Sophokles, *Oedipus at Kolonos* and *Antigone*

Although *Oedipus at Kolonos* and *Antigone* are commonly translated alongside each other, along with *Oedipus Tyrannos*, all three plays actually belonged to different trilogies and were written at different times in Sophokles’ career.

Background on the *Oedipus at Kolonos*:
The story of *Oedipus at Kolonos* resumes a few years after the events of *Oedipus Tyrannos*. In the ensuing years, Oedipus has been forced from his home (a type of self-imposed but externally encouraged exile) and has wandered throughout Greece with the aid of his daughter, Antigone. Blind and frail, the play begins with Oedipus’ arrival in the territory of Athens, at a deme called Kolonos (“hill”). Sophokles himself was from Kolonos. Oedipus soon discovers that the grove in which he has come to rest is dedicated to the Furies, or Eumenides. According to the prophesy of Apollo – the same prophesy that dictated Oedipus’ terrible crimes against his father and mother – this is the place where Oedipus is fated to end his days.

While in the grove at Kolonos, Oedipus encounters several people, including Theseus, the king of Athens, Ismene, his other daughter, Creon, his brother/uncle-in-law, and Polyneices, his son. While you have already met many of these figures, the character of Theseus deserves fuller treatment. According to Athenian myth, Theseus was one of the earliest kings of Athens. He slaughtered the Minotaur on Crete and so ended the annual tribute of 10 young men and women that the Athenians had previously been forced to send to King Minos. On his way home, however, Theseus forgot to change the color of the sails on his ship. When Aegeus, the king of Athens and father of Theseus, saw the mournful black sails, he believed all was lost and committed suicide by jumping off the Akropolis.

Sophokles wrote *Oedipus at Kolonos* at the very end of his life, in the last years of the 5th century. Athens was on the brink of collapse at this point, and the Spartan victory in the Peloponnesian War was imminent. Sophokles himself never saw this play in production, but it was produced posthumously by his son in 401.

Background on the *Antigone*:
Chronologically, the *Antigone* is the third of Sophokles’ Theban plays, occurring after the events of the *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Oedipus at Kolonos*. Historically, it also occurs after the events depicted in Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes*. Eteokles and Polyneices have just killed each other at the gates of Thebes and the city is in chaos (as usual). Creon has forbid proper burial for Polyneices, since he attacked the city with a foreign army and is considered an enemy of the state. Antigone defies Creon’s proclamation and stresses the importance of proper burial for family members and kin.

Despite behind the final play of the Theban cycle, Sophokles wrote the *Antigone* before the other two. It was written on or about 441, at a time when Sophokles served as one of the ten annually elected strategoi (military generals), alongside Perikles. At this time, the Athenians were campaigning against the island of Samos, which had revolted against the Athenian Empire. The Athenians eventually crushed the revolt and inflicted severe penalties on the Samians.

Study questions and issues for discussion:

1. Theseus and Oedipus are both guilty of killing their fathers, although Theseus’ guilt is indirect, while Oedipus’ is direct. How does this affect their relationship?
2. Contrast the Oedipus of the *OT* with the Oedipus of the *OK*. How has he changed? How has he not changed? In particular, consider Oedipus’ conception of Fate and relationship with the gods.

3. Both Sophokles and Aeschylos are interested in the grim goddesses, the Furies or Eumenides. How does each author conceptualize these figures? What role do they have in the destinies of the protagonists? What is the connection between the goddesses, tragic choice, and fate?

4. How does the historical context impact our understanding and analysis of the *OK*? By the end of the fifth century, the Athenians have faced plague, disaster at sea and on land, political instability, and economic collapse. How does the *OK* address, contradict, challenge, or support these problems?

5. Is Antigone right to defy Cleon (the State) and bury Polyneices? She knows the consequences of her actions, but chooses to act regardless. The effects of her action extend not just to herself, but have far-reaching ramifications. Are we to sympathize and support her actions, then, or condemn them?

6. Consider the role of *miasma*, or pollution in this play. Where, when, and how does it occur? How is it purified, or is it not? What is the intersection between individual *miasma* and the community as a whole?

7. Is Creon a tragic figure? Was he correct in his speech about the proper loyalties that a citizen owes to the state (ll. 194-214)? How do you think the Athenians in 441 would have reacted to Creon?