

Although Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus* was written during a period of intense oligarchic and democratic factionalism in Athens, the work's ideological stance has been the subject of debate. (Sophocles wrote the *OC* sometime before his death in 406, though it was first performed in 401.) The dramatic setting – Colonus is where the oligarchic conspirators assembled in 411 – has led some to interpret the play as an apologia for the defeated oligarchs (Edmunds), or at least as an anti-democratic critique (Wilson). Others see a broadly democratic ideology at work (Markantonatos 2007), especially in the figure of Theseus (Mills). I will argue that the diverging interests of mass and elite are negotiated through the quasi-paternal relationship between Oedipus and Theseus. While Theseus models democratic virtues such as *epieikeia* and respect for the rule of law (Mills), the transference of paternal authority from Oedipus to Theseus offers a reassuring picture of intergenerational continuity and the benefit of elite leadership. Thus the play responds to the contemporary crisis of legitimacy by idealizing a father-son relationship in which both mass and elite can take comfort (on the popular appeal of the father figure in late fifth-century Athens cf. Strauss 1993, Griffith 1998).

Theseus' defense of a suppliant from hostile Thebans is analogous to the situation in Euripides' *Suppliants*, but the *OC* eschews overt reference to democracy as a reason for Athenian support (contrast the Euripidean *agôn* in which Theseus and the Theban herald debate the merits of democracy and monarchy). Sophocles instead foregrounds the close personal relationship between king and suppliant. I will trace the way in which Oedipus gradually assumes a paternal role towards Theseus: (1) Oedipus repeatedly addresses Theseus as *philtatos* (607, 891, 1169, 1552) – a word he elsewhere uses only of his daughters (1108, 1110, 1415). (2) Both Oedipus and Theseus share significant traits, especially their “noble character” (*to genaion*, 76, 569, 1042) and previous experience as exiles. (3) Oedipus repeatedly plays the role of “instructor” to Theseus, explaining his previous suffering (note the repetition of *didaske*, 560, 575, 594) and the benefit that his death will confer on the city (*didaxô* 1518, 1539). (4) Finally, after his curse against Polyneices (1254-1446), Oedipus turns to Theseus as a potential male heir, compelling him to swear an oath that he will watch over Antigone and Ismene upon his death (1631-35).

The ideological function of this relationship can be seen most clearly when Oedipus instructs Theseus not to disclose the location of his tomb, the only instance of ritual secrecy in Greek tragedy (Markantonatos 2002: 125). Since the tomb cult will be a source of protection for the polis into the future (*aei*, 1525), knowledge of its location must be transmitted to the one “pre-eminent man” of each generation (*προφερέτατος*, 1531). This formulation effectively suggests the stability and security of a hereditary monarchy, while remaining formally compatible with the role of elites in a democratic government. I argue that this ritual secrecy is significant, since it removes the well-being of the polis from the realm of political debate and projects it onto an idealized paternal order.