

The Flowering of *Hybris* in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*

In her paper "*HYBRIS and Plants*" Ann Michelini¹ argues that plants offer a useful model for the understanding of *hybris* in men, and that the primary cause of *hybris* is *plêthos trophê*, over-nurture. The Delphic Oracle in the *Oedipus Rex* commands the Thebans to expel the *miasma* which the land has been nurturing, and because of which both land and womb have become barren and fruitless. Metaphors of growth and decay, of sowing and reaping, are fundamental to the play, and as they are developed they coincide with the increasing concern with the identity of Oedipus: who sowed and nurtured him and what seeds he has planted in the Theban state. This paper will examine Sophocles' use of agricultural metaphor, analyzing the character of Oedipus by means of the model of *hybris* which Michelini details and arguing (as Blaydes' emendation of line 872 implies) that a seed of *hybris* is indeed planted in Thebes by the *tyrannos*. The sowing of Oedipus is, in fact, at the center of the tragedy of Thebes. For when Laius fathers Oedipus, he plants the seed of destruction for the royal house; and when Oedipus "plows the furrow" in which he was sown, he begets further ruin for Thebes, namely his sons Polyneices and Eteocles.

As *tyrannos* of Thebes, Oedipus is regarded as being responsible for the fertility of the land and for its regeneration which should--but has not--come with spring. When the young nurturlings (*nea trophê*) approach his altars with suppliant branches, they entreat him to restore fertility to the "earth withering in its fruits and herds and the unborn issue of women" (25-27). Vernant² identifies the suppliant branch with the *eiresiônê*, an offering to procure springtime renewal, and suggests that the king is the "master of fecundity." When Oedipus proclaims his curse upon the murder of Laius, he beseeches the gods to "neither cause to raise up for him crops of the land nor children of women" (270-71), and that he be destroyed "fruitlessly" (254). The somewhat awkward

1. Ann Michelini, "*HYBRIS and Plants*", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* (Harvard, 1978), vol. 82.

2. Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Ambiguity and Reversal: On the Enigmatic Structure of *Oedipus Rex*" in *Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 201, 203.

description (a "mild zeugma" according to Dawe) stresses the conception of both children and crops as things which sprout forth. And Oedipus' power over the fertility of the land is reinforced in that this part of his curse is already being fulfilled in the barrenness of Thebes. And in the extravagant surmises of the Chorus, Oedipus is further identified with the forces of nature: his is a relative of the seasons (1082-3).

Oedipus is connected with fertility in another way, however: he is both a sower and a seed. He possesses a wife sown in common (*gynaikh' homosporon*) with Laius (260) and he is also, as he later discovers, Laius' seed (*blastos*). His search for his own identity focuses on the nature of that seed, and he asserts that he "will want to see the seed [*sperm' idein*] however small it is" (1076-7). And in order to do so, he must determine who sowed him (*ho phyteusas*). Oedipus--or, perhaps more accurately, Sophocles--is consistent in referring to his *actual* father by means of the verb *phyteuein*, while of his surrogate father, Polybus, he says only that he bore and raised him: *Polybo[s], hos exephyse ka'xethrepse me* (827 and cf. 1017). The oracle proclaims that Oedipus will become the murderer of the father who sowed him, *tou phyteusantos patros* (793). And when Oedipus discovers the true nature of his relationship to Laius and Jocasta, as well as to his children, the language always expresses the "agricultural" quality of the bonds: he is *thalamêpolos* (1210), having plowed the *mêtrôian arouran* (1256); marriages, having planted him, sent up the same seed again (1404-5),³ and his children are seeds of the one who seeded him (1376), etc.⁴ The doubt which sends Oedipus to Delphi concerns the possibility that he is not Polybus' son, i.e. that he is *plastos* rather than *blastos*. (The objection may be raised that there are two instances, 1007 and 1012, in which *phyteuein* ostensibly is used in connection with Polybus and Merope. In the first, Oedipus claims that he will "never go to those who planted him"--untrue, for he already has. In the second, the messenger is merely restating Oedipus' fear of *miasma*, which in fact refers to his true parents.)

Before turning to the consideration of *hybris* in the Oedipus Rex, we must first examine

3. The language is very similar to that of his curse, with the use of the verb *aniêmi*.

4. There are still more instances of *phyteuein* at 1504 and 1513.

Michelini's treatment of the subject. She maintains that sources which discuss *hybris* in social contexts focus almost exclusively on the nature of the violation and on those violated, rather than on the perpetrator, the *hybristês*. Plants, accordingly, offer an opportunity to observe and characterize *hybris* apart from these social connections. The chief characteristic of the hybristic plant is excessive growth:

While the noun itself seems not to be used of plants outside of poetry, the verbs *hybrizô* and *exubrizô* are used in the botanical texts of Theophrastus--and once in Aristotle--to refer to excessive growth and exuberance in plants (p. 36).

This excessive growth results in a disease, or even "madness," through which the plants waste their energy on leaf production (*phyllomanein*) and are therefore fruitless (*akarpa*). Therefore, Michelini observes, "the *hybrizôn* organism--whether human, animal, or vegetable--puts self-aggrandizement before the performance of the social role assigned to it" (pp. 38-9). The cause of *hybris*, whether in plants or men, is satiety (*koros*) or too much nurture (*plêthos trophês*). Thus *hybris* is often seen, in poetic metaphors of the unjust state, as blooming forth and bringing with it *atê* (for example in Solon and Aeschylus): it is "a prolific parent of malign offspring" (p. 40).

There is a seeming paradox in that these plants are both prolific and barren:

These parentings seem on the surface to contradict flatly what we know of the plant *hybrizôn*, which ought to be "barren" and "unfruitful" . . . [b]ut offspring, in fact, are seldom treated as the fruit of the parent tree in Greek; children are far more likely to be called off-shoots or branches (p. 40).

The remedy for this excessive and destructive growth is to prune (*kolouein*) the plant, a verb which is etymologically related to the term for punishment (*kolazein*). Yet often the very growth causes disease and death, and thus "the vegetable metaphor makes a direct line of connection from nurture to growth, to early maturing and sterility, and finally to disease and downfall" (p. 41).

What then are the characteristics of the *hybris* besetting Thebes? To begin with, we may observe that it is the nature of *hybris*, and not of *tyrranis*, that is being examined in the second stasimon. The chorus is contrasting the heavenly laws, which are sired by the Olympian father and which tread on high, with *hybris*, which is planted (by now a rather sinister term)⁵ by tyrannical

5. It has acquired this negative connotation not least by being associated with the joint-planting (*xumphyteuein*) of an alleged criminal deed (347).

power and which treads with an unservicable (*ou khrêsimôi*) foot.⁶ *Hybris* is the result of extreme satiety (*pollôn hyperplêsthê*) and is vain or fruitless (*matan*); it is out of season (*mê 'pikaira sympheronta*) and it attains extreme height (*akrotatan eisanabas*'). These latter characteristics, as we have observed, apply to the hybristic plant. And these observations appear to be the standard pieties with respect to the engendering of *hybris*, for in two fragments of Euripides it is the child of success and wealth, while in Solon and Theognis it is fathered by *koros*.⁷

Yet although the chorus is, as Dawe observes in his note on line 872, making a proverbial utterance, they nevertheless appear to have a specific case of *hybris* in mind. In addition to the ubiquitous references to feet, two of which occur in this passage, there is the matter of Oedipus' wealth and nurture. The *tyrranos* himself calls attention to the wealth, jealously regarded, which attends his position: *ô ploute kai tyrrani...* (380). Each time Oedipus refers to the care he received from Polybus and Merope he uses *ektrephein*, i.e. a cognate of *trophê* with an intensive prefix, *ek-*, suggesting extreme, or even excessive nurture (cf. 827 and 1396). Furthermore, he has received reverence from the Thebans almost befitting a god, and likewise the gift of kingship and the queen for a wife. The oracle specifies that Thebes is nurturing a miasma--referring in fact to Oedipus--and that it must be nurtured no longer. Finally, Oedipus shoots his arrow too high (*hyperbolan toxexas*, 1196) and becomes an affront to the nurturing (*boskousan*) flame of Helios (1428)--the elements of earth, holy rain and light will no longer receive him.

There is more than one *tyrranos*, however, in the Theban cycle: Laius was also a *tyrranos* (1043) as perhaps is Jocasta (cf. 1095), and the proverb could apply equally to them. In planting Oedipus against the orders of Apollo, they too planted a seed of *hybris*, yielding another meaning to

6. If Blaydes is correct in emending *pheronti* in line 863 to give *trephonti* then perhaps a contrast is also being made between proper nurture of reverence and improper, excessive nurture leading to *hybris*.

7. Cf. Dawe, note on 872. It is possible that this entire stasimon is modeled on Solon 13W, with its contrast between wealth "from the gods," which may be called *olbos*, with the kind which comes from *hybris*. I was unable to follow this lead however.

the fact that Laius and Oedipus are *homosporoi*. And looking ahead to the Oedipus at Colonus, Polyneices too will be *tyrannos* (O.C. 373-5). And Oedipus' children will, like the shoots of a hybridic plant, be barren (*khersous*, 1501). The hereditary curse is not, therefore, played down in order to focus on Oedipus' volitional guilt, as Vellacott claims.⁸ The curse is everywhere present in the language, in the metaphor of sowing and reaping.

As we have seen, Oedipus' life follows the course revealed in the model of *hybris* in plants, and the Oedipus Rex draws on a body of thought in which *hybris* is caused by excessive nurture and is a "prolific parent of malign offspring" (Michelini, op. cit., p. 40). And yet, Oedipus is punished (*kolazein*)--or perhaps cropped (*kolouein*)--and is thus able to return to a state useful to society. Though he causes Thebes to wither and become barren, when he is at last (trans)planted at Colonus, he becomes a source of fruitfulness to the land: the seed of the autochthonous race of Thebes returns to the earth as a blessing of fertility. Oedipus, as a relative of the seasons, completes the cycle from decay to renewal. "[This] analogy," says Michelini, "must have appealed most to the poets because it suggests the horror of *hybris* so powerfully, by linking that destructive principle to one of the great mysteries of ancient ritual, the renewal of life through the rebirth of vegetation" (p. 44).

P.H. Vellacott, "The Guilt of Oedipus," *Greece and Rome*, vol XI (October 1964), 137-48.

The Sowing of Oedipus: Vegetative Metaphor
and *Hybris* in the Oedipus Rex

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