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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Performing Arts Department

The Choral Embodiment of Oedipus:
Sacramental Performance in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Gospel at Colonus*

by

Thomas Biegler, SJ

A thesis presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
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**The Choral Embodiment of Oedipus:
Sacramental Performance in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Gospel at Colonus***

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In researching the original performances of Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, contemporary composer Lee Breuer concluded that Ancient Greek productions were "close to rock concerts," full with "responses from the audience like choral or choir responses in the church."¹ What Breuer recognized was that Sophoclean performances were lively and engaging to their audiences, inviting them to participate and help tell the story being dramatized on stage. What he also recognized was the sacramental power² of performance in Ancient Greek tragedies, when a spirit is gifted from performer to viewer. This spirit is passed through the rhythm and meter of the language, but only as sung, as embodied. This focus on the performance of the Sophoclean piece shifted importance from the meaning of the words used to the ways in which the words were being sung. Because Breuer grasped the power of music in Sophoclean tragedy, his re-creation of Sophocles's play, *Gospel at Colonus*, unearthed a sacramental capacity in the original Sophoclean text.

By comparing Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus* and Breuer's *Gospel at Colonus*, we can begin to see how music works to imbue a sacramental power in the story of Oedipus. As I propose to demonstrate, the conclusions of both Sophocles's and Breuer's plays relate the embodiment of Oedipus by the chorus. But that embodiment does not simply occur within the narrative or even within its dramatization by actors on stage; it

¹ Rabkin, Gerald. *Lee Breuer: On "The Gospel of Colonus"* Performing Arts Journal, Vol. 8, No. 1. 1984. p 49

² In this essay, sacramental will be used as a term to denote a

occurs within the music, allowing us—as scholars—to be enlightened about the role of music in Ancient Greek tragedy, and—as audiences—to be enlivened by the sacramental power of performance.

I. Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*

The last of the three Theban plays to be written by Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* sets itself apart from many other Greek tragedies insofar as it does not end solely in sadness. Produced by his grandson in 401 B.C.E., five years after the death of Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* tracks the final days of the King of Thebes. Narratively, the play is situated between *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. *Oedipus Rex* tracks the ascent and descent of Oedipus: from outsider, to King of Thebes, to the accursed (having discovered that he unknowingly married his mother and killed his father), and banned from Thebes. *Antigone* relates the destruction of the entire Theban lineage. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, however, the gods redeem Oedipus. Leaving behind his daughters Antigone and Ismene upon his death, Oedipus achieves an apotheosis, lifted up by the support and sorrow expressed by Theseus and the chorus.

Oedipus at Colonus utilizes a significant amount of sung lyricism. Original performances of Greek tragedies were sung and spoken. The division of sung and spoken text in Sophoclean Greek Tragedies is four-fold. First, the author intended for some text to be spoken. Sophocles required spoken text of certain characters throughout his drama. The messenger in *Oedipus at Colonus*, for example, is an exclusively spoken character, whose speech is rhythmically marked by iambic trimeter. Second, the author intended for other characters, such as the chorus, to be primarily sung. This tradition, more notably

used by Aeschylus, utilized strophic verses.³ Choral odes were composed with strophes; stanzas of similar units. The third compositional convention of Greek tragic texts is the use of anapestic meter in four anapestic metrical feet. The sung or spoken nature of this meter is generally disputed. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, anapests encompass a small portion of the text. Modern classicists debate whether or not anapests were sung or spoken. If they were sung, classicists concur that the extremely simple meter would have lent itself to a repetitive, simple melody.⁴

The fourth rhythmic compositional convention of text, used prolifically by Sophocles, is to feature sung lyricism with varied meter. Sung texts of varied meter are comprised of seven derivations, five of which are frequent: Iambic, Aeolic, Choriambic, Dactylic and Dochmiac. The two less common meters are Anapaestic and Ionic.⁵ Non-strophic sung lyricism utilizes less-simple meters that repeat sporadically throughout a given set of a specific portion in the tragic text.⁶ The use of varied meter enabled a dynamic, enlivened lyricism for the performer. Through this lyricism, Sophocles relays the significance of the event being dramatized in the narrative.⁷ In most Sophoclean tragedies, principal characters used non-strophic, sung dialogue. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, however, not only the principal characters but also the chorus utilize non-strophic sung dialogue. This signals to the listener that the chorus is also relaying an important event. Because the chorus serves as a representative of and conduit to the audience, its sung

³ Similar to plainchant of the Middle Ages, strophic verses are comprised of the repetition of simple meter in repeated verses

⁴ The same note would have likely been repeated as in recitative of an opera

⁵ Scott, William C. *Musical Design in Sophoclean Theater*. Hanover: Dartmouth College, 1996. page, xvi

⁶ A Wagnerian aria could be akin to non-strophic sung dialogue.

⁷ Scott, 249

lyricism also enlivens the viewer.

At the beginning of *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus sings in varied meter and the chorus in anapests. At the conclusion, the chorus sings in varied meter, inheriting a lyrical style similar to that of Oedipus. Transference of varied meter from Oedipus to the chorus thus relays to the audience the musical journey of both Oedipus and the chorus.

In *Musical Design in Sophoclean Theater*, William Scott analyzes this lyricism into three musical and narrative stages of *Oedipus at Colonus*. Each stage communicates a developmental relationship between Oedipus and the chorus from Oedipus as *outside* the chorus to Oedipus as *embodied* by the chorus. In the initial portion of the text, from lines 1-548, Oedipus begins as an outsider. Sophocles relates the principal character, Oedipus, as musically separated from the chorus. Oedipus engages in spoken dialogue with a “stranger” until confronted by the chorus. The chorus enters at line 118 singing, “Look who is he? Where is he?” These choral meters are countered with spoken text from Oedipus, “Men! Guardians of this land, let me tell you who this old man here is...Would I be moving about using someone else’s eyes?” As the narrative continues, Oedipus sings with the chorus. The chorus’s strophes counter Oedipus’s varied meter. Oedipus relates the misfortunes that befell him in Thebes. Musically, Oedipus is an outsider: singing his verse in a different meter. Moreover, unlike other principal characters, Oedipus sings. This sets Oedipus apart from other characters in the play. Varied metrical singing becomes emblematic of Oedipus’s identity as an outsider. The section concludes with another interaction between Oedipus and the chorus. Once again, the chorus’s strophes counter Oedipus’s varied meter. While the two are unique musical bodies, they are both engaged in singing. Musically, then, Sophocles relates Oedipus’s

acceptance of Athenian norms by his *singing* with the members of the chorus instead of speaking with them. The first portion of the text demonstrates Oedipus's ability to adopt the musical identity of the chorus.

Whereas the first portion of the text shows Oedipus's acceptance of the Athenians, with Oedipus still an outsider to the chorus, the second portion of the text, lines 549-1096, musically relates the chorus's acceptance of Oedipus. This portion begins with spoken dialogue between Theseus, King of Athens, and Oedipus. The first choral ode marks the beginning of the sung portion of this stage, as the chorus welcomes Oedipus to Colonus, a "paradise" and "the sacred grounds of Dionysus, a soil un-trodden by mortals."⁸ Spoken dialogue ensues as Creon enters the grove, seeking to return Oedipus to Theban soil. Sung dialogue transforms the text from lines 833 to 843, and 886 to 876, as the chorus and Oedipus both engage in sung lyrical verse, identifying with each other, musically. As conflict exists between Athens and Thebes, the Athenian chorus defends Oedipus from the Theban grasp, as Creon tries to reclaim Oedipus's daughters, Antigone and Ismene. Musically, Oedipus has become one with the Athenians. The chorus sings in a meter complementary to Oedipus, such that, musically, Sophocles shows the chorus has accepted Oedipus. From lines 1040 to 1095, a second choral ode concludes this stage of the tragedy, as the chorus reflects on the battle between Creon and the men of Athens with strophes.

In the final stage of *Oedipus at Colonus*, comprising the remaining seven hundred lines of the text, glory is returned to the former Theban King, as he is identified with the chorus through its adoption of non-strophic, lyrical sung dialogue. Spoken text begins

⁸ Line 669

this final stage, as Theseus reunites Oedipus with his children. Theseus vows to assist Oedipus in the foreseen conflict with his approaching son, Polynices. Between lines 1211 to 1238, a third choral ode in strophic form begins the sung portion of the text. The ode concludes with a break in rhythm and ten lines of varied meter as the chorus begins to embody the musical stylization of Oedipus's varied meter in these ten lines.

Oedipus's interaction with Polynices is entirely spoken, as the son searches for his father's support in his upcoming battle in Thebes. Polynices's identity as an outsider is re-enforced by his spoken dialogue since those welcomed to Athens engage in singing. Another choral ode ensues from line 1448 to 1456, as Oedipus awaits the return of Theseus. Between lines 1457 to 1555, Oedipus and the chorus engage back and forth between sung and spoken dialogue. This compositional structure builds excitement: Oedipus and Antigone speak as the chorus sings. Oedipus stops singing. The chorus utilizes varied meter. From 1556 to 1568 the chorus sings, in a different meter, an appeal to the gods on Oedipus's behalf as Oedipus leaves the grove. Between lines 1579 to 1669, the messenger relays a veiled description of Oedipus's transcendence, using spoken iambic trimeter. The remaining portion of the text, from 1670 to the end, is sung in varied meter. Antigone and Ismene sing a *kommos* (a song of mourning) for their deceased father. Theseus and the members of the chorus encourage the girls to desist in lamentation, and, at this point, strophic singing is abandoned.

Scott argues that the concluding portion of *Oedipus at Colonus* enacts the chorus's "heroization of Oedipus."⁹ For Scott, "the play's musical design suggests that the subject, the main topic that is explored and developed, is not a character or situation;

⁹ Scott, 219

rather, it is an abstract theme, the status of Oedipus."¹⁰ Thus, through the lyrical transference, the chorus accepts Oedipus and elevates him to the status of a hero.

In *When Heroes Sing: Sophocles and the Shifting Soundscape of Tragedy*, Sarah Nooter builds on this theory, suggesting that the chorus learns from Oedipus and reflects that insight in song. Musically, the chorus not only reveres or learns from Oedipus through the singing of varied meter, but also embodies his spirit. She suggests that, "the lyrical hero [Oedipus] disappears, but the dramatic world inherits his lyricism."¹¹ Musically, then, the chorus adopts Oedipus's lyricism. As Oedipus becomes integrated into the chorus, the musical characterization of Oedipus and the chorus coalesce. Nooter concludes, "lyricism spreads to the community as the hero ascends to a divine identity."¹² Taking Nooter's insight a step further, we see that, in performance, the audience also would have been changed, aurally assuming the lyricism transferred from Oedipus to the chorus. This suggests that an original performance of *Oedipus at Colonus* would have been experienced as a sacramental narrative. Through a spirited performance of sung lyricism, Oedipus gives his musical identity to the chorus who passes it along to the audience. I propose that lines 1239 to the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* relay the embodiment of his spirited musicality, the embodiment of his spirited performativity. In the final days of Oedipus's life, the chorus adopts his musical form, and in so doing embodies his spirited identity. This sacramental capacity of *Oedipus at Colonus* is made possible in performance. Through the performance of a musical identity, Oedipus and the Greek chorus signal a transaction of spirit with the effect of enlivening the viewer.

¹⁰ Scott, 219

¹¹ Nooter, Sarah. *When Heroes Sing: Sophocles and the Shifting Soundscape of Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012. page, 146

¹² Nooter, 147

II. Adaptation, re-staging and revivals: Contemporary productions of *Oedipus at Colonus*

Musical identity served as an instrument of characterization and a narrative tool in Sophoclean tragedy. Timothy Powers relates the formidable status music held in Athenian tragedy due to its contributions to character and narrative.¹³ Productions of Sophoclean texts that utilize music are better equipped to demonstrate the playwright's characters and narrative. There remains a complication, however, due to the absence of musical notation.

As musical notation from the original productions of Sophoclean texts is unavailable, modern adaptations of *Oedipus at Colonus* generally utilize spoken dialogue. Without music, Greek tragedies become theatrically staged readings: literary relics focused on textual narration.¹⁴ One solution is to add music to the plays. But, as Scott observes, “[s]etting the libretti of Greek tragedy to music involves imposing an alien musical form on the original text.”¹⁵ Although Scott sees the lack of musical notation as a problem, the imposition of an alien, or modern musical form on the original text can in fact enable an understanding of the classical work. As Martha Nussbaum observes in *Love's Knowledge*, the relationship between original work and revival is “interconnected.”¹⁶ In such a relationship, revivals and re-interpretations of traditional texts may inform and illumine the intentions of the original work. Amy Green agrees. In

¹³ Powers, Timothy. “Sophocles and Music” *Brill's Companion to Sophocles*. Leiden: Brill, 2012.

¹⁴ Edmunds, Lowell. *Theatrical Space and Historical Place in Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996. p, 6

¹⁵ Scott, xix

¹⁶ Nussbaum, Martha C. *Love's Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.

her book *The Revisionist Stage*, Green articulates a connection that develops between a modern adaptation and the material that inspired it. Green relates, “As long as the director’s ideas are anchored to impulses in the text, he is confident that the script and performance will cast reflections back and forth, each augmenting and clarifying the other.”¹⁷ With a foundation in Sophocles’s text, Breuer’s *Gospel at Colonus* reveals how a new musical form can facilitate a clarifying element to the original work. As we’ll see, his implementation of an alien music—a spirited, performed Gospel music—enables a sacramental transaction between performer and viewer to take place.

III. Lee Breuer’s *Gospel at Colonus*

In a forward to Breuer’s script, Penelope Fitzgerald states, “The play [*Gospel at Colonus*] is [meant] to be a new play, derived from the original, different from it and yet true to its essential spirit.”¹⁸ The primary focus of Breuer’s work is a thematic translation without corruption.¹⁹ Breuer utilized the medium of a church to facilitate this transformation. As Helen Foley offers in *Modern Performances of Greek Tragedy*, Breuer, “was convinced that Gospel music...had the power to excite genuine catharsis in contemporary American audiences, and that the music could push the tragic tale through pity and terror into joy.”²⁰

Because Breuer produced a modern adaptation of the classical narrative, *Gospel at Colonus* is not a re-staging of the Sophoclean tragedy. A re-staging would employ a

¹⁷ Green, Amy S. *The revisionist stage: American directors reinvent the classics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. p, 61

¹⁸ Rabkin, Gerald. p 48

¹⁹ Foley, Helen P. “Modern Performance and Adaptation of Greek Tragedy” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* Vol. 129. 1999

²⁰ Green, p 61

verbatim translation and traditional aesthetics (costuming, design, traditional stylistic element, etc.) Rather, as Foley states, Breuer aimed to “transform [the original text] for a later age.”²¹ Breuer intended to re-create and re-imagine the story of Oedipus’s final days in a contemporary, black context. The placement of the narrative in a black church, and the use of Gospel music apply a new, but appropriate context to that which Breuer found enlivening in Sophocles’s original production.

One of the anchoring impulses in Breuer’s adaptation is his decision to update the setting to a black church. Whether he realized it or not, Breuer’s updated setting honored the sacramental spirit of Sophocles’s source text because it allowed him to tell Oedipus’s story through spirited music. In a black church, gospel music is featured, allowing for a particularly powerful sacramental feeling to unite choir and congregants. Much like Sophocles, Breuer invites his audience into performance by showing a transaction of spirit from Oedipus to chorus and chorus to congregants. By charging the chorus with the spirit of Oedipus through the performance of gospel music in the context of a church, the sacramental nature of Sophocles’s original work is enacted through the music and setting of this alien musical form in a modern adaptation.

But Breuer doesn’t just add gospel music to Sophocles’s text. He introduces several changes. First, Breuer divided Sophocles’s individual character, Oedipus, into two Oedipodes: one spoken and one sung. Second, Breuer divided the Greek chorus into two choruses: one large, gospel choir (which serves as the congregation), and a smaller choragos, a visiting gospel Quintet who performs the role of choral leader.²² Third, *The Gospel of Colonus* and *Oedipus at Colonus* both contain sung and spoken text. *Gospel of*

²¹ Foley, 41

²² Breuer, page xix

Colonus, however, is a musical that retains its musical composition. While it may appear that music in Breuer's piece is more prolific, this is not the case, as music is constitutive to both works.

In *Oedipus at Colonus* Sophocles's Oedipus utilized both sung and spoken text. Breuer manifests this division externally. The division of Oedipus into two characters is an external manifestation of the division in Sophocles' text. For Breuer, however, the role of spoken Oedipus is not as Sophocles intended. Sophocles's spoken Oedipus interacted with other characters: Creon, Ismene, Antigone, Theseus and the chorus. Breuer's spoken Oedipus serves as a narrator: relating to the congregation (the chorus, choragos and the audience) the story of Oedipus. He does not engage in dialogue with other principal characters. The character of sung Oedipus engages with the characters of the play.

Breuer divides the chorus into two groups of sung characters. The chorus, the large group of attendees at the worship service is, in many ways, a traditional Greek chorus: a large body that expresses itself through song. The choragos, comprised of five members, serves as the Ancient Greek choral leader. Like spoken Oedipus, the large choir does not interact with other principal characters. In Breuer's work, the dramatic tension between Oedipus and chorus noted above occurs between sung Oedipus and the choragos. It is the choragos that challenges the Theban King and, ultimately, accepts him into the community at large, while the chorus is a passive witness to the story of Oedipus, until it takes on his musical identity in the final song.²³ Throughout the play, the large chorus responds to the Oedipus story with "amens" and "hallelujahs." In the final song, the large chorus sings jubilantly: demonstrating its embodiment of Oedipus's spirit.

²³ Green, Amy. p 62

Towards the end of the musical, the choragos and large chorus adopt the free-style, preacher-like singing appropriate to gospel music and black preaching. As the musical progresses, the choragos abandons the structured, formed, and organized music utilized in the initial portion of *Gospel at Colonus*. As the musical concludes, the larger chorus likewise abandons conventions and sings spiritedly. Both chorus and choragos take on the musical identity of Oedipus by singing like a preacher.

According to the Reverend Earl F. Miller, the enlivening spirit of preaching and gospel music enables a congregant to become spiritually enraptured, to lose himself within the music and preaching of the black church. In his words, the congregant can “lose it.” In a 1986 lecture on *The Gospel at Colonus*, Miller, the originator of the 1985 Broadway role of Theseus, described the spirited “losing it” of a congregation as the ultimate goal of the preacher and music in a black church. The preacher’s congregation receives the ability to “lose it” through others “losing it.” Miller states that from its outset,

black preaching was different from white preaching. It broke all the rules of form and organization...In black preaching the preacher has to get outside of himself, or in church language, let the spirit take control. In order for the people to judge the preacher’s call to the ministry authentic, at some point in the sermon he has to lose his cool because he isn’t supposed to be in charge.²⁴

Later, he states, “[b]lack preaching is body and soul.”²⁵ Spirit transfers from preacher and singer to congregation. The effect that black preaching and gospel music have on a congregation for Miller likewise happens in a performance of *Gospel at Colonus*. The chorus and choragos “lose their cool.” The “amens” and “hallelujahs” become spirited,

²⁴ Breuer, Lee, Bob Telson, and Sophocles. *The Gospel at Colonus*. New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 1989. xiii

²⁵ Breuer, xiv

impassioned sung moments with vocal embellishments and compositional derivations that are developed in the same tripartite manner as *Oedipus at Colonus*.

With these differences in mind, we can now analyze Breuer's use of music to imbue Oedipus's story with a sacramental power. Scott's tripartite division will prove helpful here. The first stage of *Gospel at Colonus* relates Oedipus's entrance into Colonus, and his acceptance by the choragos. The second stage relates a deepening of relationship between Oedipus and the choragos. The third stage relates the transaction of spirit from Oedipus to the chorus. Much like the original Sophoclean text, all of these stages appear in Breuer's adaptation, with its musical form.

After an introduction from preacher Oedipus, *Gospel at Colonus* begins with a spoken narrative of the story of the fallen King with textual nods to *Oedipus Rex*.²⁶ Sophocles's play does not begin with this summary, suggesting that Breuer may have felt contemporary audiences needed to know the backstory that would have been familiar to ancient Greek audiences. Next, the chorus sings a traditional Gospel-sounding song, "Live Where You Can," which begins, "Don't go...away. Oh Father, won't you stay!"²⁷ Breuer uses this introductory song to assimilate his audience into the story of Oedipus.

The first choral ode, "Fair Colonus,"²⁸ follows the introduction of "Live Where You Can." In *Gospel at Colonus*, this ode occurs much earlier than in the Sophoclean text. It is of simple melody and rhythm, reflecting a psalm-like quality in its composition. Members of the choragos sing this song. Breuer uses the ode to set the musical landscape of a serene garden. This serenity is disrupted as singer Oedipus enters the stage. He

²⁶ Breuer, 4

²⁷ Breuer, 6

²⁸ Breuer, 11

encounters the choragos and together they sing, “Stop, Do Not Go On.”²⁹ Textually, this song resembles the beginning interaction between Oedipus and the chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, “Stop! Who is He?”³⁰ However, in the Sophoclean text, Oedipus speaks as the chorus sings. In Breuer’s work, Oedipus and the choragos both sing, but in different musical styles. Sung Oedipus is expressive: varying rhythmically and thematically from the choragos. The choragos, like the chorus in the opening number, is musically structured and composed.

The two songs, “A Voice Foretold”³¹ and “Never Drive You Away”³² complete the first stage of the narrative. Breuer makes use of the two quintets: the five men who compile the choragos and the four additional Blind Boys from Alabama who accompany sung Oedipus. The two engage in musically similar, well-structured songs. In “A Voice Foretold”, the Oedipus quintet relays the prophecy of Oedipus’s discovery of a final resting place. In “Never Drive You Away (No Never),” the choragos tells Oedipus he will be protected in the land of Colonus. These songs mirror the Sophoclean interaction between Oedipus and the chorus from lines 460 to 548. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus and the chorus engage in strophic singing. In the *Gospel of Colonus*, the Oedipus quintet and the choragos sing structured songs. Oedipus has accepted the norms of the choragos.

After gaining acceptance and protection by Theseus the King of Athens, the choragos and the chorus both signal an acceptance of Oedipus through the song, “Never Drive You Away.” As the song develops, the chorus joins the choragos in song. The chorus and choragos become increasingly expressive: mirroring a small amount of the

²⁹ Breuer, 12

³⁰ Sophocles, line 120

³¹ Breuer, 21

³² Breuer, 24

free style previously utilized by sung Oedipus. The choragos is beginning to be filled with the spirit of Oedipus. They are beginning to “lose it.” This signals an onset of the embodiment of the identity singer Oedipus.

In the second stage of *Gospel at Clonus*, Breuer uses two songs that do not stem from the text or meter of *Oedipus at Colonus*. The songs serve to further establish the relationship between Oedipus and the choragos. In “Lift Me Up,”³³ Oedipus sings of his desire to be “raised up” by the choragos. As in the beginning of the musical, Oedipus is soulful and expressive. He has musically “lost his cool.” Oedipus relates, “Everything’s gonna be alright if you lift me up!”³⁴ Polynices enters at the conclusion of the song. As in the Sophoclean text, the character of Polynices is spoken. Polynices remains an outsider. Although related to Oedipus, Polynices is not musical and, likewise, not sacerdotal. Polynices pleads for his father’s assistance in reclaiming his land. A singer from the choragos musically relates further empathy for Oedipus. The choragos curses Oedipus’s misfortune through the song “Sunlight of No Light.”³⁵

The final stage of *Gospel at Colonus* involves the death of Oedipus. After the return of his daughters, Theseus leads singer Oedipus to a piano, from which he descends below the stage. The choragos sings “Eternal Sleep,”³⁶ as they watch Oedipus depart from the land of the living. The song is strikingly simple and Oedipus literally descends under the stage.

Preacher Oedipus steps behind the pulpit and gives an impassioned sermon that recounts the death of Oedipus (similar to that of Sophocles’s messenger). With singer

³³ Breuer, 36

³⁴ Breuer, 36

³⁵ Breuer, 42

³⁶ Breuer, 46

Oedipus gone, the chorus stands and sings a song of tremendous expressivity and improvisation. “Lift Him Up,”³⁷ (also known as the “Song of Paean”) begins with a female soloist and slowly, the chorus and choragos join the soloist. The song is a sermon, with repeated “Hallelujahs” and call and response moments. The soloist, the choragos, and the chorus, have been given the spirit of sung Oedipus. With sung Oedipus under the stage, the chorus musically embodies his “losing it.” By the end of the “Lift Him UP,” the chorus and choragos “lose it.” Together, they repeat “Lift Him Up, Lord!” for three minutes, increasing each time with intensity.

The finale of the musical has filled the chorus, the congregation, with the spirit of Oedipus. By adopting his musical style and expressive and improvisational musicality, compositional additions and musical embellishments, the congregation signals a completed transaction of spirit. A sacramental narrative has been witnessed by the chorus, who has embodied the enlivening musical spirit of the King. The entire cast joins another soloist for the final song, “Now Let the Weeping Cease.”³⁸ The chorus, choragos, and principle characters conclude with words taken from Sophocles’s final lines of the tragedy, “Now, let the lamentations cease!” This song serves as an epilogue--an opportunity for the entire cast to reunite on stage, to “lose it,” demonstrating through performance their embodiment of Oedipus and inviting the audience to “lose it,” too.

While Breuer’s musical form differs from that of *Oedipus at Colonus*, the story of *Gospel at Colonus* remains faithful to that of Sophocles’ text. Breuer’s work adds to Scott’s findings, as the musical form, the preacher-like “losing it” of sung Oedipus, enacts the chorus’s embodiment of Oedipus’s spirit. This enlivening spirit must have

³⁷ Breuer, 52

³⁸ Breuer, 54

been present in the original productions of Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*. Scholarship on ancient Greek drama reveals how music contributed to characterization and narrative. Breuer's use of gospel in his adaptation of Sophocles's play further reveals the sacramental function that music can have in enlivening both characters and audiences. By the end of the performance of Breuer's *Gospel at Colonus*, the chorus and the audience not only take on the embodiment of Oedipus, but—sacramentally—they also “lose it.”

Breuer's *Gospel at Colonus* thus allows us to return to Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus* with an understanding of how music in performance imbued the play with a sacramental power. In both, as in many other spirited performances, embodied music transfers an enlivening spirit from performer to viewer. The recorded audience in Breuer's 1985 production reflects this spirited interchange.³⁹ At the conclusion of the performance, audience members rise from their seats, clap and join the cast in completing the transaction between performer and audience. Breuer's use of music enabled the sacramental nature of the work to be revealed.

III Conclusion

What implications are raised by this transfer of spirit? What is the sacred power communicated by the play? For some, the sacramental power of Breuer's adaptation existed in the sense of reconciliation and unification it imparted to its audience. In their book *Crossroads in The Black Aegean* Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson name this sacramental capacity, this spirited transaction, as a moment of reconciliation for an audience that has experienced racial divisiveness. Goff and Simpson argue that Breuer's

³⁹ *The Gospel At Colonus*. Dir. Kirk Browning. Perf. Morgan Freeman. WNET/Thirteen, 2008. Videocassette.

interpretation addresses—and spiritually ameliorates—the divisive history of black Americans. For them, *Gospel at Colonus* serves as a performance of reconciliation for a black community that has felt the divisive pains of racial and socio-economic persecution. Goff and Simpson begin, “It is, of course, exactly this bitter history of division that *Gospel* seeks to address and in part to overcome with its staging of reconciliation.”⁴⁰

Perhaps it is this reconciliation that allows Breuer’s Oedipus to serve as a hopeful character justified in spirit: a man of ill fate who is redeemed in his final days. Simpson and Goff believe that the chorus is inspired by Oedipus’s redemption. Specifically, they believe that “reconciliation has taken place: to enact community is to have it, to enact integration is to be integrated.”⁴¹ By understanding this performance as a sacramental performance, we can see how Breuer invites his audience to engage the finale as a unification that includes them. The hope of Oedipus becomes the hope of the audience, and the reconciliation of Oedipus becomes the reconciliation of the audience. This reconciliation is facilitated by Gospel music’s capacity to allow individuals to “lose it.” As the chorus “loses it” and embodies the spirit of Oedipus, it effects Oedipus’s reconciliation. And, insofar as the audience “loses it,” they also partake of this reconciliation.

Both Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus* and Breuer’s *Gospel at Colonus* musically relate the chorus’s embodiment of Oedipus. Through the varied meter of Sophocles, and

⁴⁰ Goff, Barbara E., and Michael Simpson. *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. p 212

⁴¹ Goff, Barbara E., and Michael Simpson. p. 212

the preacher-like expressivity of Breuer, the embodiment of Oedipus becomes a constitutive part of the performance, allowing the play to effect a sacramental transaction between performer and audience. The challenge for modern revivals of *Oedipus at Colonus* is to find an appropriate musical style that makes manifest the sacramental capacity of the narrative. By setting it in a black church, and engaging Gospel music, Breuer's re-interpretation and adaptation of the text enacts a particular kind of enlivening. *Gospel at Colonus* illuminates a sacramental quality that—once experienced by contemporary audiences—can be imaginatively restored to Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus* and perhaps to all of Ancient Greek tragedy.

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