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## How to be a good king in Athens – manipulating monarchy in the democratic political imaginary

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### Introduction

Dramatists' depiction of monarchy within the polis has puzzled many commentators.<sup>1</sup> Many have argued that the figure of the 'democratic king' is an anachronism.<sup>2</sup> Other critics have taken a historicising approach, and interpreted the presence of the democratic king in tragedy as the retrojection of debate about the quality of contemporary democratic political leaders such as Pericles into the mythical environment of tragedy.<sup>3</sup> Neither of these explanations is entirely satisfactory in explaining why the figure of the Athenian king should be so prominent in tragedy, and what the exploration of Athenian mythical kingship brings to a genre that is so closely linked to Athenian democracy.

Kings provide a useful focus for thinking about the city and its political life, even before they develop into Plato's philosopher kings or Aristotle's *pambasileus* (both later, fourth-century BCE, developments), and before Hellenistic kingship theory emerges.<sup>4</sup> The good kings of tragedy predate these theoretical restatements of the possibilities of good single-person rule, which are informed by political and historical developments that post-date the fifth century.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a slightly expanded and revised version of that originally delivered at AMPAL 2011. I would like to thank the editors and reviewers of Rosetta for their helpful comments, the organisers of AMPAL, and the audience at AMPAL, and also those who commented on earlier versions of this paper delivered to the Graduate Interdisciplinary Seminar at Cambridge and the Lucy Cavendish College Graduate Research Day. Thanks are also due to my supervisors Professor Paul Cartledge and Professor Malcolm Schofield, the Faculty of Classics at Cambridge, Lucy Cavendish College and to the AHRC.

<sup>2</sup> Davie 1982; Easterling 1985; Goossens 1932: 21; Hall 1989: 192; Parker 1996: 170.

<sup>3</sup> Goossens 1932; Podlecki 1966, 1975; Zuntz 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Pl. *Resp.* V.473c-VII; Arist. *Pol.* 3.14-18 (1284b35-1288b6), especially 1285b29-33, 1287a8-12 (definitions of *pambasileia*); for a survey of later kingship theories, see Hahn 2000.

However, there does seem to be a political purpose to the representation of Athenian kingship in tragedy. The tragedians manipulate Athenian foundation myths in order to present the city's mythical monarchs, notably Theseus and Erechtheus, as the focus and origin of political power, and to question the democracy's claim to political legitimacy. The stories of these mythical kings, still present in Athenian civic ritual and central to its religious calendar, are reconfigured and reinvented to query the legitimacy of the Athenian constitution and the construction of Athenian ideology. This process takes place against Athens' shifting claim to hegemony over the Greek world, as the progress of the Peloponnesian War weakened its power and control over its empire. As Athenian control weakened, Euripides and Sophocles each turned to retellings of civic myth to explore the problems of democracy and to question the state of leadership in the city.

### **Theory/methodology**

Political debate in ancient Greece frequently makes use of mythical settings to explore the issues, ideas and problems of contemporary society; the political myth attributed to Protagoras by Plato (Pl. *Prt.* 320c8-328c2) shows how novel renderings of mythical themes could enable the exploration of subtle political ideas, in this case the question of whether all humans have the capacity for political skill, or only those with specialist knowledge and experience.<sup>5</sup> The inherent flexibility of myth makes it a suitable medium for hosting debates about political ideas. The flexibility of myth is emphasised by recent theorists of myth such as Hans Blumenberg, for whom myth is always 'work on myth' transforming it through the process of retelling.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Plato gives Protagoras the counter-argument for his own view, developed in the *Republic* and expressed most fully in the *Politicus*, that political skill is a specialist art and not a quality shared by all citizens.

<sup>6</sup> 'Myths are stories that are distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core and by an equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation': Blumenberg 1985: 34; also Bottici 2007: 116-20.

As a result of this process, a part of what is explored on the tragic stage is the political and social imaginary of Athens. 'The social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy', according to Charles Taylor: in Castoriadis' more radical conception, the city is itself instantiated by its citizens' participation in the process of sharing in these common ideas.<sup>7</sup> The society of the polis is brought into existence by the adoption of common ideas by each citizen.

The Athenians had a rich cluster of civic myths, telling of the foundation of the city's cults, the origins of the city and its rulers, and particularly the deeds of the city's own hero and king Theseus. This complex of civic myths is retold and developed by the city's writers: in doing so they place the political life of the polis under intense scrutiny. While this process occurs throughout Athenian history in genres as diverse as oratory, drama, philosophy and history, the tragic stage of the fifth-century was a place where individual writers could promote their own 'work on myth'.<sup>8</sup>

The modern political imaginary tends to be conceptual rather than narrative, based around shared views on ideas such as 'nation', 'democracy' or 'freedom'.<sup>9</sup> The Greek imaginary, on the other hand, is explored through the process of work on myth. Political myths are expressed through mythical narratives, often taking a dramatic form.<sup>10</sup> Tragedy is a prime means through which these concepts are shared – but always through the tragedian, who holds a powerful position as the manipulator of these beliefs. Arguments are made by proposing changes to stories already known to most of the audience; Euripides' version of the story of Ion, for example, strengthened the Athenian claim to be the mother-city of the Ionian Greeks and also repositioned Ion as the son of Apollo, explaining his role as a civic god in Athenian cult. Other Athenian beliefs explored in this way include autochthony, closely linked to

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<sup>7</sup> Castoriadis 1987: 115-64, 1997; Taylor 2004: 23.

<sup>8</sup> These myths were also extensively featured in the iconography of public buildings, whether primarily religious or political in function: Boedeker 1998; Castriota 1992: 3-16.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson 1991; Taylor 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Bottici 2007: 178-80; Tudor 1972.

kingship myth, as the child born from the earth is usually held to be the ancestor of the royal dynasty.<sup>11</sup>

Positioning the tragic space as the location for ‘work on myth’ requires one to take a strong view of the social and political function of Athenian drama, as Simon Goldhill does, which situates the performance of drama within its political and historical context.<sup>12</sup> This also fits with a Cambridge school analysis of the political function of drama as political speech acts, performed within the polis to manipulate the political ideas of the audience.<sup>13</sup> Such an analysis reminds us that the assembly and the law-courts were not the only locations of political debate.<sup>14</sup> The language of politics saturates all verbal forms of cultural production in the democratic city, and the dialogue between drama and context is the potential locus for change in ideas, with the tragedians acting as innovators.

One also needs to accept the ideological function of myth within the polis, as the vector for a range of political ideas, constantly adjusted to reflect current debates. Plato’s extensive work on the subject suggests an awareness of the use of political myth, and his concerns about the ability of poets and dramatists to manipulate myth (notably his concerns about Theseus as a role model, *Pl. Resp.* 3.391c8-e2) – not of course that that stopped him from creating his own powerful political myths, such as the Noble Lie (*Resp.* 3.414d1-415c7) or the story of Atlantis and Athens (*Pl. Criti.* 109b1-end).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For more on the Athenian concept of autochthony, the claim to their land through permanent presence and original emergence from the ground itself, see Loraux 2000; Parker 1987; Rosivach 1987.

<sup>12</sup> Goldhill 1987, 2000, cf. Burian 2011; Cartledge 1997. Dissenting voices include Griffin 1998; Rhodes 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Ober 1998: 36-38; Skinner 2002: 103-27.

<sup>14</sup> Ober 1989: 127-55.

<sup>15</sup> Schofield 2006: 284-97. The complex framing of Plato’s political myths within their dialogue settings, such as Socrates’ apparent reluctance to recount the myths of the Noble Lie, enables Plato both to use myth and distance himself and his characters from their contents when it suits his purposes.

## **Anachronism and the democratic king**

The usual interpretation of characters such as Theseus in tragedy is that they are 'anachronisms' that show the difficulty that playwrights had integrating their compulsory mythical subject matter with issues of contemporary interest.<sup>16</sup> Much effort has been expended on mapping tragic heroes to individual historical politicians, most notably Pericles.<sup>17</sup> Clearly the representation of leadership in tragedy provides a means of assessing contemporary leaders, but pursuing one-on-one mappings is reductive. One can instead see multiple temporalities in play – the performance in historical time links the timeless mythical narrative and cyclical ritual calendars.

Two uses of the idea of kingship in tragedy demand further exploration. Firstly, there is the role of the king as a 'super-citizen', who exemplifies the perfect participant citizen in Athenian democracy. The king is subject to no one, an autonomous individual, yet responsible for the common welfare of the polis. He is the only member of the heroic society depicted on stage who has the same status in that the Athenian citizen does in contemporary society. Secondly, there is the role of the king as a mediator between political and cosmic order, and in particular as the expression of the unity of the polis, solving the one/many problem of the nature of the polis that so troubled ancient thinkers. While classical Greek culture rejected the idea of divine kingship, the Greeks remained aware that other, non-Greek cultures still made use of it.<sup>18</sup>

## **Three good kings in action**

All three of the major tragedians represented exemplary good kings in their extant tragedies, notably in the so-called 'suppliant play' where the king

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<sup>16</sup> Easterling 1985.

<sup>17</sup> Goossens 1932; Podlecki 1966.

<sup>18</sup> Vernant 1982: 38-48.

apparently represents the polis as a whole.<sup>19</sup> While these kings are often regarded as mouthpieces for pro-democratic views, their actions and statements as individual political actors can be seen to undermine the authority and legitimacy of Athenian democracy. Their political debates with their opponents allow cogent presentations of anti-democratic argument to be presented in the heart of Athens' own festival. The democracy depicted in the stage polis of the drama may be markedly different from the practices of contemporary Athens.

### 1. Pelasgus (Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*)

Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* provides a strong contrast between autocratic, non-Greek despotism and Greek proto-democracy. The play is believed to date to the 460s BCE, a time at which Athenian democracy was evolving and casting aside remaining aspects of aristocracy in the hands of leaders such as Ephialtes and Pericles.<sup>20</sup>

Aeschylus represents Pelasgus as the autochthonous king of Argos, either a founder or closely related to one. All tragedy's good kings have a claim of some sort to be considered the founder of their polis or originator of their people, a claim that Pelasgus makes of himself as he introduces himself to the Danaids, the Egyptian refugees who claim asylum in his city based on their Greek ancestry:

τοῦ γηγενοῦς γάρ εἰμ' ἐγὼ Παλαίχθονος  
Ἴνις Πελασγός, τῆσδε γῆς ἀρχηγέτης,  
έμοῦ δ' ἀνακτος εὐλόγως ἐπώνυμον  
γένος Πελασγῶν τήνδε καρποῦται χθόνα· (Aesch. *Supp.* 250-3)

*For I am mighty Pelasgus, the son of the earth-born Palaichthon ('Ancient-Land'), the ruler (archēgetēs) of this land, and this land is cultivated by the race of the Pelasgians, appropriately named after me their king (anaktos). (tr. Sommerstein, adapted)*

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<sup>19</sup> Burian 1985; Kopperschmidt 1971.

<sup>20</sup> Podlecki 1986.

The Pelasgians had an ambiguous status in Athenian mythical history; they exist as a predecessor of the Athenians, who were nonetheless the first inhabitants of the land.<sup>21</sup>

Pelasgus displays many other qualities of the good king, particularly a concern for the communal life of the city, shown through the use of *koinos* vocabulary, opposed to the *kratos* of the autocratic ruler. Aeschylus strengthens the opposition between the community of the polis and the autocracy of the non-Greek Danaus and the suppliants, through opposing the two sets of vocabulary in the lyrical confrontation between the king and the chorus:

Βα. οὔτοι κάθησθε δωμάτων ἐφέστιοι  
ἐμῶν· τὸ κοινὸν δ' εἰ μαιίνεται πόλις,  
ξυνηὶ μελέσθω λαὸς ἐκπονεῖν ἄκη.  
ἐγὼ δ' ἂν οὐ κραινοίμ' ὑπόσχεσιν πάρος,  
ἀστοῖς δὲ πᾶσι τῶνδε κοινώσας πέρυ.  
Χο. σύ τοι πόλις, σὺ δὲ τὸ δῆμιον·  
πρύτανις ἄκριτος ὦν  
κρατύνεις βωμόν, ἐστίαν χθονός,  
μονοψηφοῖσι νεύμασιν σέθεν,  
μονοσκήπτροισι δ' ἐν θρόνοις χρέος  
πᾶν ἐπικραίνεις· ἄγος φυλάσσου. (Aesch. *Supp.* 365-375)

*Pelasgus: You do not indeed sit as suppliants at the hearth of my own palace: and if the city is polluted in respect of its community, it must be the concern of the people as a whole to work out a cure. And I cannot make a binding promise beforehand, but only after sharing these issues together with all the citizens.*

*Chorus: But you are the city, you are the public realm: as an unjudged*

*President you control the altar, the hearth of this land, by your nod and vote alone (monopsephoisi); with your sceptre alone (monoskeptroisi), on your throne, you determine every matter. Guard against pollution.*

The idea of opposition between two political forms, Athenian (Greek) democracy and non-Greek autocracy, may have been strengthened by the exotic presentation of the Danaid chorus as non-Greeks.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Hdt. 1.56-58, 8.44.2: Sourvinou-Inwood 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Burian 1974a; Hall 1989: 202-03, 2010: 207-10.



The Danaids' immediate response is that Pelasgus is the city and a 'public thing', ruling in the singular (σύ τοι πόλις, σὺ δὲ τὸ δῆμιον, 370). This identification between individual ruler and city is paralleled by other tragic kings' assessment of their relationship to the polis, notably Oedipus', who argues that his experience of Thebes' plague is different from that of the citizens supplicating him for help; they have only their individual suffering to bear, while he suffers on behalf of the city as a whole (Soph. *OT* 62-4).

The Danaids continue to argue that Pelasgus wields sole absolute power (373-5).<sup>23</sup> Kingship is equated with divine absolute authority; the Homeric king's nod, equivalent to the nod with which Zeus exercises authority over the other gods, is translated into a newer politics as a single controlling vote (*monopsephoisi*).<sup>24</sup> He holds the only sceptre (*monopsephoisi*), a symbol of monarchy often associated with the divine gift of power, as in the case of Agamemnon's sceptre, created by a god and passed down through the royal line (Hom. *Il.* 2.100-09).<sup>25</sup> The rhetorical and rhythmic force of the repetition *monopsephoisi... / monopsephoisi...* is strong, and the plural forms add a sense of timelessness, but there is a strong contrast too – royal sceptres are properly singular items, while votes are properly plural.

The Danaids' construction of a singular royal power draws attention to the one/many problem of the relationship between singular king and multiple populace, which seems central to the problem of the unity of the city, which is resolved through the character of the democratic king. The Danaids (and Sophocles' Oedipus) seem to suggest that only the singular entity of the monarch can be equated to the singular entity of the city. His status within the city is different from that of the citizens; he is more like the divine power of Zeus, whose political aspect is emphasised throughout the play, notably in the closing lyrics (*Zeus anax*, 1062) but also at 689-90. The single ruler is like a

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<sup>23</sup> Burian 1974a: 7-8, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Or perhaps, the monarchical capability for generating unanimity (*homonoia*) among the population and so converting the multitude into a singular entity, that votes as one, to prioritise the polis over the individual.

<sup>25</sup> Carlier 1984: 190-4.

god in his relationship to the city; he is not part of it, but a whole that can be equated to it. Although Pelasgus submits to the authority of the people in the assembly, this is somewhat double-edged as he is confident that his logos will be persuasive, enabling him to gain suppliant status for Danaus and his daughters. This capability of the king goes back to epic, as shown in the Kings and Singers passage in Hesiod's *Theogony* (80-103).<sup>26</sup>

Pelasgus makes correct decisions about accepting suppliants, a complex process with military, political and religious elements that prove a fruitful dramatic device for illustrating kingship.<sup>27</sup> The good king often opposes the people as a whole in understanding the issues and reaching a correct decision, a connection between kingship, inquiry and knowledge that permeates other genres such as historiography. This contrasts with Aeschylus' Agamemnon, whose failure as a monarch at least partly lies in his earlier decision to favour family and aristocratic group interests in the pursuit of Helen over the communal interest of his polis.

Pelasgus does seem weak and indecisive, surely suggesting that we are not meant to accept him as an ideal king. Reconstructions of the trilogy suggest that he was killed in battle, and that Danaus took his place, threatening the political orientation of Argos which could be presented as favourable to Athenian democracy and replacing it with an autocracy more in line with Athenian dramatic presentation of the politics of other *poleis*.<sup>28</sup> (Darius in Aeschylus' *Persians* would be a very problematic model of a good king, but he is represented as dead in mythical time, and is also the king of a non-polis, when the concern of the dramatists is political activity within the polis framework.)

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<sup>26</sup> Laks 1996; Stoddard 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Bernek 2004; Kopperschmidt 1971.

<sup>28</sup> Garvie 1969: 163-233.

## 2. Theseus (Euripides, *Suppliant Women*)

It seems clear that a good king needs to be king of a democracy, and that Athens is the best example of this, producing a paradox that can only be resolved through the exploration of political myth on the stage. Euripides turns to the Athenian king and hero Theseus again and again, depicting him in different and not always compatible circumstances and stories, which presumably originated in separate cult aitiologies.

In the *Suppliant Women*, produced in 423 or 422 BCE, after the battle of Delium in which the Thebans refused to hand over the Athenian war dead, Theseus appears as the archetypal democratic king. Whereas Walker regards him as a convert to democracy, and Mills a symbol of Athenian imperialism, his inconsistent statements place him as an ambivalent champion of the city's politics.<sup>29</sup> In the dramatic contest with the Theban herald, the representative of autocracy, Theseus lists the key features of democracy:

πρῶτον μὲν ἤρξω τοῦ λόγου ψευδῶς, ξένε,  
ζητῶν τύραννον ἐνθάδ'· οὐ γὰρ ἄρχεται  
ἐνὸς πρὸς ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐλευθέρα πόλις.  
δῆμος δ' ἀνάσσει διαδοχαῖσιν ἐν μέρει  
ἐνιαυσίαισιν, οὐχὶ τῷ πλούτῳ διδοῦς  
τὸ πλεῖστον ἀλλὰ χῶ πένης ἔχων ἴσον. (Eur. *Supp.* 403-8)

*To begin with, stranger, you started your speech on a false note by asking for the master (turannon) here. The city is not ruled by a single man but is free. The people (dēmos) rule, and offices are held by yearly turns: they do not assign the highest honours to the rich, but the poor also have an equal share. (translation adapted from Kovacs)*

The good king is able to mediate and moderate the conflicting interests of different groups of citizens. This is rendered difficult because of the textual problems in Euripides – many of the passages discussing this, because they sound so much more like 4th century political theory than 5th century drama, have been suspected as interpolations from 4th century productions.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Mills 1997; Walker 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Kovacs 1982; Podlecki 2004: cf. Page 1934.

Theseus makes the most interesting case for democracy early in the play. Like Pelasgus, he is confident that his persuasive speech will win debates. He explains to his mother Aithra that he is the founder of Athenian democracy:

δόξαι δὲ χρήζω καὶ πόλει πάσῃ τόδε,  
δόξει δ' ἔμοῦ θέλοντος· ἀλλὰ τοῦ λόγου  
προσδοῦς ἔχοιμ' ἄν δῆμον εὐμενέστερον.  
καὶ γὰρ κατέστησ' αὐτὸν ἐς μοναρχίαν  
ἐλευθερώσας τήνδ' ἰσόψηφον πόλιν. (Eur. *Supp.* 349-53)

*I want this to be ratified by the city, and it will be, since I wish it to be. But in relaying this logos I would put the people in a more favourable frame of mind. For indeed I established them in their position of sole authority (monarchia), when I freed this city of equal votes (isopsephon).*

Theseus claims to have set the demos into a state of *monarchia*, in granting freedom to the polis (or set up a polis of equal votes, in giving freedom to the demos; there is some ambiguity in 352-3).<sup>31</sup> The establishment of democracy becomes, in Euripides' manipulative retelling, the achievement of the heroic king Theseus rather than the collective Athenian people. The argument that democracy derived its political legitimacy from monarchical origins was taken up by later writers, notably Isocrates; there even developed a school of thought, represented by Theophrastus' Oligarchic Man, that Theseus was a bad king for enabling Athenian democracy to develop.<sup>32</sup>

Athenian democracy in Theseus' view entirely depends on the transmission of his monarchical authority for its legitimacy. And it remains a kind of monarchy – it is only effective when the mass (*plēthos*, 355) of the Athenian people can unite behind single ideas and policies. Of course, this refers to Theseus' role as the synoecist of Athens, as described by Thucydides, but it also suggests a

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<sup>31</sup> Editors have repeatedly tried to emend these lines, but both the Murray and Diggle editions of the Oxford Classical Text let them stand: Collard 1975: *ad loc*; Diggle 1981: 16.

<sup>32</sup> Isoc. *Panath.* 12.128-130; Plut. *Vit. Thes.* 25-26; Theoph. *Char.* 26.5. Theophrastus' somewhat comic presentation marks a shift in opinion which may also be evident in Lycurgus' use of Erechtheus and Codrus as exemplars rather than Theseus (Lyc. *Against Leocrates* 84, 99-100).

continuing role for the unifying figure of the founder-king.<sup>33</sup> Whether the democratic city under Theseus truly is one of equal votes (*isopsephon*, Eur. *Supp.* 353), or whether Theseus maintains the powerful influence that Pelasgus did at Argos (*monopsephois*, Aesch. *Supp.* 373) remains ambiguous.

### 3. Theseus (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*)

Euripides did not have the last word on the relationship between king and democratic polis. In 406 BCE and his final play, Sophocles turned to two great myths, the Theban cycle of Oedipus and the Athenian story of Theseus, and connected them in his final play. One might expect the dramatist to cast a critical eye over the city's politics in this play, the product of a city facing total defeat in the Peloponnesian War.<sup>34</sup>

Sophocles' good Athenian king Theseus demonstrates the power of the informed individual over the ignorant collective, a theme that becomes familiar in later anti-democratic political thought.<sup>35</sup> He is less inclined to persuade than simply to command; he does not argue with the men of Colonus but tells them what to do.

The political structures of Athens depicted in this play are vague, although the depiction of geographic, religious and political space is precise.<sup>36</sup> Antigone emphasises the distance of the city and its far-off towers (14-15), but acknowledges that they are in a part of Athens (24). The distance of the border deme of Colonus from the central *astu* is emphasised, suggesting a liminal status for its citizens: the Xenos must explain that it is the king from the *astu* who rules the place (67). But there is no indication that they do not have citizen rights across Athens as a whole. In political terms, Athens appears to

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<sup>33</sup> Thuc. 2.15.1-2; Walker 1994.

<sup>34</sup> Xen. *Hell.* 1.6-1.7.

<sup>35</sup> Pericles contrasted to other Athenians and other Athenian leaders, Thuc. 2.65.8-11; geometric equality in Athens, Isoc. *Areopag.* 21-22; cf. Hdt. 5.97 where Aristagoras finds it easier to persuade the Athenian masses than the Spartan king, and Aristotle's presentation of the opposite case, *Politics* 3.11.1281a39-b21.

<sup>36</sup> Edmunds 1996: 91-92; Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988: 357-59.

be adjusting to its perhaps recent synoecism; here the religious context is important too. This may be Athens, but it is Poseidon and the Eumenides who hold sway here, and the eponymous hero is Colonus (58-61) not one of the Athenian democratic heroes.<sup>37</sup> Colonus' role as the site of the establishment of the 411/10 BCE oligarchy is not invoked, but must be relevant.<sup>38</sup>

Although he is a commanding individual, Theseus is represented as a king who also cares about the shared life of the city, *to koinon*. Sophocles achieves this through the implicit contrast between Theseus and the Thebans who seek Oedipus' return, Creon appearing as a tyrant (939-1013) and Polyneices as activist for the pro-oligarchy youthful faction (1285-1345). It is clear that political authority for Theseus is constituted through *logos* not force. But it also clearly exists within the command of the individual king, whose religious authority enables Oedipus to grant Athens the posthumous protection that Thebes was seeking through granting him suppliant status.<sup>39</sup> Blundell argues that Theseus here exemplifies a traditional morality, the ideal of helping friends and harming enemies.<sup>40</sup>

Sophocles occasionally has his kings blur the line between the privileged epistemological status of the leader and their ontological status; the king becomes the city, his personal unity matched to its political unity. The person of the king can be equated to the unity of the polis. In the earlier Oedipus play, Oedipus makes this claim when his citizens first seek his help for the plague that has arrived at Thebes:

τὸ μὲν γὰρ ὑμῶν ἄλγος εἰς ἕν' ἔρχεται  
μόνον καθ' αὐτόν, κούδέν' ἄλλον, ἢ δ' ἐμὴ  
ψυχὴ πόλιν τε κάμει καὶ σ' ὁμοῦ στένει. (Soph. OT 62-4)

*For pain comes to each one of you, alone and on his own account,  
and that of no other, but my soul grieves both for you and for me  
and for the city.*

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<sup>37</sup> Kearns 1989: 50-52, 178.

<sup>38</sup> Thuc. 8.67.2.

<sup>39</sup> Burian 1974b: 409-10, 428-9.

<sup>40</sup> Blundell 1993.

While Sophocles shows that Oedipus' beliefs about his own status are a delusion, the suggested connection remains. There is a symbiosis between the corruption he has yet to discover and the plague that besets Thebes; the distinction that Oedipus sees between him and the other citizens is not the one that will emerge as the play progresses.

Political analysis of the later play has mostly focused on Oedipus' political status (is he granted citizen status in Athens or not?), but it is the religious status of Theseus that is most relevant here.<sup>41</sup> Towards the end of the play, the dying Oedipus grants Theseus unique and personal access to his mysteries, to be handed on in turn to his successors:

ἀλλ' αὐτὸς αἰεὶ σῶζε, χῶταν ἐς τέλος  
τοῦ ζῆν ἀφικνῆ, τῷ προφερτάτῳ μόνῳ  
σήμαιν', ὁ δ' αἰεὶ τῷπιόντι δεικνύτω.  
χοῦτως ἀδῆον τήνδ' ἐνοικήσεις πόλιν  
σπαρτῶν ἀπ' ἀνδρῶν· αἱ δὲ μυρίαὶ πόλεις,  
κἂν εὖ τις οἰκῆ, ῥαδίως καθύβρισαν. (Soph. OC 1530-35)

*But always protect (these secrets), and when you reach the end of your life, indicate them to the eldest alone, and let him always in turn show them to his successor. And so you will live in this city free from fear of the Sown Men. For countless cities, even if someone governs them well, easily fall into insolence.*

Of course, there is a pro-democracy reading of this – the Athenian *basileus* as the annual archon in charge of older celebrations, handing on his religious authority to his successors in turn – but in the dark context of this play, in which Theseus has already been shown overturning the majority verdict of the demesmen in accepting Oedipus as a suppliant, there may be an anti-democratic argument here about the preferred rule of the expert, philosopher king.<sup>42</sup> The superlative *prophertatōi* (1531) could mean either eldest, implying a monarchical succession, or most outstanding, implying an aristocratic one.

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<sup>41</sup> Ahrens Dorf 2009: 73-82; Knox 1982: 21-25.

<sup>42</sup> *Archon basileus* as public official in charge of older ceremonies at Athens: [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 3.2-5, Rhodes 1993: 99-106.



That certainly fits the context of the writing of the play, though perhaps less so its posthumous production, in Athens after both the end of the war and the restoration of democracy.<sup>43</sup> Sophocles' political thought is complex, and also responsive to its political context; Sophocles was an active participant in Athenian civic life, one of the *probouloi* whose advent was seen as a weakening of democracy. It is hard to see how the Theseus of the *OC* could have fitted into the two earlier Theban plays, for example, where the single leader taking strong control of the city is depicted as a developing tyrant (Creon in the *Antigone*) or as lacking in the knowledge he claims (Oedipus in the *OT*).

## Conclusion

Tragedy's democratic kings enabled the dramatists to explore the dynamics of political participation within a heroic setting, but they also serve to focus two of the democracy's biggest theoretical difficulties, how to express the unity of the city and how to express the participation of individual 'great men' leaders such as Pericles within the framework of collective decision-making and life. Aeschylus seems to look forward to a democracy that will express the values of Greek culture within the polis, while Euripides and Sophocles respond to the developments of the Peloponnesian War.

Athenian myth proves to be a relatively flexible basis within which the tragedians can explore a range of arguments about the relative claim of individual and collective, and the strengths of kingship compared with democracy in delivering stability to the polis. Presenting the good king on the democratic stage enables the qualities an impossible real king might bring to be activated within the Athenian political imaginary; by representing itself as the home of good monarchy, the polis achieves the unity and stability associated with good kingship without exposing itself to the politically unacceptable consequences of single-person rule.

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<sup>43</sup> Easterling 1997: 281. Easterling notes that this 'is a play for audiences with mixed feelings about Athens... but with a powerful belief in the value of the πόλις...'



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