

## The fall and rise of King Oedipus: On sacrificial logic and “Proto-Christology”

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### Abstract

This essay is placed within a continuing debate on the appropriateness of a Christian deployment of tragedy. According to David Bentley Hart, tragedy legitimates a sacrificial and scapegoating logic that is in contradiction with the Christian gospel. It promotes exclusion and therefore is imaginatively and metaphysically conservative in its import. In the ensuing argument, I hope to show through one example how even Greek tragedy can resist some of these claims. Drawing on the seminal work of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, I argue that Sophocles’ Oedipus cycle, firstly, demonstrates the inability of *nomos* to grasp the exception of Oedipus, and that this might constitute a critique rather than a simple legitimation of the civic order. Secondly, the narrative arc of *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus* point towards incorporation rather than final exclusion, and that his apotheosis could be read as resisting deleterious tropes of a final holocaust of the tragic figure. In the final section, drawing on Rowan Williams, I discuss the problems associated with literary Christologies in general, and whether it could be theologically feasible to talk about the Theban cycle as exhibiting a ‘proto-Christology’.

### Keywords

*Tragedy; Sophocles; Christology; David Bentley Hart; Rowan Williams*

## I

In his *The Beauty of the Infinite*, one of the critiques given by David Bentley Hart against tragedy is that it promotes a “sacrificial regime of the totality”, an “economy of violence” in which human sacrifice is given a

kind of “aesthetic necessity” and “moral symmetry”.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, it legitimates a form of “sacrificial logic” which “may endow its protagonist with a certain tragic grandeur, but only one that ends in the embral glow of his or her holocaust”.<sup>2</sup> Under the influence of René Girard,<sup>3</sup> Hart argues that tragedy legitimates a scapegoating in which the ills of the civic community are externalized onto a polluting figure, one who then is punished, exiled or killed. As such, it leaves systemic evil where it is, and does little address the real source of injustice. Its vision, rather than being radical, is thus profoundly conservative in its orientation. This again is connected to the trope of metaphysical closure and stasis that Hart believes is emblematic of every capitulation to tragic theology.

But can these categories be so easily applied to ancient tragedy? For those seeking to bring Christian theology and tragedy into conversation, in the wake of those like Donald MacKinnon<sup>4</sup> and Rowan Williams,<sup>5</sup> this requires some response. So, by way of example, I hope in this essay to make the argument that Sophocles’ portrayal of Oedipus escapes the final acquiescence and sublime alienation that Hart thinks is essential to its enactment. Through a narration of the Oedipal descent and ascent, it will be argued that Sophocles, rather than simply condoning scapegoating and the violence of law, points to their failure to grasp the exception. Furthermore, it is wagered that it is through the Athenic reabsorption of Oedipus into its civic pantheon that the moral durability of exclusion is questioned too.

As regards “sacrificial logic” and “scapegoating”, two notes should be mentioned at the outset. Firstly, any allusion to sacrificial language must consider the cultural and contextual reverberations that such concepts have. One cannot abstract scientific or overly-generalized contours to its practice; there must be a focus on the particular cultures that bring

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1 David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 373.

2 *Ibid.*, 376.

3 *Ibid.*, 384.

4 Donald MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

5 Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

such language into being.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Greek antiquity did not condone human sacrifice, even though it willingly engaged in animal holocausts (*thusia*), which were often understood as being substitutional for human life. And even there, as Burkert has shown, such sacrifice was not engaged in lightly: there had to be a rationale for its implementation, hence all the ritualized games that rendered the chosen animal “guilty” or “compliant”. Worth mentioning too is that sacrificial cultism was not tied primarily to magical invocation or manipulation, but rather constituted a form of liturgical remembrance whereby human beings were continually made aware of their mortality and finitude. It was an attempt to include death within the symbolic universe of its practitioners.<sup>7</sup> And when we speak about the practice of scapegoating in particular, we cannot assume that there is a sacrificial logic present in every case. Sacrificial performance overall was more closely aligned with the religious context of cooking and food consumption and was additionally linked to reciprocity of gift-giving as well. It follows then that the practice of scapegoating, which could be applied to humans, animals, and plants as well, cannot be equated with this pattern, since it remains ritually distinct from the process of culinary production. To state this content more positively, scapegoating had less to do with the mystification of divine violence and more with the process of ritual purification and the externalization of sin (as is the case in Leviticus 16). There is a substitutionary role implied here of course, but it cannot be equated simply with the practice of sacrificial offering or apotropaic invocation. Furthermore, there is a significant amount of uncertainty regarding exactly how scapegoating practices were implemented. One cannot, for example, equate historical practice with the poetic invectives of the period – which are hyperbolic and ideologically slanted; and when one examines more reliable sources ambiguity still remains. Some sources suggest that the scapegoat was killed, while others assert a punishment without death. Others appear to say that the victim was despised while others suggest he or she was highly honoured. Connected

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6 For what follows more generally, see John Milbank, “Stories of Sacrifice”. *Modern Theology* 12, no. 1 (1996): 27–56.

7 Walter Burkert, “Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual” and “Opferritual bei Sophokles in Pragmatik-Symbolik-Theater,” in ed. Wolfgang Rösler, *Kleine Schriften VII: Tragica et Historica* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 1–36; 73–91.

to this detail is the idea that the marginality of the victim also implied an interchangeability between the scapegoat and the most exceptional figure of all – the king. When this exchange was envisaged, the persona of the royal was transferred to a substituted figure that stood in the place of king. By mentioning some of these factors then, one thus adds more interpretative layers to a practice that remains mysterious.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, we should then treat with circumspection the universalizing traits of Girard's analysis, as John Milbank has also argued.

Secondly, Girard's theory of mimetic desire – predicated as it is on Lacanian insights – might presuppose the very ontology of violence that Hart aims to historicize.<sup>9</sup> Rather than accounting for the growth of desire within a dynamic of expansion and incorporation, Girard could be read as locking the operations of desire into a necessarily conflictive model. The imitations of desire, according to Girard, tend towards the strictures of violent self-assertion at the expense of the other, one that is representationally symbolized in the scapegoat, who is localized as that foreign contagion which needs to be expelled. This in turn is combined with Lacan's reflections on the grammar of desire, which postulates that agents, in their fixation upon gaining an illusory self-presence, are driven to locate their longing in that signifier which, for him, is the nullity of desire. There is no transcendent object hereby projected on Lacan's reading, but simply a cultural misidentification of desire as such. However, such a model is profoundly connected to anti-representational philosophies that refuse any accounting of transcendent form, tendencies which deny the metaphysical priority of goodness and thus tacitly support an ostracizing violence (since some goods are finally incompatible).<sup>10</sup> Of course, these points are not a decisive response to Hart's concerns, but they do provide an instructive segue for our discussion.

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8 Jan Bremmer, "Scapegoat Rituals in Ancient Greece". *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 87 (1983): 299–320.

9 Milbank, "Stories of Sacrifice," 41–46.

10 But this is by no means the only reading available since the fact that human desires appear mutually exclusionary could be read from the vantage of Christian orthodoxy. The localization of desire as terminating in a specific object, and the psychological failure to identify one's good in the goods of others, can be narrated as product of "original sin" and not as something metaphysically inevitable. Augustine's erotics could very well serve then as an alternative to the Girardian or Lacanian proposal.

## II

The legend of Oedipus precedes its narration in Sophocles' Theban cycle.<sup>11</sup> Significant parts of the legend are not detailed, but rather presupposed in the story he tells in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.<sup>12</sup> These details were known by the audience, and would have constituted the ambience of the drama.<sup>13</sup> Tracing the line of the narrative, in summary, it is clear that the two plays catalogue a journey that begins at “divine” heights, that thereafter leads towards descent, humiliation, and exile. This, as we will find out, is not however the end of the story; Oedipus is ultimately elevated again, bringing its protagonist towards re-integration, acceptance, and vindication.<sup>14</sup> The detour Oedipus takes is one in which his very identity is

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- 11 For a summary of the biographical details on Sophocles, that is by-and-large conservative in judgements and critical in regard to ancient biographies of Sophocles (e.g. the Suda), see Ruth Scodel, “Sophocles’ Biography”, in Kirk Ormand (ed.), *A Companion to Sophocles* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 25–37.
- 12 Though the choice is somewhat arbitrary (since a significant amount has been written on these plays), by way of introduction to the content one could consult Josh Beer, “Oedipus Tyrannus” and “Jon Hesk, “Oedipus at Colonus”, in ed. Andreas Markanatos, *Brill’s Companion to Sophocles* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 93–110; 167–189 resp. I would also supplement Beer’s introduction with Vayos Liapis, “Oedipus Tyrannus”, in Kirk Ormand (ed.), *A Companion to Sophocles*, 84–97. I would also recommend Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “Oedipus at Athens”, in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York, Zone Books, 1988), 301–327. For arguments on why Oedipus Tyrannus and Oedipus at Colonus are connected intimately, and should both be treated within a developing story, see Bernd Seidensticker, “Beziehungen Zwischen den Beiden Oidipusdramen des Sophokles”. *Hermes* 100, no. 3 (1972): 255–274.
- 13 This is not to say that the myth of Oedipus was fully consistent. As can be seen in comparing the various versions of the story (even within the Theban cycle), there are divergences regarding the fate of Oedipus.
- 14 For the following, I have indebted to Vernant, “Ambiguity and Reversal: On the Enigmatic Structure of Oedipus Rex, in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 113–140; and Vidal-Naquet, “Oedipus Between Two Cities: An Essay on Oedipus at Colonus”, in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 329–359. Vernant’s interpretation in particular has been influential but has not been uncontested. Cf. Simon Goldhill, “The Ends of Tragedy: Schelling, Hegel, and Oedipus”. *PMLA* 129, no. 4 (2014): 634–648. Goldhill main criticism of Vernant concerns the fact that Oedipus’ exile is not detailed within the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. He further has problems with the “Christianization” of tragedy that is found particularly within German Idealism. For my purposes, I am not primarily concerned whether Oedipus is exiled within the first play or not (entwined as it is also with the textual debate regarding the ending of play) but rather on the trajectory of both plays as a “sequential” narrative. I would further contest Goldhill’s rather truncated and “Steinersque” portrayal of Christianity, which he thinks is inimical to the aporetic quality of tragedy. It would not take too much to show that this reduction creates a pseudo-contradiction (as figures such as Donald MacKinnon have argued).

immured in ambiguity and double meanings.<sup>15</sup> His very name (*Oidipous*) testifies to his enigma,<sup>16</sup> since within its overtones one can hear the conjunction “Know-foot”, an allusive designation of Oedipus the Sage (the one who could solve the riddle of the Sphinx and save the city of Thebes). But his name is connected to another possible valence, “Swollen Foot”, which prognosticates his yet-to-be revealed destiny as Oedipus the Lamé and the Defiled (the one who will suffer shame and ostracizing). Yet it is precisely this ambiguous figure who will finally charter an alternate course within life because he does not follow the straight or direct path.<sup>17</sup> His journey and personhood is one of exception, a diversion from the normal pattern. After managing to escape a botched attempt at infanticide by his biological father Laius, Oedipus is rescued by a shepherd and taken to Corinth, where he is adopted by new parents. Many years later he returns victoriously to his birthplace in Thebes, leaving the defeated Sphinx in his wake. However he is a stranger in the city over which he rules, and remains “other” to himself as well.<sup>18</sup> The apparent saviour of Thebes, who was by-and-large guiltless according standards of justice and wisdom,<sup>19</sup> will also be revealed as the Defiled, that figure considered, rightly or wrongly, to have brought down plague and famine (*loimos*) upon his city. The one to whom quasi-divine language is ascribed near the beginning of the narrative (θεοίσιΐσομενον, *Oedipus Tyrannus* 31) ends up being rendered, at the denouement of the tragedy, as a representative of humanity’s ephemerality, our status as mere shadows living towards nothingness (ἴσα και τό μηδέν ζώσας, *Oedipus*.

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15 This insight is pervasive in the literature on Sophocles but for a short description, see Vidal-Naquet, “Oedipus in Athens”, 319–321.

16 The double meaning of his name, see Vernant, “Ambiguity and Reversal”, 123–125.

17 On relation this, see Vernant, “The Lame Tyrant: From Oedipus to Periander”, in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 207–236.

18 For a discussion on this and related themes, see Charles Segal, “Time, Theater, and Knowledge in the Tragedy of Oedipus,” in Bruno Gentili and Roberto Pretagostini (eds.), *Edipo: Il Teatro Greco e la Cultura Europea* (Roma: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1986), 459–484.

19 For a helpful albeit slightly imbalanced presentation, see the three-part contribution of Thomas Gould, namely “The Innocence of Oedipus: The Philosophers on Oedipus the King”. *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 4, no. 3 (1965): 363–386; Gould, “The Innocence of Oedipus: The Philosophers on Oedipus the King. Part II”. *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 4, no. 4 (1965): 582–611; Gould, “The Innocence of Oedipus: The Philosophers on Oedipus the King. Part III”. *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 5, no. 4 (1966): 478–525.

*Tyrannus* 1187–1188).<sup>20</sup> This apparently abortive conclusion is not the final word on the matter, since a further irony is meted out: Oedipus, as an exile and suppliant to the city of Athens, eventually makes the passage again from the realm of infamy towards collective affirmation, as one who in his mysterious death becomes a saviour once again.<sup>21</sup> Even though he has experienced defilement, his taintedness is but the reverse side of his supernaturally-charged being, a manifestation of his holiness as defilement (cf. *agos* in *Oedipus Tyrannus* 1426 and *hieros* and *eusebēs* in *Oedipus at Colonus* 287). The structure of this reversal deserves fuller treatment.

In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the movement of descent can be seen in how the semi-divine language that was previously applied to Oedipus, is gradually transferred to the realm of the gods. Terms such as *kratynōn* (sovereign), *sotēr* (saviour), *meγas* (great), and *patēr* (father) which are initially used as descriptions of Oedipus are incrementally transferred, as the play develops, onto the divine realm.<sup>22</sup> This is bound up with the gradual unveiling of Oedipus' hidden fault (*harmartia*),<sup>23</sup> his reversal of fortune (*peripateia*) that leads him to a discovery (*anagnōrisis*) of his true identity,<sup>24</sup> as the one who killed Laius and who ultimately married his own mother. However, to say that he empties himself completely of his divine aura and 'sacredness', would be overlook the trajectory of his story, as well as some highly

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20 For a brief commentary on these passages, see R. D. Dawe, *Sophocles: Oedipus Rex* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 90ff.; 215ff. Jean Bollack's comment on the latter reference (τό μηδέν ζώσας) by saying that it is "un équivalent de l'ombre or du simulacre, un >>quasi-rien<< (ἴσα καὶ τό μηδέν) et al souveraineté du changement est alors inférée de ζώσας," in Jean Bollack, *L'Édipe Roi de Sophocle. Les textes et ses interprétations, III: Commentaire. Deuxième partie*. Cahiers de Philologie 13a (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1990), 778. On the Chorus' reflection in general, Kamerbeek writes that "Oedipus' fate is represented as paradigmatic of the human condition, but in such a way that the misery of the man Oedipus is not lost sight of, nor his greatness", in J. M. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles, Part IV: The Oedipus Tyrannus* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 222.

21 For this, see Peter Burian, "Suppliant and Saviour: Oedipus at Colonus". *Phoenix* 28, no. 4 (1974): 408–429.

22 Vernant, 'Ambiguity and Reversal,' 123.

23 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452b31–38.

24 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452a22–b9.

particularized features of Greek mythology and religion: namely, his status as both scapegoat and king, both *pharmakos* and *tyrannos*.<sup>25</sup>

The play begins in a time of crisis for the inhabitants of Thebes, who are experiencing a *loimos*, a period of pestilence and famine in the land. They come begging for help at the ‘altars’ of Oedipus (cf. *Oedipus Tyrannus* 16), an action that bestows upon him a quasi-divine status. As a result of this supplication, Creon is dispatched to Delphi to discover the source of their suffering; he returns with the news about the source of the problem: the murderer of Laius was never found or prosecuted. This fact disturbs King Oedipus, who consequently identifies with the suffering of the suppliants and is determined to solve the riddle of Laius’ death for their sake.

I do pity you, children. Don’t think I’m unaware.  
 I know what need brings you: this sickness  
 ravages all of you. Yet, sick as you are,  
 not one of you suffers a sickness like mine.  
 Yours is a private grief, you feel  
 only what touches you. But my heart grieves  
 for you, for myself, and for our city.<sup>26</sup>

It is here that we can see the beginnings of Oedipus’ identification with the *pharmakos*, the scapegoat,<sup>27</sup> which (like the *tyrannos*) implies both an individual and collective function. Behind this identification, two cultural traditions within Athenian culture need to be explained in more detail: the

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25 For the following, I rely on the excellent summary in Vernant, ‘Ambiguity and Reversal’, 125-140.

26 *Oedipus Tyrannus* 56–64. The translation is taken from Robert Bagg and James Scully, *The Complete Plays of Sophocles: A New Translation* (New York: Harper, 2011). Unless otherwise indicated, this is the standard translation for this essay.

27 For Girard’s take on Oedipus, see René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 68–88. For a critique of the “universalizing” tendencies in Girard’s concept of the scapegoat, see John Milbank, “Stories of Sacrifice”, and the above discussion. For an exegetical rebuff of Girard’s reading of Oedipus, see R. Drew Griffith, “Oedipus Pharmakos? Alleged Scapegoating in Sophocles’ ‘Oedipus the King’”. *Phoenix* 47, no. 2 (1993): 95–114. As regards the arguments above, I am assuming that the scapegoating is broadly correct, if even Girard’s own reading remains questionable at several points. But it should be said that even if the scapegoating reading is incorrect, the broader movement from descent and to ascent, from exclusion to embrace would not be fundamentally altered.



Thergalian rituals of scapegoating (which we have alluded to already), and the political practice of “ostracism”.

Regarding the first, this is related to the citizens of Athens parading the *pharmakoi* through the streets on the sixth day of the month of *Thargeliōn* and was directed to the purgation the land from *loimos*. The Athenians ceremoniously beat them with squills and stones, and possibly even killed and burned them – the exact details are murky – thereafter they scattered their ashes to the winds to complete the ritual purification. The people who were chosen were usually from the lower classes (*kakourgoi*) and were considered degraded (*phauloi*). Strangely though, in a kind of carnivalesque reversal, the *pharmakos* (as mentioned previously) may function as the double of the king, since it was believed that final responsibility for the *loimos* lay with the king himself; it was he who should ideally assume the suffering of the *pharmakos* since the king, in some sense, embodied the highest level of marginality. This practice establishes the plausibility that a *tyrannos-pharmakos* was not beyond the imagination of the ancient Greeks, as Girard already theorised. As regards “ostracism”, this constituted a technique of social control (first instituted by Cleisthenes<sup>28</sup>) whereby upward moving and powerful citizens were ejected from the city. Such a practice was designed to prevent wealthy and powerful individuals from achieving too much political clout within the civic hierarchy. After expulsion, such individuals became essentially *apolis*, without a city; they became, in the words of Aristotle, either a beast or a god.<sup>29</sup>

But since Oedipus is king and scapegoat and outcast, one could argue that he transcends to a certain extent these practices, and even approaches “a zone of indistinction”, analogous to the Roman legal category of the *homo sacer*.<sup>30</sup> By embodying in his person the double ambiguity of the *tyrannos-*

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28 Vidal-Naquet, “Oedipus in Athens,” 326.

29 Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a3–7.

30 Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). We do however have to notice the difference between the Latin and Hellenistic etymologies of “the sacred”. While the Latin *sacer* and *sanctus* carried with it a much stronger emphasis on separation, the Greek *hieros* more strongly emphasized divine potency and the involvement of the gods in human affairs. For this, see Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes II: pouvoir, droit, religion* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969), 179–207.

*pharmakos*, of sacredness and defilement (*hagnos* and *agos*<sup>31</sup>) – “guiltless guilt”<sup>32</sup> – one could argue that Oedipus himself manifests the presence of Dionysus, the god of confused boundaries and transgression.<sup>33</sup> It follows then that Oedipus bears within his body the status of an exception, an individuality that is not amenable to the constrictions of current law.

The inference to be noted is that the Oedipal narrative does not simply mirror contemporary practices but transcends them and thereby gestures towards a different category of being. Jean-Pierre Vernant, for instance, writes that the story of Oedipus as here recounted does not uncritically repeat the exiling mechanisms of culture, but challenges them, pointing towards what cannot be accounted for in the legal arrangements of the time.

For in social practice and theory, the polar structure of the superhuman and the subhuman is aimed at giving a more precise picture of the specific features of the field of human life as defined by the body of *nomoi* that characterize it. The relationship between the above and the below is merely that between two lines that clearly define the boundaries within which man [sic] is contained. In contrast, in Sophocles, the superhuman and subhuman meet and become confused within the same figure. And, given that this figure is the model of man, the boundaries that contained human life and made it possible to establish its status without ambiguity are obliterated.<sup>34</sup>

Within his person then (as Vernant says), Oedipus manifests the inherent contradictions and instabilities of *nomos*, manifesting both its ordering and exclusionary functions.<sup>35</sup> This is part-and-parcel of the general tendency of

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31 For more on this, see Jean-Pierre Vernant, “The Pure and the Impure,” in *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1980), 121–141.

32 Cf. Michael Rasche, “Das Phänomen des Tragischen und die tragische Dimension des Christentums”. *Theologie und Philosophie* 89 (2014): 515–533. The phrase is inspired by Schelling.

33 Jean-Pierre Vernant, “The God of Tragic Fiction”, in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 181–188.

34 Vernant, “Ambiguity and Reversal”, 139.

35 Regarding *nomos*, Christoph Menke argues that plays like Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* and Oedipus Tyrannus display the inherent contradiction of legality by displaying *nomos*

tragedy to mark out the transitional nature of law, especially as this applied to fifth century Greece.<sup>36</sup> Such a tendency within the drama is thus not a characteristic of this play alone, but something inherent to the institution of tragic theatre itself, which acted as a space for political reflection and critique, pointing towards the limitations and fragility of the Athenian social compact.<sup>37</sup>

### III

As we turn to the later drama (which was incidentally Sophocles' final work), *Oedipus at Colonus*<sup>38</sup> finds our protagonist engaging in a movement away from Thebes, with all its negative associations, towards the promissory location of Athens.<sup>39</sup> In short, we have the reverse structure of the previous play, a movement from exclusion to embrace, a story of Oedipus pleading at the threshold of Colonus for sanctuary within the regime of Athens. As

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as violence itself. For more on this, see Christoph Menke, Law and Violence. *Law and Literature* 22, no. 1 (2010): 1–17.

- 36 Vernant, "Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy" in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 29–48.
- 37 David Janssens, "Locus Tragicus. The Problem of Place in Greek Tragedy", in Arthur Cools, Thomas Crombez, Rosa Slegers, Johan Tael (eds.), *The Locus of Tragedy. Studies in Contemporary Phenomenology 1* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008), 9–27. Also cf. Goldhill, "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology". *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107 (1987): 58–76.
- 38 For a summary and discussion of the contents of the play, see Andreas Markantonatos, *Oedipus at Colonus: Sophocles, Athens, and the World*. Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte, Band 87 (Berlin and New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2007), 71–119.
- 39 Froma Zeitlin has argued that Thebes constituted a kind of "anti-Athens", a mirror picture of what Athens considered itself to exemplify. Much like theatre was a form of "othering" whereby the polis placed itself at a distance, and was able to reflect on its own political ordering, Thebes constituted within the Athenian mind a further "othering" whereby it sought to portray itself though the "negative" example of Thebes'. Zeitlin particularly focuses on Oedipus and his connection with the *topos* of Thebes: it is only by turning away from Thebes, towards Athens that Oedipus eventually receives vindication and redemption. The reference is Froma I. Zeitlin, "Thebes: Theatre of Self and Society in Athenian Drama," in J. Peter Euben (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 101–141. For more on the possible political and ideological motivations in Sophocles' choice of Colonus and Athens, see Andrea Rodighiero, "The Sense of Place: Oedipus at Colonus, Political Geography, and the Defence of a Way of Life," in eds. Andreas Markantonatos and Bernhard Zimmermann, *Crisis on Stage: Tragedy and Comedy in Late Fifth-Century Athens* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 55–80.

is born out in the tale, Oedipus' expulsion has reduced the exiled king to years of aimless wandering, being abandoned by his two sons Eteocles and Polynices, who are both rival claimants to the sceptre of Thebes, and are engaged in a pugnacious game of one-upmanship for the throne. Oedipus' misery is however mitigated by his inner conviction of innocence – a certainty that expands as the narrative evolves – and also by the support of his daughters Antigone and Ismene. Further amelioration is sought in the prospect of civic protection within the walls of Athens (the enemy of Thebes during the Peloponnesian War). However, he only gets as far as Colonus when he is stopped by the guardians, who alert him that he has approached holy ground, that is, the sacred site of the Eumenides. His brutalized appearance and miasmatic reputation are initially deemed beyond the pale of acceptance. But through the presentation of his defence before the king of Athens (Theseus), he is able to persuade the Athenians to have compassion for his cause: "I am / a suppliant to whom you promised / safety. Don't break that promise. And don't / shun me because of my disfigured face. / I've come here a devout and sacred man, / and I'll prove myself useful to your people" (*Oedipus at Colonus* 287).<sup>40</sup> Oedipus is also able to demonstrate despite his infirmities a supernatural level of prescience. We discover that, much like Tiresias, his blindness has been combined with a prophetic power,<sup>41</sup> whereby he is able to bestow blessing and curses on who

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40 For more on the institution of supplication, see John Gould, "Hiketeia". *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 93 (1973): 74–103. For more on Oedipus as a suppliant, see Burian, "Suppliant and Saviour: Oedipus at Colonus". On how Oedipus at Colonus is a reversal of Oedipus Tyrannus, see Seidensticker, "Beziehungen Zwischen den Beiden Oidipusdramen des Sophokles".

41 On the Oedipus' prophetic power in Oedipus at Colonus, see Rebecca W. Bushnell, *Prophesying Tragedy: Sign and Voice in Sophocles' Theban Plays* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 86–107. More generally, see J. C. Kamerbeek, "Prophecy and Tragedy". *Mnemosyne* 18.1 (1965): 29–40. On the relation between poetic-prophetic insight and blindness (both in Sophocles and elsewhere), see R. G. A. Buxton, "Blindness and Limits: Sophocles and the Logic of Myth". *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 100 (1980): 22–37. Buxton shows that the mythical function of blindness rendered the individual in question both "below" and "above" other human beings, standing somewhere "between" the gods and humanity. These results are confirmed by Grelka, who additionally mentions the influence of Parmenides on Sophocles' understanding of the relation between sight and knowledge. For the documentation, see Maciej Grelka, "On the Question of Knowledge and Blindness in Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus". *Symbolae Philologorum Posnaniensium Graecae et Latinae* 23, no. 1 (2013): 19–33.

he chooses.<sup>42</sup> He thus promises that if he is accepted into Athens,<sup>43</sup> broken and humiliated as he is, he will nonetheless become a source of grace and blessing for the city and its people: “I came to offer you my disfigured / body as a gift. Though not pleasant / to look at, it will generate benefits / beauty could not.” (*Oedipus at Colonus* 578–580). Ultimately, however, he never actually enters the city, but is raptured in a clandestine fashion, the details of which are only reported through the words of a messenger. It is precisely through this mysterious anabasis, through his strange “death” and “daemonization”, that that he will be vindicated as both a saviour of Athens, and an avenging spirit against its enemies (e.g. Thebes). Much like Eurystheus at Pallene (in Euripedes’ *Heracleidae*), his promise of sacredness extends beyond death and acts as a talismanic presence on behalf of the citizens of Athens.<sup>44</sup>

I’m going down, to hide my death  
in Hades. Come, dearest stranger  
bless you, bless this land, bless your people.  
And in your prosperous state,  
remember me when I am dead,  
the source of your boundless well-being.<sup>45</sup>

Oedipus’ tomb is unknown, and his miraculous death is not portrayed on stage, but only relayed through witnesses. It is here that the narrative has reached completion, whereby an ignominious refugee ascends to the status of hero and saviour, to receive adulation alongside the Eumenides. Athens has come to see the benefit in accepting an outsider, who despite his infamous and tainted status, will provide protection for the inhabitants of

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42 Cf. Laurel M. Bowman, “The Curse of Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*”. *Scholia* 16 (2007): 15–25.

43 Whether he actually becomes a citizen through his death is debatable; cf. Vidal-Naquet, “*Oedipus Between Two Cities*”, 342–359.

44 A-J. Festugière, “Tragédie et tombes sacrées”. *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 184, no. 1 (1973): 3–24. Festugière draws comparisons between the tomb of Oedipus and other sacred burial sites. However, he distinguishes them from Oedipus’ of death since the idea of Oedipus acting as an avenging spirit on behalf of Athens does not cohere fully with ancient beliefs regarding the sacred tombs of martyrs and saints. For more on the hero cult in Sophocles, see Bruno Currie, “Sophocles and Hero Cult”, in ed. Kirk Ormand, *A Companion to Sophocles*, 331–348.

45 *Oedipus at Colonus* 1542–1555.

the city, which – to quote Andreas Markantonatos – speaks to “the pressing need for the Athenian polis to establish her reputation as a law-abiding state...one that pays due consideration to the welfare of the citizens in deed rather than in word”.<sup>46</sup> That is, a law that provides security for the exceptions, a law that promotes equity for its inhabitants, the avoidance of which invites destruction for the city. Also worth noticing within *Oedipus at Colonus* is the marked transition from the nihilistic desperation of the Chorus’ earlier commentary (“Not to be born is best”<sup>47</sup>) towards something much more affirmatory, as can be seen in the final lines of the drama (“Well, no more sound, / raise no more lamenting: / these things are bound / firmly to this ending.”).<sup>48</sup> It is not without merit then that analogies with Christian notions of immortality and redemption have been noted in this section, though rejected by some.<sup>49</sup> The transformation of Oedipus in his mysterious death takes on contours that are difficult

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46 Markantonatos, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 99.

47 *Oedipus at Colonus* 1211–1238. This translation is taken from Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fagles (Great Britain: Penguin, 1984).

48 *Oedipus at Colonus* 1777–1779. The translation is Sophocles, *Sophocles: Four Tragedies*, trans. Oliver Taplin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

49 Cf. Vidal-Naquet, “Oedipus Between Two Cities”, 350n.70. Vidal-Naquet relies mainly on the work of Hans Dietz and Richard Buxton. Dietz argued that λελογχότα (lines 1583–1584) is an unnecessary emendation that “Christianizes” the text. He argues that this reading was popularized by Wilamowitz, but that it originally stemmed from Z. Mudge (1769) and was not an original reading. Combined with the phrase αἰεὶ βίον, it gave the sense that Oedipus entered into an “eternal life”, in the sense of an afterlife that never comes to an end. Dietz argued instead that in regard to ancient hero cults, the phrase αἰεὶ βίον implied a unity between life and death, and that his “eternal life” is a this-worldly event rather than an other-worldly one. For Dietz’s arguments, see Hans Dietz, “Sophokles, Oed. Col. 1583f.” *Gymnasium* 79, no. 3 (1972): 239–242. However, Bruno Currie argues that such an emendation is a necessary one, in order to make sense of the text. For his argument and the citation of relevant literature, see Currie, “Sophocles and Hero Cult”, 340–341. Currie argues that it is hard to avoid an “eschatology” in these passages, since they were associated with the ancient mystery cults. Richard Buxton’s position is similar to Currie’s, in that the ultimate destiny of Oedipus is left tragically uncertain, in the sense that the question of who “mediates” the death of Sophocles is unknown. However, it does seem that he was less sanguine regarding talk of “eschatology” in relation to Oedipus’ post-mortem existence. For his comments on this interpretative problem, see R.G.A Buxton, *Sophocles*. *New Surveys in the Classics*, no. 16 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 30. Also see the comments by J. C. Kamerbeek, in *The Plays of Sophocles, Part VII: Oedipus at Colonus* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1984), who accepts λελογχότα “after much hesitation” (216). However, Walter Burkert does well to remind us that it was only with Plato that αἰεὶ received the sense of “eternal”. For this, see Burkert, “Opferritual bei Sophokles,” 83.

not to compare with the Christ-event. (Lee Breuer’s wonderful *The Gospel at Colonus* is an example of how amenable this story is to Christological rendition).<sup>50</sup> However, it is admitted that such a transformation still carries with it a good dose of tragic uncertainty, since the nature of Oedipus’ eschatological existence remains underdetermined within the text itself: does he experience an apotheosis, or does he simply become a hero? Does he enter Olympus or descend to the underworld? The text remains unclear.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, his passing continues to be mourned by Antigone and Ismene, and the damning words he uttered against Polynices persist as an ominous reverberation that finds its echo in the devastation of *Antigone*. However, even at this point, we cannot assume that there is no growth in perspective between the earlier and latter plays, and this passage certainly influences how we read the “later” Theban sequence too, as Brooke Holmes has argued.<sup>52</sup> One only has to see the unfolding perspective on Oedipus himself, as taken from Aeschylus’ *The Seven Against Thebes*, though the *Antigone* to the *Oedipus at Colonus*, to see that tragic irony can link endings to unexpected beginnings.

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50 See the chapter “The City on the Edge: Lee Breuer’s *The Gospel at Colonus*,” in Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson, *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 178–218.

51 Cf. Currie, “Sophocles and Hero Cult”, 340–341; Claude Calame, “Mort Héroïque et culte à mystère dans l’Édipe à Colone de Sophocle”, in Fritz Graf (ed.), *Ansichten griechischer Rituale: Geburtstag-Symposium für Walter Burkert* (Stuttgart and Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1998), 343–345.

52 It could be argued that the impending disaster portrayed in *Antigone* is transformed by *Oedipus at Colonus*. We already know that within the Theban cycle Oedipus’ own destiny is transformed (as be seen in the differing portrayals of Oedipus within the Theban cycle), and there are indications that we should re-read *Antigone* in light of its belated “prequel”. For an argument supporting this, see Brooke Holmes, “*Antigone at Colonus* and the End(s) of Tragedy”. *Ramus* 42, no. 1–2 (2013): 23–43. See particularly her comments in the final paragraph: “The more *Antigone* begins to orient herself towards a world beyond the Coloneus, first in the meeting with Polynices, then in the final scene, the less she seems reducible to the product and symbol of incestuous, polluted, dead-end love: her stance becomes the embrace of an alternate future, dictated neither by the Labdacid legacy nor by past tragedies. That unexpected shift resembles the creative transformation of Oedipus himself in the Coloneus. Yet at the same time, the emergent *Antigone* counters the legacy produced by her father’s transformation, intimating a politics of the disrupted curse, reconciliation, and affirmation. If the hatred of the curse enjoins fatality on its descendants, its counterweight, filial love, insists on the possibility of the future being otherwise. And within that space of possibility, we may find another way of imagining tragedy itself: not as fixed repetition nor as timeless truth but as a machine for generating unexpected futures out of the bones of the past” (43).

To summarise: I have been attempting to trace the contours and formal features of Sophocles' presentation of the Oedipus story. My aim has been to trace some of the religious overtones that surround the narrative of descent and ascent that characterizes Sophocles' recounting of the Oedipus myth. If this reading has any merit, then it places in question Hart's contention that tragedy constitutes a simple or uncritical affirmation of sacrificial logic and exclusionary politics. Rather than obsequiously submitting the dramatic principals to the claims of *nomos*, the Oedipal narrative teases out its limit, those points where it breaks down and is unable to comprehend the reality it supposedly governs. Particularity expands an ersatz universality of the law towards a greater equitability. Further, even if the scapegoating narrative is to be presupposed in *Oedipus Tyrannus* – and it is by no means uncontested – then we have to place this expulsion within the larger ambit of final hospitality and re-incorporation within the *polis* of Athens. Here, the unremitting or “absolute” tragedy of George Steiner has little sway, as does Hart's somewhat essentialist reading of the tragic.

Thus, my purpose in this compressed reading of the Oedipal tragedies has been to show how specific tragedies are able to expand our definition of “the tragic” itself. Much like the singularity of Oedipus, tragedy sits uncomfortably in the Procrustean definitions that have sometimes been proposed. Such an exegesis aids us in responding to Hart's concerns that tragedy underwrites a rather depressing ideology of sacrifice, in which the individual is violently sublated for the civic collective. Our reading of Oedipus has contested this conclusion at two moments: firstly, the suggestion that Oedipus' particularity is engulfed into the mystical unity of the city is resisted in the texture of the narrative. On the contrary, the Oedipus narrative indicates the limitations of *nomos* of scapegoating, and its inability to account for the exception. Secondly, even if Oedipus' expulsion is legitimated within the confines of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, we cannot read the former without the apotheosis of *Oedipus at Colonus*. If Oedipus remains an outcast and derelict in the previous sequence, then his rehabilitation in the concluding drama places in question the finality of his expulsion.



## IV

Theologians reading the above argument would no doubt have caught resonances with the gospel narration of Christ's death and resurrection. It is hard not to pick up at least some analogies of this kind. I have already mentioned Lee Breuer's musical remixing of Sophocles as but one instance of how this story has been taken in this direction. Other Christological readings of Oedipus have been given by the likes of Balthasar<sup>53</sup> as well as Papagiannopoulos<sup>54</sup>, who is followed in some sense by Manoussakis.<sup>55</sup> This does not mean that the strong differences between Oedipus narrative and Christology should be underplayed,<sup>56</sup> nor does my argument imply a return to neo-Frazerian mythology. Moreover, the difficulties of any literary figuration of Christ, apart from gospels, remain enormously difficult, as has been argued for my Rowan Williams. In his contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (entitled "Imagining Christ in Literature"),<sup>57</sup> Williams addressed the question of the viability of creating fictional

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- 53 He writes concerning Oedipus that "Excommunicated from humanity (*sacer*), the hero thus becomes, as he himself knows full well, the actual source of salvation and sanctity ... Through his suffering, Oedipus has become a soter, a beneficial tutelary spirit, for which ever region is permitted to house his grave", in Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics IV: The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, trans. Brian McNeil et al (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 129.
- 54 Ilias Papagiannopoulos, "The Eschatology of the Self and the Birth of Being-with; Or, on Tragedy", in Neal DeRoo and John Panteleimon Manoussakis (eds.), *Phenomenology and Eschatology: Not Yet in the Now* (England: Ashgate, 2009), 103–119.
- 55 John Panteleimon Manoussakis, "Thebes Revisited: Theodicy and the Temporality of Evil". *Research in Phenomenology* 39 (2009): 292–306.
- 56 This is a point argued rather stringently by D. A. Hester in his critique of the "orthodox" or "Christianizing" interpretation of the story of Oedipus, which argue that Oedipus experiences moral advancement, and at death enters into the afterlife. For his critique, see D. A. Hester, "To Help One's Friends and Harm One's Enemies: A Study on the Oedipus at Colonus". *Antichthon* 11 (1977): 22–41. Hester has some significant points which deserve hearing; however, some of his findings are contested implicitly by Currie, Calame, and Festugière in which Oedipus' death is compared to ancient mystery cults. In addition to this, Hester underplays the strong possibility that an important cult once existed that centred itself on the figure of Oedipus. The details are murky to be sure, but the best of classical scholarship seems to confirm it since it is attested in more than one ancient source. Hester also underplays Oedipus' prophetic or "daimonic" power in Oedipus at Colonus, a fact that is contested by Rebecca Bushnell in her book length study on the use of prophecy in Sophocles' Theban cycle.
- 57 Rowan Williams, "Imagining Christ in Literature". In Francesca Arana Murphy and Troy A. Stefano (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 488–505.

“images” of Christ. His mentions a conversational remark made by Ludwig Wittgenstein on the possibility of creating a fictional narrative regarding the Christ event. In Wittgenstein’s opinion, “it would be impossible to decide ‘what form’ an adequate record of God becoming human should take; we do not have available the criteria that would help us settle what is and is not a plausible or persuasive narrative account of the basic claim”.<sup>58</sup> This is because

If what we are trying to do is to narrate the events around God’s appearance in human form, we cannot achieve this by crafting what is humanly the best possible vehicle for such a disclosure, as if the credibility of the claim could be established or enhanced by human skill. What this would mean is that the authority with which we are summoned to believe in God’s presence among us would be mixed up with the authority that accrues to a certain level of excellence in performance; we should not be hearing the invitation as it comes from *God*.<sup>59</sup>

These remarks indicate what is for Wittgenstein “the fundamental difficulty of writing about God incarnate”,<sup>60</sup> a difficulty that is comparable to the ancient iconoclast controversies: if Christ is presented humanly, does that not leave out of account his identity as the God-Man? This debate is illuminating for the question of a literary Christology since there does seem to be a similar dynamic present within the realm of fiction and drama as it relates to its repetitions of gospel story. The “grammar” of Christological doctrine, as especially enshrined in the Chalcedonian formulae, seems to articulate the central problem of presenting a literary “image” of Christ. If Christ is human, then “there must be some analogical element, some way of rendering this as the story of a recognizable human psyche”.<sup>61</sup> But if Christ is also divine, then no such presentation will ever be able to match up to the Incarnation. Because of this, Williams seems to think that there cannot any establishment of a “perfect” rendition of the Christ-story within the literary tradition, but only rather opaque, even

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58 Ibid., 488.

59 Ibid., 488–489.

60 Ibid., 489.

61 Ibid., 490.

“parodic” attempts at displaying what Christ is not (Williams’ favourite example here is Prince Myshkin from Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*<sup>62</sup>). One could say that he is attempting what Brett Christopher Gray has called “a negative literary Christology”,<sup>63</sup> a project that tries to take seriously the historicity of the Christ-event, not reducing thereby it to “a historically indeterminate narrative that could as well be fiction as fact”. Instead, it aims to take seriously the interpersonal and finite nature of God’s embodiment with us, by showing that it is “grounded in interaction, in the ordinary processes of meeting, understanding, misunderstanding, guessing, trusting, learning”.<sup>64</sup> And the fact that the gospels themselves engage in a quasi-novelistic presentation of Jesus’ life show us that such an enterprise is not beyond the realm of possibility.<sup>65</sup> The gospels are transformative for those who encounter the Christ displayed within their pages, and so it seems that for Williams, finally, a successful presentation of Christ’s “image” within the realm of fiction is one that is able to “leave the reader with a sense of what it is to confront a figure both identified with human process and always inexhaustibly engaged in drawing us into an uncontrollable territory not restricted by habitual human experience”.<sup>66</sup> On Williams’ estimation then, a faithful rendition of Christ-event is considered to be more truthful to the extent it “displays” within its texture precisely the final inadequacy of such portrayals. Merely narrating or re-imagining the human story of Christ, whatever the aesthetic success of its production, in the end does not fully account for the divine reality in which the narrative participates. The only way such a gesture can embodied artistically is through showing that the significance of Christ-figure is too rich to be narratively contained, and so a successful “image” contains an awareness of *failure*; or to use Gillian Rose’s somewhat Beckettian phrase, it implies a *failing towards* a more truthful “image”.

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62 Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008), 47–57.

63 Brett Christopher Gray, “Clones, Princes and Beautiful Parodies: Rowan Williams’ Negative Literary Christology”. *Literature & Theology* 29, no. 3 (2015): 284–297.

64 Williams, “Imagining Christ in Literature”, 490.

65 *Ibid.*, 490–491.

66 *Ibid.*, 503.

This creates even more problems for rendering a pre-Christian text “Christological”, something that I am *not* attempting to do in this article. However, if the interpretation of the structure of the Oedipus cycle is at least plausible, then we are permitted some scope for speculation. Can we read certain ancient texts as “proto-Christology”, or – to put an even finer point on it – as “negative proto-Christology”? If we consider the fall and rise of King Oedipus, and his ordeal of “guiltless guilt” (to echo Schelling), then can we talk about some ancient drama as having an anticipatory structure which we now recognize in light of the Christ-event? Are there no echoes here with Paul’s claim that Christ is the One who was without sin became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), redeeming us from the curse of *nomos* by becoming himself accursed (Gal. 3.13)? And can we find no parallels, for instance, with the kenotic structure of the *Carmen Christi* (Phil. 2:6–11)? We of course cannot impose a Christian narrative of incarnation and atonement onto Sophocles. That is a given. But the analogies are at least suggestive.

If we are permitted to engage in comparisons, then there would be nothing particularly unorthodox about it, from a Christian or patristic perspective at least. As is well-known, the early church fathers often raided Hellenistic literature and philosophy, apologetically, looking for prolepses of Christian doctrine. (I am thinking particularly of the likes of Pseudo-Justin’s *Exhortation* and *Discourse to the Greeks*, but one could reference many others). The Logos Christology of those such as Justin Martyr and Maximus the Confessor would give some theological credence to the idea that pre-Christian societies were able to intuit aspects of the Christ-story, since all created *logoi* have their existence through a participation in the *Logos*. This is explicitly used to justify the early Christian’s usage of pagan philosophy: Socrates is not Christ, but in his life, death, and memorialization he is not completely *unlike* Christ either. Early Christian philosophers recognized this too. Moreover, as regards tragedy in particular, early and medieval Christians have in many ways attempted to translate Attic tropes into a Christian idiom, the most famous being the *Ἐριστός πάσχων* or “Christus Patiens” (attributed to Gregory Nazianzus).<sup>67</sup> All of this of course does not

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67 Carol Symes, “The Tragedy of the Middle Ages”, in Ingo Gildenhard and Martin Revermann (eds.). *Beyond the Fifth Century: Interactions with Greek Tragedy from the*

necessitate an ascription of “proto-Christology” to the Oedipus cycle – even though it seems somewhat more fitting than ascribing it to Euripides’ *The Bacchae*. However, it does suggest, to use the old medieval term, a certain “convenience” between them that is worth pausing over.

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