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## Humanimity and Hyper-determination in Sophocles' Oedipus Plays

Abstract

In a discussion of *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus* the essential question of Oedipus' identity remains unanswered. This paper addresses the topic, conceiving Oedipus as a "manimal", a point of intersection of nature and culture. Oedipus' humanimity questions his common reception as a hero occupying a liminal space between nature and culture: rather, he seems to fully belong to the wild nature of Cithaeron, and also to the civilized world of Thebes. Born in a human family and raised by step parents, Oedipus is also the child of Cithaeron, which nurtured him like a mother (*OT* 1091: τροφὸν καὶ μητέρα) and, according to this double origin of birth, a human puppy but also a nursling animal (θρέμμα: 1143); the mountain does not represent only his place of savage birth, but also the location where he would like to die (1451-4). Yet, despite his wild origins, Oedipus belongs to the city of Thebes more than anyone else. Thebes is not going to find salvation without him, even after acknowledging his incest. The Sphinx oppressing the city was defeated by him; Thebes' political balance relies upon him, who alone, by returning to Thebes, can prevent his sons' war. Whereas Oedipus is the citizen that Thebes cannot relinquish, Creon, Eteocles and Polyneices, the men in charge in Thebes, will cause havoc in the city, by waging a war for honour and dynastic power (*OC* 1416-23). As far as I am aware, the only paper discussing how a Greek play lends itself to the idea of humanimity is Payne (2016). This paper aims to broaden this discussion to other dramatic plays, taking Sophocles' Oedipus plays as a key-study.

KEYWORDS: humanimity, incest, parricide, Cithaeron, hyper-determination

*Oedipus Tyrannos* overturns assumptions which seemed rock-solid. A citizen, one would have said, is not a stranger; a single brigand does not equal several; that which you leave on the mountain does not return to haunt you in the city. This is a tragedy about the disastrous failure of attempts to keep things separate.

R. Buxton, *Imagery Greek Mountains*

It is as readers and writers that we fulfill the potential of Oedipus' paradigm of transgression.

S.D. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*

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In *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, the identity of Oedipus remains essentially undisclosed.<sup>1</sup> My suggestion to further research on the topic is to conceive Oedipus as a “manimal”, a point of intersection of nature and culture. In this light, Oedipus’ dramatic career is extremely modern: it discloses a notion of man prefiguring the contemporary exploration of the concept of the animal in man, as analysed in seminal works by Agamben 2002, Haraway 2003, Simondon 2004 and Derrida 2006. Within this frame, Oedipus’ humanimity represents a conceptual metaphor that disentangles the notion of animal being as opposed to human being: the image of the humanimal as a metaphorical language, employed by humans to talk about themselves and animals alike, belongs to a symbolic order unsettling the human/animal distinction.<sup>2</sup>

Oedipus’ humanimity, as we shall see, questions his common reception as a hero occupying a liminal space between nature and culture. In particular, my discussion differs from the seminal study of Bettini and Guidorizzi (2004) who argue that Oedipus, as the child of Cithaeron and of a human family, encompasses both animal and human qualities and, precisely for this reason, is a marginal figure inhabiting a liminal space between nature and culture.<sup>3</sup>

In the reading proposed here, the manimal Oedipus does not entirely assimilate the animal Otherness: the figure of Oedipus does not represent an animal; it represents a man who embodies the animal’s difference. By disentangling the dichotomies of nature and culture, of man and animal, Oedipus’ tragic action ‘remaps these boundaries’, deactivating strategies of cul-

<sup>1</sup> The Greek of *OT* and of *OC* follows the OCT edition of Lloyd-Jones and Wilson; the Greek of *Phoenissae* the edition of Mastronarde (for the *λύσις* the OCT edition of Murray). All translations are mine. My sincere thanks to my colleagues Chiara Thumiger and Emeline Marquis, and in particular Francesca Spiegel, for their advices and sharp remarks. But above all I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer whose theoretical rigor and knowledge of Greek has reminded me of how much I still have to learn.

<sup>2</sup> On animal being as a notion, an image and a conceptual metaphor, cf. Timofeeva (forthcoming): “Animal as a concept is born from the system of philosophical definitions and is linked to other concepts, such as human being (to whom animal is often opposed as the Other). . . . Animal as an image belongs to the order of symbolic mediations and appears as an element of metaphorical language on which humans talk to themselves either about themselves (thus, in humanist tradition the figure of the animal can refer to human passions) or about the Other (in this case the animal is to be found on the one side with the excluded, the vulnerable, etc., with migrants, or minorities, or the poor). When the image and the concept are bonded, i.e. when there is a concept or a system of concepts behind the image, the animal appears as a conceptual metaphor”.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bettini and Guidorizzi 2004: 83-102.

tural domination upon nature, of man upon animal.<sup>4</sup> As I argue, Sophocles' Oedipus plays invite us to ponder if, and to what extent, Greek tragic thought questions anthropocentrism and the view of man as the measure of everything.

To my knowledge, the only paper discussing how a Greek play lends itself to the idea of humanimality is Payne in "Teknomajikality and the Humanimal in Aristophanes' *Wasps*" (in the *Brill Companion to Aristophanes' Reception*, 2016).<sup>5</sup> This paper aims to broaden the discussion to other dramatic plays, taking Sophocles' Oedipus plays as a key-study. In the first part ("Manimal"), I explore Oedipus as a humanimal whose destiny is hyper-determined; in the second part ("Remapping human/animal boundaries"), I discuss how savage nature, from Oedipus' perspective, is not what made him a parricidal and incestuous son.

## 1. Manimal

Why "manimal"? To begin with, Oedipus appears a "manimal" because of his double origin of birth: on the one side, a human origin (Laius and Jocasta, his biological parents, as well as Merope and Polybius, his adoptive family in Corinth); on the other side, an origin in the wilderness of the mountain Cithaeron, where Laius and Jocasta abandon him when he is only three days old (*OT* 717-29). As we are told by the chorus, the mountain's wooded valleys and gorges (1026: *ναπαΐαις ἐν Κιθαίρωνος πτυχαῖς*) are thought of as the hero's place of birth: as Bollack points out (1990: *ad loc.*), the noun *πτυχή* evokes the image of a cavity, and, by extension, of the womb. The Cithaeron is to Oedipus a mother and a nurturer (1091: *τροφὸν καὶ ματέρ'*). This mountain's description indicates in fact "how for a time the infant Oedipus was indeed in its care" (Finglass 2018: *ad loc.*).<sup>6</sup> We do not know how much time Oedipus spends on Cithaeron before the shepherd finds him. However, unlike Jocasta, the shepherd, who gave Oedipus

<sup>4</sup> Borrowing from Haraway, we might say that Oedipus' tragedy implies, for the reader of the plays, to engage "the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts" (2016: 67).

<sup>5</sup> Although Holmes (2015) is not concerned with humanimality, her paper is a groundbreaking and illuminating discussion of how the river Scamander, acting as a heroic figure, repeals the divide between nature and culture in the *Iliad*, pointing to their irreversible continuity.

<sup>6</sup> On Oedipus' double birth in a human family and on the wild space of Cithaeron, cf. also Bettini and Guidorizzi 2004 (esp. 83-90), with an emphasis on the mountain as the place of the passage between death to rebirth (p. 86: "place where the transition between death and rebirth takes place").

to the messenger, recognizes the hero immediately (1142-6), so it seems reasonable to suppose that they spent a considerable amount of time together.

In conformity with his double origin of birth on Cithaeron and in a human family, the baby Oedipus is referred to with words that point to his humanimity. The messenger asks the servant if he remembers having given him a boy to raise him up as if he was his own child:

ΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ φέρ' εἰπέ νυν, τότε' οἶσθα παῖδά μοι τινα  
δούς, ὡς ἔμαυτῶ θρέμμα θρεψαίμην ἐγώ;

[MESSENGER Come, tell me now, do you remember having given me a child  
/ back in those days to be raised up as my own creature?]  
(1142-3)

In the *figura etymologica* 'θρέμμα θρεψαίμην', the noun θρέμμα, 'fed animal', is predicative to παῖς and singles out the animal and human origin of Oedipus: θρέμμα is a human nursling but also an animal puppy. The ambiguity is mirrored in the verb τρέφω, which is used in Greek for animals, such as cattle and dogs, as well as for children bred and reared in a household (cf. LSJ). Similarly, Oedipus' investigations of Laius' murder point to the hero's humanimity. In his rational search for Laius' assassins, in his *zetesis* (110), Oedipus looks for traces of blood (ἵχνος) (108-9)<sup>7</sup> behaving like dogs on the hunt for murderers (Aesch., *Eum.* 246-7). On the other hand, looking for blood traces is also what hunters typically do.<sup>8</sup>

The language of *Oedipus Tyrannus* points to Oedipus' humanimity also towards the end of the play. When Oedipus laments the suffering for the terrible disgrace of incest and parricide, he traces his stabbing pain, metaphorically, back to his human and animal part: he asserts that his soul is pierced by the stab of goads, as well as by the memory of the committed crimes (1318: κέντρων τε τῶνδ' οἴστρημα καὶ μνήμη κακῶν). In a similar vein, in passage 1349-50 (ὄς . . . νομάδ' μ' ἔλαβ'),<sup>9</sup> Oedipus is depicted like a grazing animal roaming through the mountains. In conformity with this

<sup>7</sup> With ἵχνος taking up the αἷμα in line 101. For the representation of tragic characters as following traces of blood, cf. also Odysseus in Soph. *Ai.* 1-8 (with ἵχνος at line 6), and Cassandra in Aesch. *Ag.* 1093-4.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kicey 2014: 39-40 with n15. On Oedipus' looking for traces leading to Laius' assassins, cf. also *OT* 220-1.

<sup>9</sup> The codd. have νομάδος; Lloyd-Jones and Wilson print νομάς (*coniecit* Hartung); I follow here Pearson who prints 'νομάδ' (*coni. Elmsley metri gratia*). Finglass *ad loc.* notes that "writing νομάδ'" (*coni. Elmsley, text and p. 108*) inappropriately applies the adjective to the immobile baby". Yet, tying a baby with shackles does not mean necessarily to immobilize him but to hinder his movement. Stella prints νομάδος ἐπὶ πόας, but the adjective ἐπιπόδιος, as Finglass *ad loc.* observes, "is unlikely to have been inserted by mistake".

association, the bonds trapping his feet (1349: πέδᾶς) are the shackles commonly used for tying up humans, but also the hobbles that are tied to the front legs of animals to prevent them from running away (cf. *Il.* 13.36).

Further narrative elements highlight Oedipus' humanness. His fate appears directly linked with animality. When he defeats the Sphinx, he brings happiness and good fortune (*tyche*) to the city with a good bird's omen (52-3).<sup>10</sup> The chorus affirms that Laius' murderer has feet stronger than those of storm-swift horses (466-68), and Oedipus tells Jocasta that he met a man (sic. Laius) on a cross-road on a chariot drawn by colts (802-3).

The understanding of Oedipus as a being with a double origin of birth questions his common reception as a hero occupying a liminal space between nature and culture. According to the critics, this child raised on the mountain will never fully belong to the civic world of his native city Thebes and his adoptive city Corinth.<sup>11</sup> In Corinth, he is king Polybius' foster son, and therefore, as he says himself, the most important under the citizens (774-6), but from another point of view, he is a foreigner coming from Thebes. He is citizen and king of Thebes, and yet, as Tiresias explains (452-3), he arrives at Thebes as a foreigner because he is not aware that he was born there.<sup>12</sup> He is a friend of Thebes (he saves it from the Sphinx) but also an enemy to its civic community (he spread a contagious illness with his incest). This interpretation of Oedipus' tragic role tacitly implies a dichotomy of nature and culture: his identity is profoundly ambiguous; as a human baby grown up in the wild, he does not completely belong neither to the city, nor to the mountain. However, as I shall illustrate, there are reasons to suppose that Oedipus fully belongs to the wild nature of Cithaeron and to the civilized world of Thebes.

Throughout all his life, the Cithaeron is always with Oedipus. The mountain represents not just his place of birth, but also the place where he would like to die (*OT* 1451-4). We can push this point further. When Oedipus begins to investigate Laius' murder, the search for the culprit on the basis of tangible and incontrovertible evidence, and hence the search for a rational explanation for this crime, translates for the hero into the collapse of the world he considers real. While Thebes and Corinth cease to exist for

<sup>10</sup> One of the examples of tragic irony in *OT*: when Oedipus brings good fortune to Thebes, he simultaneously brings its disaster. On prophetic birds in *OT*, cf. also line 966.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. e.g. the influential contributions of Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1972, 1986 [1988]; Segal 1981, 2001; Delcourt 1981; Bollack 1990; Foley 1993; Bettini and Guidorizzi 2004: 83-102.

<sup>12</sup> Similarly, for the tension between "Oedipus the king of Thebes" and "Oedipus the stranger in Thebes", cf. *OT* 219-23: here Oedipus, still unaware of who he really is, affirms that he will speak publicly (ἐξέρῶ) to the city as a stranger to the deed (ξένος δὲ τοῦ παραχθέντος), that is to Laius' murder.

Oedipus because they prove to be not what he believed they were, the Cithaeron does not. In fact, the mountain continues to be for Oedipus what has always been: the place that welcomes him, when humans drive him out from their world. Drawing on these remarks, we can put forward some further points on the identity of Oedipus. Oedipus is not just “hidden from himself”, as McCoy (2013: 56) has recently suggested. In Oedipus’ search for his own identity, we recognize a paradoxical progression: the more he tries to explain what is true and real for him, the more what is true and real for him disappears. In addition, if Oedipus’ identity is an enigma (it poses a question that admits only a true or false answer: are you or are you not Laius’ and Jocasta’s son?), the case of Oedipus seems to illuminate us on the positive value of reduced awareness: full self-knowledge might push the subject to death. In this sense, Oedipus’ investigation might represent a criticism of the Delphic wisdom of the *gnothi sauton*.

The Cithaeron remains a part of Oedipus’ human life, also because the mountain safeguards the memories that bound the hero to his human family. When the messenger reveals Oedipus that he found him on Cithaeron while taking care there of Laius’ flocks (OT 1026-30), he also reveals Oedipus that he freed his ankles that were pinned together (1034). Oedipus refers to his perforated ankles as an old trouble (1033) that he had from the cradle (1035); then, the messenger states that Oedipus’ name, and therefore his identity, depends on his pierced ankles (note in line 1036 the correspondence between the verb to name/ὀνομάζειν and to be/εἶναι):<sup>13</sup>

Αἴτσαλος ὥστ’ ὀνομάσθης ἐκ τύχης ταύτης ὃς εἶ

[MESSENGER So much so that from that circumstance you were called be  
that name which you still bear]  
(1036)

Who gave Oedipus his name? Perhaps the foster parents in Corinth; hardly, his biological parents, as Bollack *ad loc.* explains at some length. Yet, regardless of who ever chose it, “Oedipus” is a sign of the hero’s humanness, in the sense that “Oedipus” names the child whose fate (τύχη) was to be exposed on Cithaeron, to be injured at the ankles in order to die on the mountain, and to be rescued instead by the mountain that nursed him. In this verbal exchange, the savage Cithaeron is invested with a cultural value. As the place that lets Oedipus’ childhood memories flow back, together with his identity as the injured baby abandoned in the wild, the mountain is implicitly represented as the geographical point of the hero’s emotional investment with his environment. Seen as ‘the’ element of Oedipus’ *topo-*

<sup>13</sup> Cf. also Eur. *Pho.* 25-7; *Apollod.* 3.5.7.

*philia*, the wild Cithaeron is part of the cultural geography of Oedipus' human life.<sup>14</sup>

Following this discussion, the text of *Oedipus Tyrannus* does not seem to establish a dichotomy of nature and culture, but rather a continuity in reference to Oedipus' identity. This should not surprise us. The Cithaeron is the savage space of the non-polis that man cannot penetrate (719).<sup>15</sup> It is also much more than that. For instance, shepherds live and work there (1028-9, 1044, 1125-7, 1133-9). After all, mountains in Greek culture do not symbolize only wilderness as opposed to civilization; they often epitomize the tensions between these two spheres. For instance, as Buxton has extensively shown (2013), mountains, in myth as in real life, were economically productive places (sources of wood, charcoal and sheep-farming); as Langdon (2000) carefully discusses it, mountains were privileged spaces for worshipping gods (notably, according to Pausanias (9.2.4), the Cithaeron was Zeus' sacred mountain; in the *Bacchae*, it is the place where the Maenads worship Dionysus).

Equally importantly, the Cithaeron is part of Oedipus' human life because it is the mountain that grants the hero the chance to become citizen and king of Thebes. Without Cithaeron, Oedipus would have never been accepted as a member of the community of Thebes. When his human family wanted him dead, his life was saved by the mountain which raised him, and precisely because Oedipus is a creature of wild Cithaeron, he defeats the Sphinx and becomes widely known and publicly respected (*OT* 8, 495; *OC* 305-6), the king of Thebes (*OT* 1380), the first among men (33-6), the most powerful and envied man in Thebes (1525-6). The Cithaeron is a wild and prodigious space: it harbors beasts and nomadic shepherds, but also the nymphs, Pan, Apollo and Dionysus (*OT* 1098-109), and benevolent animals such as sheep and goats (1135-6). In this world, simultaneously savage and benign, Oedipus acquires an outstanding power which exceeds the average abilities of a human being: having lived among animals in his infancy, he has the ability to understand the Sphinx, a talking animal, a ῥαψωδὸς κύων, a dog chanting its riddle (391).<sup>16</sup> As Bettini and Guidorizzi

<sup>14</sup> On *topophilia* and cultural attitudes towards mountains and wilderness, cf. Tuan 1974: 92 ff. (ch. 8: *topophilia* and environment); Schama 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the similar description of Cithaeron in Eur. *Ba.* 677ff., 1043-147.

<sup>16</sup> For the Sphinx as a dog, cf. also Aesch. fr. 236 Radt and Ar. *Ra.*, 1287. On the Sophoclean Sphinx as a dog, cf. Bollack ad *OT* 391-2: "The monster (that the 'dog' terms as such, in its animality, rather than in the aspect of woman, 'bitch' . . .)", to whom one has to add the important remarks of Bettini and Guidorizzi (2004: 178) and Finglass at *OT* 391-2. On the singing Sphinx, cf. also 36, 130, 1200. As a talking animal, the Sphinx is a wondrous animal. On wondrous animals, cf. Beagon (2014). In the *Seven against Thebes*, the Sphinx is described as a noxious and monstrous beast devouring men

have observed (2004: 88):

The double birth gives the baby a surplus of powers and makes him a two-faced being, man and animal at the same time . . . a being that precisely for this reason can interpret the voice of animals and is therefore able to understand the question of the Sphinx, who is a speaking animal.

The solution of the Sphinx' enigma, which is the word "man",<sup>17</sup> can only come from a manimal. It is Oedipus' animality which allows him to interpret the Sphinx' animal language, and to defeat the wondrous animal. Additionally, the concept itself of man, amounting to the solution, implies the necessity of a human act on the part of Oedipus, in order to fully grasp the meaning of the riddle. The manimal Oedipus has a savage mind that masters animal language.

The *Phoenissae* seem to support this reading. In this play too, Oedipus seems to solve the unintelligible enigma thanks to his ability to understand what the Sphinx sings. On the one hand, Antigone affirms that he could understand the song of the songstress who is hard to be understood:

ΑΝΤΙΓΟΝΗ . . . ὅτε  
 δυσζυνέτου ζυνετὸς μέλος ἔγνω  
 Σφιγγὸς ἀοιδοῦ . . .

[ANTIGONE . . . as he understood the subtle song<sup>18</sup> of the Sphinx, the songstress hard to be understood . . .]  
 (1505-7)

On the other hand, Oedipus depicts himself as the one who solved the enigma, the solution of which nobody could grasp:

ΟΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ αἴνιγμ' ἀσύνητον εὐρών  
 [OEDIPUS As he solved the unintelligible riddle]  
 (1731)

To this line of interpretation, one might object that the Sphinx is not a talking dog, but an animal-human hybrid as in the famous attic *kylix* of the Oedipus Painter.<sup>19</sup> After all, the Sphinx is described as a winged and deadly

(Aesch. *Th.* 541, 558, 776-7).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *hypothesis* III of *OT*; *lysis of Phoenissae*; D. S. 4. 64.4; Apollod. 3.5.8.

<sup>18</sup> For ζυνετὸς μέλος as 'subtle song', cf. Mastronarde *ad loc.*: "ζυνετὸς (μέλος) is best taken as 'subtle, deep, clever'".

<sup>19</sup> In Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca* she is said to have the face of a woman, breast, feet and tail of a lioness and wings of a bird (3.5.8); in Diodorus Siculus she is said to be a two-formed wild animal (4.64.3).

virgin (*OT* 507-8, 1999-201) as in Euripides' *Phoenissae* (806, 1019-25, 1041).<sup>20</sup> In conformity with this, one might argue that she speaks human language and, therefore, that every one in Thebes understands her but nobody is capable of solving the enigma. This seems to be suggested by Apollodorus who refers that the Thebans often met and discussed the answer to the enigma (3.5.8), implying that they could understand the language of the Sphinx but not the enigma. Yet, there are good reasons to suppose that Oedipus' capacity to crack the riddle, in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, is directly linked to his capacity to interpret animal language. In his attempt to denigrate Tiresias, Oedipus explicitly says that a seer's help was needed to solve the Sphinx' enigma, because to interpret (διειπεῖν)<sup>21</sup> it was not a task for the first comer; yet Tiresias was discovered not to have prophetic skills and Oedipus himself solved the riddle:

ΟΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ    καίτοι τό γ' αἴνιγμ' οὐχὶ τοῦπιόντος ἦν  
                   ἀνδρὸς διειπεῖν, ἀλλὰ μαντείας ἔδει·  
                   ἦν οὔτ' ἀπ' οἰωνῶν σὺ προῦφάνης ἔχων                    395  
                   οὔτ' ἐκ θεῶν του γνωτόν· ἀλλ' ἐγὼ μολῶν,  
                   ὁ μηδὲν εἰδὼς Οἰδίπους, ἔπαυσά νιν

[OEDIPUS and yet it was not the task for a passer-by / to interpret the enigma, but it needed prophetic skill / But you did not seem to possess any prophetic skill, either from the birds / or from the gods. But I came along / Oedipus, who knew nothing, and made her stop singing.]  
 (393-7)

In his reply, the chorus refers to the enigma as the god's prophecies (406-7: τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ μαντεῖ'). In this dramatic exchange, the capacity to understand the Sphinx is put in direct relation to the divine and divinatory powers. This is crucial. As Furlanetto has extensively shown (2005: 158-63), seers are known for understanding animal language, because animal language is traditionally linked with the knowledge of the future<sup>22</sup> and indeed this applies to the Sphinx too, who is said to be *χρησμοῦδος*, that is chanting oracles, prophetic (1200).

To be sure, the priest says that Oedipus solved the enigma with the help of a god: he had no better knowledge than any one else in Thebes nor was

<sup>20</sup> On the Sphinx as a deadly virgin, cf. also Pindar fr. 177a-f M. In this light, the description of the Sphinx as a dog alludes, metaphorically, to her female gender in an obvious gesture of denigration (cf. Bettini and Guidorizzi 2004: 175).

<sup>21</sup> On διειπεῖν as meaning 'to interpret', cf. the painstaking and elegant discussion of Bollack *ad loc.*

<sup>22</sup> For instance, Xanthus' foreboding of Achilles' future in the *Iliad* 19, which Furlanetto discusses extensively.

taught anything in this respect (*OT* 36-8). Oedipus himself contends that he solved the enigma thanks to his wit (*γνώμη*) only, without the help of the prophetic art (398). Yet, this seems to point to Oedipus as a figure whose humanimity comprehends the ability to understand animal language. For instance, we know from Oppian (*Cynegetica* 2.540-3) that a few human beings, gifted with special skills, are able to understand the language of elephants. Furthermore, Oedipus' *γνώμη*, his wit, marks a continuity with the Sphinx, who is depicted as a cunning animal: she is *ποικιλῶδός* (130), that is she sings cunningly.<sup>23</sup> Relying on Bettini 2009, the Sphinx' *poikilia* can be read as a visible sign of Oedipus' incest:

The *poikilia* (of the rainbow, or other things) presents itself as an immediate symbol of all that seems to abolish the distinction, the opposition by intervals: as it happens in the enigma, or in the incest, where precisely the *adynata*, that what is contradictory, coincide and every true distinction falls between father and brother. (198)

Cunning is not the only point of continuity between Oedipus and the Sphinx, the only sign of the hero's humanimity. There is also a body contiguity between them: as the hero is lame, so the Sphinx has crooked talons (1199). The vulnerability of their body intersects the boundaries between human and animal, showing how human and animal fate are bound together. Indeed, Oedipus' fate is indissolubly tied to the Sphinx: it is the killing of the Sphinx that gives Oedipus enormous reputation. Moreover, the Sphinx' cannibalism mirrors Oedipus' crimes since cannibalism, as Forbes Irving (1987: 103) and Thumiger (2008: 2; 2014: 86) have spelled out, is linked to incest and familial disorder.

So far, we have seen how Oedipus' tragic biography outlines a continuity between nature and culture: by saving his life and nursing him, the mountain grants Oedipus the opportunity to become a member of the civic community of Thebes, in fact its king. Yet, as the child of Cithaeron, which to him is a fellow-countryman (*OT* 1090: τὸν πατριώταν Οἰδίπου), Oedipus belongs to the city of Thebes more than anyone else. Thebes is not going to find salvation without Oedipus; the entire city relies on him, even after acknowledging his incest. He defeated the oppressing Sphinx; only he can save the city from the war among the hereditary princes Eteocles and Polyneices. This inseparable bond with Thebes is the reason why exile in the savage woods (*OC* 348-9) is not suitable to him (590). This also explains why Oedipus never forgives his sons and Creon for having expelled him from Thebes (427-44; 761-71; 1364), turning him into a man without a

<sup>23</sup> On *poikilia* as inherently related to cunning, cf. the seminal study of Detienne and Vernant (1974) 1991: 24-54 ("The Fox and the Octopus").

city, an *apolis* (207, 1357). Whereas Oedipus is crucial to the life of the city, Creon, Eteocles and Polyneices, the men in charge in Thebes, will cause havoc, by waging a war for honor and dynastic power (1416-23). In Thebes, cultural values, power relations and military violence rank among the first causes of the city's devastation - certainly not Oedipus and his humanimality. Thebes' political balance relies upon the humanimal Oedipus, who alone can prevent his sons' war, by returning to Thebes. Here we trace a bitter criticism of state politics and human values, a major theme in all Euripides' plays, as Pucci (2016) carefully argues in his last book on Euripides.

The hypertrophy of Oedipus' birth origin - as a child of Cithaeron and as a child of a human family - is mirrored in the manimal's hypertrophic tragic actions. Oedipus' tragedy can be traced back to many factors: his abandonment at birth; his parricidal fate; his incest; his children conceived with his own mother; the self-blinding. In turn, this multiplicity of tragic actions ensues from Apollo's prophecy lurking on his fate (*OT* 376-7, 463-6, 896-910). As Oedipus' tragic actions are determined by a prophecy, and progress from a variety of factors, we can say that the hero's identity is hyper-determined. Unlike what critics usually assume, Oedipus' tragedy does not seem to amount to a conflict between individual freedom and external constraints:<sup>24</sup> he acknowledges his fate to be determined by Apollo's oracle (1329-30).<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, the tragedy of Oedipus' hyper-determined fate is consumed in an intersection of chance and finality: on the one hand, all his actions are determined by the prophecy; on the other, by *tyche*, of which he affirms to be the son (1080).<sup>26</sup> This convergence of finality and *tyche* is a feature of Oedipus' hyper-determination. As Pucci observes (1999: 166), even when he turns out to be responsible of parricide and incest, Oedipus is still the man who solved the Sphinx' enigma as well as the man who blinds himself and suffers an self-inflected pain rather than being punished by Apollo (1331-5). "The implication here", as Lawrence observes (2014: 504), "is that one can exist apart from one's destiny, which need not comprise an entire life".<sup>27</sup> But we can go perhaps a step further. Not even Oedipus' inquiry about his own origins is a consequence of the oracle: first the drunk man reveals the hero that he is not the son of

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Dorati 2015, with a painstaking and very detailed overview of the research done on this topic.

<sup>25</sup> For a very careful and detailed discussion of Oedipus' story as determined by the god's involvement in human life and the "divine purpose that is immanent in human life", cf. Cairns 2013. Cairns' paper is a must-read as it painstakingly explains how the notion of free will or lack thereof are inherently modern and do not fit to the ancient Greek view of human action (esp. pp. 120-30).

<sup>26</sup> Compare Jocasta in *OT* 977-9, according to whom *tyche* rules human life.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. similarly, Woodruff 2009: 242-3.

Merope and Polybius, and then Oedipus decides to go to Delphi, in order to find out the truth about his parents (779-88). Oedipus' disposition to ascertain his origins, and the ensuing drama, seems to betray the paradoxical character of his destiny rather than the opposition between free choice and necessity: paradoxically, precisely by deciding to go to Delphi to investigate his origins, Oedipus fulfills the oracle and the destiny predetermined for him by the god Apollo.

## 2. Remapping Human/Animal Boundaries

I come now to discuss the second point of this paper: how does the tragic action of the manimal remap the boundaries between nature and culture? In the play we find a view of incest and parricide as savage acts, in contrast to their notion as cultural acts. The old men of Thebes recognize in Oedipus the perpetrator of savage crimes. Until the truth about Oedipus' identity is undisclosed, the chorus describes the murderer of Laius as a savage animal, that is a bull (ταῦρος),<sup>28</sup> and an invisible man hiding in the savage woods (*OT* 477-82). When his identity is finally revealed, the chorus describes the parricide and incest as "savage plagues" (1205). In this light, the killing of the Sphinx represents the achievement of the wild Oedipus because it is immediately conducive to the wedding of Jocasta and her own son (following the decision of the ruler in Thebes, the hand of the queen Jocasta is offered to anyone who would defeat the Sphinx). It is also worth mentioning the observation of Lévi-Strauss (1973: 31-5), according to whom once the enigma is solved, two oppositions are united: in the case of the incest, mother and son; in the case of the enigma, a question and an answer.

Oedipus, however, does not partake in the chorus' rhetoric of explanation of his wild nature and of his terrible actions. If we rely on how Oedipus talks about his crimes, the wild *tauros*, allegedly responsible for Laius' murder, belongs to the city.<sup>29</sup> Thus, for Oedipus, parricide and incest originate in the city. They are eminently cultural facts of human life in a social group, and in the civic formation of the polis. The problems of parricide and incest, from Oedipus' perspective, are problems of the city of The-

<sup>28</sup> For ταῦρος as savage animal, mostly associated with emotional turmoil, violence and aggressiveness, cf. Thumiger 2014: 86, 89, 95.

<sup>29</sup> "Oedipus the ταῦρος", therefore, parallels the situation of the Aristotelian *tauros* shunning his herd and risking being hunted by predators (*HA* 611a2-3). The *tauros* in *HA* belongs to nature and culture at the same time: in his subjection to human ends, he is – like sheep and goats (610b35-611a1) – a domesticated animal belonging to a shepherd's herd which protects his members; however, as a roaming bull who abandoned his herd, he is an animal growing wild (cf. also 572b16-23).

bes. Oedipus' view of parricide and incest redesigns, then, the dichotomy of nature and culture, since his crimes are not to be ascribed to the world of savage nature, but to the civilized world of the polis. Culture destroys Oedipus; not the wild Cithaeron, which has been like a mother to him.<sup>30</sup> From Oedipus' perspective, the savage nature that raised him does not make him a creature in opposition to the human world: incest does not belong to the wild; it is, rather, a city's and a family's concern. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus accuses the Cithaeron of having kept him alive (1391-3), but he blames the adoptive father Polybius, the city of Corinth and his family in Thebes of feeding his depravity (1394-6). In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus argues that Thebes, although unintentionally, was the cause of his wedding and incest with Jocasta (525-6). In the same vein, Oedipus blames the city of Thebes, which he saved and protected, for a gift that he was not meant to receive: the union with his mother (539-41). Equally important, the course of the events questions Oedipus' savagery. Despite the chorus' belief that Laius' assassin is roaming through the woods, Oedipus is the king of Thebes and lives there. In this sense, quite interestingly, when Oedipus exhorts the citizen of Colonus not to look at him as an *anomos* (142), the hero is not referring to his past crimes; rather, as Guidorizzi (2008: *ad loc.*) poignantly observes, the hero is alluding to how the citizen of Colonus might see him *hic et nunc*, namely as man who might violate the rules to enter the city of Athens.

Since he does not blame the Cithaeron for his own crimes, but he blames the civic community instead, it is clear that Oedipus never feels like a wild creature, not even when he finds out about his violations. To be sure, he speaks of himself as the greatest scourge for men: this is the reason why he wants to be expelled from the city and confined to the wild space of Cithaeron (*OT* 1290-1, 1340-5, 1350-5; 1381-2; 1409-15; 1432-41; 1449-54), as Tiresias once foretold him (417-20).<sup>31</sup> Yet, when Oedipus begs the old men of Thebes to banish him, since he is undeserving of the life in the civ-

<sup>30</sup> To my knowledge, the scholarly discussion about Oedipus' guilt or innocence has the unfortunate consequence of dismissing the plays' ambivalent discourse on nature and culture. Critics have essentially debated whether or not Oedipus should be considered guilty according to the Athenian homicide law of the time, cf. e.g. Finkelberg 1997; Sommerstein 2011; Harris 2010 and 2018: 435-45. Yet, as Cairns poignantly puts it: "whether the killing of Laius is *phonos hekousios* or *phonos dikaios*, it is qua parricide and not qua homicide that it really matters. Oedipus suffers as he does not because he killed a man, but because the man he killed was his father; his anger and haste may have caused the killing qua killing, but not qua parricide" (2013: 168n90).

<sup>31</sup> Before discovering the truth, Oedipus affirms that the murderer of Laius is a filth and a wicked man (*OT* 138, 1381-3); when everything seems to indicate that it is the killer himself, he asks himself whether he is a bad and impure man who deserves only the exile from Thebes (822-5).

ilized world of the *polis*, the hero speaks like a man of the *polis* and not as a creature made unsociable by his wild undertakings. In the long exchange with the chorus (1320-90), Oedipus addresses the old men of Thebes as *philoï*, friends (1321, 1329, 1339), because, as citizen of Thebes, he considers them the highest good for him (63-4; 93-4). Precisely in virtue of his civic view of the concept of *philia*, Oedipus asks them how a man like him could possibly engage further in the civic life of his fellow citizens; and he begs them to force him to leave because he is a disgrace for the city and its gods (1378-90).

Perhaps even more importantly, from Oedipus' perspective, there is no clearly cut cultural boundary establishing the criteria to condemn a person as a parricidal and incestuous son. In the Oedipus' plays, the representation of Oedipus as a man that the city of Thebes has to condemn is very unstable. Oedipus considers himself 'νόμῳ καθάρως', innocent before the city's law (*OC* 547-9), since he was unaware of the crimes he committed: he did not know that Laius was his father and Jocasta his mother (266-72; 971-5, 982-4, 991-6). From his perspective, since he did not act voluntarily, parricide and incest are lawfully not condemnable. The men who accuse him are instead disrespectful of the laws of the *polis*: they are disregardful of Oedipus' will, hence unjust and slanderers (973-1002). Once he is aware of the terrible truth about himself, Oedipus begs Creon to expel the worst of men (*OT* 1432: *κάκιστον ἄνδρ'*) from Thebes. But, again, for Oedipus, being a bad person is a consequence of *bad* parents (1397: *κακός τ' ὢν κάκ κακῶν εὐρίσκομαι*), and not of his past experience in the wild. When time has passed since the discovery of his true identity, he does not feel a bad man anymore. He says that he is *γενναῖος*, a noble person of origin and character (*OC* 8-9), and that he is not base (*κακός*) by nature, that is by *physis* (270-2).

The characters in *Oedipus at Colonus* agree with Oedipus' self-representation as a good and noble man. The stranger who first meets him at the sacred grove in Colonus describes Oedipus as a noble man (75-6); Theseus says he is benevolent (630-1) and the chorus that he is *χρηστός*, good (1014), which, notably, is the opposite of *κακός*.

The play's assessment of Oedipus as a noble man asks us to reassess the way the characters interact with him - for instance, the behaviour of the people who, as Oedipus fears, might refuse to marry their daughters, since they are children begotten by an incestuous father (*OT* 1496-502). As I would like to suggest, this is how the transgression of the parricide and incestuous Oedipus becomes the transgression of the reader, raising the question of how to ascertain the limits of nature and culture. By remapping these boundaries, the figure of Oedipus relinquishes the investigation

of man's place in the world to the reader.<sup>32</sup> Is the *locus* of man to be found in a cultural opposition to nature, in a separation attributing to nature the cultural violence (incest, parricide) that society can only handle through the exclusion and the marginalization of the "savage" subject? Is Oedipus the "savage man" committing incest and parricide? Or is, rather, the *locus* of man in the world to be situated at the continuity of nature and culture and, therefore, is "savagery" inherently cultural, to the point that a reversal takes place, whereby nature preserves man and society destroys him? Is Oedipus the child of wild Cithaeron that Thebes tries to obliterate by exposing him on the mountain and, as we have seen, by pushing him towards incest and parricide, as Oedipus tells us (*OC* 525-6)? - "with an ill wedlock, the city bound me, although knowing nothing, to the doom of my marriage". Disentangling strategies of domination of culture over nature, Oedipus becomes a subversive subject: he reminds the reader that justice based on laws runs the risk to be arbitrary, and he raises the suspicion that societal life, and not wild nature, might end up reducing the members of a community to wanderers without a locus, as Thebes did with him (*OC* 3: *πλανήτην Οιδίπουν*).

## Conclusions

In Greek, ὄρος ("mountain") derives from the verb ὀρίζω ("to divide, to separate"): mountains, in Greek thought, separate the civilized world of the polis from the savage dominion of nature. In Sophocles' Oedipus plays, however, the meaning of Cithaeron compromises this dichotomy by displaying its ambivalence. For the chorus, the savage crimes of Oedipus are signs of the mountain "invasion" of the space of the polis of Thebes. In this view, parricide and incest epitomize the horror that might ensue from the collision or implosion of ὄρος and polis. For Oedipus, the Cithaeron represents a refuge, the place he wishes for his own death, when his true identity is disclosed and he no longer considers himself worthy of a life in Thebes. Nonetheless, the hero traces his parricide and incest back to his life in the city and never accuses the Cithaeron of turning him into a parricidal and incestuous son. Consequently, Oedipus' tragic voice proves in this regard to be inherently transgressive, since it invites the reader to remap the boundaries between nature and culture.

<sup>32</sup> On a reading of *OT* as a play about the place of man in the order of things, cf. famously Goldhill 1986: 221, with the important discussion of Goldhill's reading by Kicey 2014: 34-6.

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