have recognized Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) for its social commentary and unabashed treatment of sexuality in old age. Largely unappreciated, however, has been the novel's profound relationship to the classics, conspicuous in the presentation of its protagonist, Coleman Silk: a black man who has spent his professional life "passing" as a white Jewish professor of Classics at "Athena College" in Massachusetts. This paper examines the significant and striking ways in which Roth uses Greek tragedy to model its narrative and the extent to which this strategy enhances the tragic standing of the work, notwithstanding the general incompatibility between tragedy and the modern novel. Greek tragedy provides an explicit paradigm for the wounded anger of the protagonist and his withdrawal from his community: "he knew what can corrode and warp a man who believes himself to have been grievously wronged. He knew from the wrath of Achilles, the rage of Philoctetes, the fulminations of Medea, the madness of Ajax, the despair of Electra, and the suffering of Prometheus the many horrors that can ensue when the degree of indignation is achieved and, in the name of justice, retribution is exacted and a cycle of retaliation begins" (p.63).

The Oedipus plays of Sophocles, in particular, provide a rich set of analogues. As in *Oedipus the King*, Silk's true origins belie the public perception, and the dark mysteries of race provide an American corollary to the Greek horror of incest; the *anagnorisis* in the novel will be that of the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, who realizes Silk's secret only after his death, although the reader, like the audience of *OT*, "knows the story" almost from the outset. This knowledge allows the reader to appreciate its manifold ironies—not the least, that Silk himself should fail to see the tragic trajectory of his life, armed though he is by "the prophylaxis of the whole of Attic tragedy and Greek epic poetry" (p.63). An even greater depth of inspiration is drawn from *Oedipus at Colonus*, whose aged protagonist is in many ways a model for Silk in his angry self-exile; his willful determination to live his remaining years on his own terms rather than those of others; his love for his idealistic daughter Lisa and strained relationship with his son Mark (recalling Antigone and Polyneices, respectively); and his bitter rejection of the hypocrisy of family and community that disguises self-interest as principle.

The tragic intertexts support the sense of loss and suffering that permeates the novel and engulfs its characters. The novel's tragic ambience is epitomized at Silk's funeral, as his children assemble to mourn his passing and Mark sings the Kaddish, recalling the shared sense of loss after the passing of Oedipus in *OC*. Yet the novel ends with a gesture to the redemptive power of art. Just as *OC* works to restore Oedipus to his former greatness, the novel that the narrator vows to undertake (which is *The Human Stain*) seeks to rehabilitate the damaged reputation of its protagonist.