

Oedipus and Ion As Outsiders: The Implications and Limitations of Genealogical Citizenship

An Analysis of Oedipus at Colonus by Sophocles and Ion by Euripides

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INTRODUCTION

In ancient Athenian society, the collective myth of autochthony¹ provided the basis for social order, determining who got the benefits of citizenship and who was excluded from the polis.² According to their autochthonous myth, the citizenry of Athens did not emigrate from elsewhere, but instead arose from the earth upon which ancient Athens stood. There was not a city of immigrants; from their very origins, the people of Athens believed themselves to be the only population that had always belonged to Athenian soil. Thus, each true-born Athenian carried within them the essential spirit of the Athenian people, passed down from generation to generation. To determine and confirm their citizenship on an individual level, each Athenian had to demonstrate their autochthonous familial descent when they came of age in a dokimasia, an examination wherein citizen tribunals

1 Autochthony: n., The quality, state, or condition of being autochthonous; an instance of this. Autochthonous: (of an inhabitant of a place) indigenous rather than descended from migrants or colonists. Oxford English Dictionary, "autochthony" and "autochthonous," OED Online, December 2018.

2 Polis refers to a Greek city-state. Here, more specifically, it refers to the people allowed within government in Athens, the people who constituted the voter base and who were included in all aspects of civic life.

collected testimony from friends and family members in support of one's claims to citizenship.³ In this way, one's lineage became the sole factor determining one's inclusion in the polis.

Once blood became the basis for citizenship, citizens who were established as autochthonous could not be excluded from the polis on the basis of class. The poorest citizens had the same right to participate in Athenian government as the elite, although in practice the higher classes enjoyed special privileges, such as training in rhetoric, which poorer citizens did not. For ancient Greek city-states, this level of inclusivity was groundbreaking; most city-states did not consider their lower- or even middle-class members to be citizens, even in democratic systems of governance. However, this is not to say that Athens was entirely without social divisions, for more than just fully-privileged citizens lived within the city walls. Overall, inhabitants were sorted into three groups: citizens, metics, and slaves. While citizens enjoyed all the rights and benefits of the polis, including the right to vote and to participate in public forums, metics were an in-between, catch-all group, not subjugated like slaves but not as privileged as citizens. They could not participate in government or vote, for example, but were still able to participate economically in Athenian society. Metics were what we today might call a migrant class, as they did not meet the full requirements for blood-based citizenship but were still free. Metics were not confined to only the lower classes; like citizens, metics existed in every economic stratum, from the poorest to the richest. However, regardless of economic class, citizens, being true-born Athenians, were more socially vaunted.

While lauded by political theorists for its groundbreaking inclusivity, the Athenian genealogical grounds for inclusion, like any other such system, necessitated that some be excluded so that the polis might be defined and unified rather than indistinct and anarchic. This exclusion, at least theoretically, was to be on the grounds of blood-based requirements for citizenship.⁴ However, as Oedipus at Colonus by Sophocles, the second in his trilogy about the eponymous protagonist, and Ion by Euripides make abundantly clear, this distinction did not always play out as it ought. In fact, the existence of exceptions to the rule of blood-based citizenship reveals that its apparent legitimacy was, at its core, fallacious. The tragedy

3 Dokimasia: n. The term δοκιμασία and the related verb dokimazein were used in various Greek contexts to denote a procedure of examining or testing, and approving or validating as a result of the test. Oxford Classical Dictionary, 2016, "dokimasia."

4 At the time in which Ion is set, the requirement for citizenship was having one Athenian parent, not two, as it was after Pericles' citizenship law. For Oedipus, the distinction is irrelevant because both of his parents are Thebans—or, in his father's case, a naturalized Theban ruler.

of Oedipus and Ion is in that the knowledge of their parentage, which should have moved them out of their marginal social positions and into the sociopolitical centers of their respective poleis, actually prevented them from claiming their rightful places within society. This is due to the fact that in practice, blood did not stand alone in determining membership to the polis. Athenian society instead relied upon adherence to socially-codified, secondary behavioral implications of blood-based membership, as shown through a further examination of the Athenian city-state and the plays Oedipus at Colonus and Ion. What's more, the rule of descent necessarily meant that any violations of these secondary behaviors were inheritable and thus contaminated an individual's entire genetic line from their transgression onward. In examining the social structures as they are presented in these two works, in light of the historical context of ancient Athens, it is clear that the lineage-based autochthony myth was only the beginning of the implied social order.

LITERARY BACKGROUND

Before diving into the social structure of Athens, a short summary of each play is in order, which will highlight the most relevant plot points. Thanks to Freud, most are familiar with Oedipus, or at least with his infamous acts: killing his father, marrying his mother, and fathering her children. Once he discovers all that he has unknowingly done, Oedipus blinds himself and is outcast from Thebes, his home and onetime kingdom. All of this takes place in Oedipus Rex, the first in Sophocles' trilogy of plays about Oedipus and his family. Following these events is Oedipus at Colonus, which shows Oedipus in exile from Thebes as he approaches the Athenian acropolis. During the course of the play, Oedipus encounters a pair of Athenian citizens, who fetch Theseus, the Athenian king, to determine if Oedipus will be allowed to stay in Athens. After a lengthy debate, Theseus decides to accept him, thanks in part to the pleading of Oedipus's daughters, who have been helping him in his blindness. At the conclusion of the play, Oedipus is led away into the forest of Athens where he dies without leaving a trace, with Theseus as his sole witness swearing not to say a word about what happened to him. The themes of Oedipus at Colonus reach their pinnacle in Antigone, the final play in Sophocles' trilogy, wherein Oedipus's children are all killed, save Ismene, whether it be by their own hands or those of their political rivals.

Ion by Euripides centers around another family drama, although perhaps not as well known as that of Oedipus. In the play, Ion is an orphan like Oedipus, raised in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. The play starts when Creusa, former and Queen of Athens, and her husband Xuthus, a war hero and metic, visit the Temple to ask for a prophecy concerning Xuthus's prospects of having any children. There, the couple meets Ion, and the prophecy leads Xuthus to assume that

the now-grown orphan is his true-born son. By the end of the play, however, Creusa and Ion discover his true parentage: that it is she who is really his mother, and that his father is actually the god Apollo, who raped her before she married Xuthus. Following council from the goddess Athena, they choose to keep this knowledge secret from Xuthus for reasons that will later be discussed, and Ion goes on to eventually found the Ionian race.

THE ATHENIAN CITY-STATE

With the above summaries in mind, we will begin our analysis of the Athenian city-state. Athenian democracy, while more inclusive of lower classes than any prior sociopolitical structure, necessarily imposed limits on those allowed into the privileged citizenry. Voting could only be meaningful if it were limited; absolute freedom to participate in the polis would be, as Jacques Derrida says of unconditional hospitality, “a law without imperative, without order and without duty. A law without law, for short.”⁵ For order and social duty to exist, there must be a specific group to whom these imperatives apply, or else all is unordered chaos. The necessary trade-off in this collective unification is the creation of an out-group against which the citizenry can be defined and assert its exceptionalism. In this way, the social order itself creates the outlaw, the metic, the orphan, and the bastard: broad, inferior social categories designed to include those who do not adhere to the implied social code. Those considered “outside of the law” are not actually so, for they fall into categories created by the social order. The only individuals truly outside of the law are those who cannot be defined by it, which we shall see is the case for Ion and Oedipus. The social rule creates the social rulebreakers, and at the same time the rule-breakers throw the rule itself into relief. Each is the inverse of the other’s positive assertion, becoming a co-constitutive axis. They provide legitimacy by means of a relation of difference through which to define themselves, while in reality neither category exists outside of the artificial, dyadic social construction.

In order for a society to function, however, it must be able to overlook the arbitrariness of social delineation and instead see it as legitimate, even inherent to its subjects. To that end, Athens turned to a system of social order that on its face seemed absolute, inherent, and infallible: blood-based citizenship dependent upon genealogical descent from an autochthonous original populace. In the way of legitimacy, autochthony appeared acceptable to its citizens because it could not

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, Trans. Rachel Bowlby, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 83.

be disproven, even though it was just as much of a social construct as any other conception of citizenship and justification of exceptionalism. Because the mythical original autochthonous population from which Athenians claimed citizenship was ancestral, its supposed existence could not be called into question based on facts, since there were none to confirm or deny its existence. Like the founding myth of any society, the lie at the core of Athenian structure not only persisted but, interestingly, added legitimacy to the regime.

Autochthony also provides a reason to see status as inherent to the citizen, since it “grounds difference in claims of nature—specifically, in earth and blood—[which gives] these categories the appearance of an ontological status.”⁶ That is, Athenian exceptionalism appeared justified since it was traceable back to inherent natural differences between people. The lie of one’s social status being inherent, especially in a system based on blood, means that both adhering to its standards and violating them are not seen as merely shifting status, but are actions sublimated into the person themselves. Oedipus, answering the question the Chorus poses as to his identity, does not say, “I am in exile”—that is, inhabiting an external, imposed state—but “I am an exile” (*italics added*).⁷ His status has become his being, since blood determines both. Just as Thomas Kuhn conceives of paradigm shifts in science as not only incorporating past scientific information, but also as proclaiming past paradigms unscientific, so too do new information and actions that cause a change in status retroactively re-write one’s entire self. Everything that previously signaled one’s status becomes a lie, and, in a world where statuses can change, passing becomes both possible and inevitable.⁸ This is the unavoidable fallout of the idea of social status as inherent and blood based.

While autochthony’s claims of being inherent certainly rested on shaky ground, these were not the only fallacious premises upon which Athenian self-conception depended. Because autochthony was meant to order, it centrally imposed its structure down to even the level of individual family, and in doing so, manifested itself as a myth of unity. Above all, genealogical claims were meant to be objective and clear, “largely to guard against the kind of mingling and confusion of identities that blurs discrete lines of demarcation in the social order.”⁹ The ideological primacy of a clearly-ordered and unified family structure was designed to

6 Demetra Kasimis, “The Tragedy of Blood-Based Membership: Secrecy and the Politics of Immigration in Euripides’s *Ion*,” *Political Theory* 41(2):231-256 (2013), 15.

7 Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1941), 92, line 9. The exact blood-based social conventions Oedipus violates that lead to his expulsion from Thebes will be explored later.

8 Passing, or being perceived and accepted as something other than what one actually is, is certainly an important part of any strictly-delineated social order. For example, in the post-Jim Crow era, certain people who would legally have been considered African American could “pass” in their daily lives as white. Passing is especially important in relation to Euripides’ *Ion*, but further discussion is not within the scope of this paper.

9 Kasimis, “The Tragedy of Blood-Based Membership,” 15.

make orderly life possible, with a cohesive overall clan structure which mirrored the internal structure of the family. In this way, the polis functioned ideologically as a single entity, its uniform organization all the way down to the individual level supplementing its unifying claim to one collective heritage. This ideology is far from abstract, and is in fact visible in much of the literature Athenian citizens produced. In Pericles' Funeral Oration, for example, "the 'populus,' in the general sense of the term, is not politically divided," and, indeed, "is never divided in the works of the tragic poets."¹⁰

This broad claim of unity is seen in Oedipus at Colonus as well, when Theseus, reacting to Creon's abduction of Oedipus's daughters, proclaims, "Your [Creon's] behavior is an affront to me, / A shame to your own people and your nation," and that "the whole city [Athens] / Must not seem overpowered by one man."¹¹ In a unified citizenry, any citizen exemplifies that citizenry, and thus the actions of one man can impact the reputation of the entire polis. In this way, the citizen is metonymic of the polis, and conflating one with the other is both an easy and powerful move in a mythically-unified city like Athens, especially by its figurehead Theseus. What this means, however, is that the broad-reaching social order determines not only social status, but behavior. One must act in accordance to its social prescriptions, or else one endangers the social ideal of collective unity. Thus, those who violate the social norms, especially those important enough to be codified into law, must either be expelled from the polis by being placed into one of the excluded classes—in extreme cases, such as with Oedipus, this meant being expelled from the city itself and branded an exile—or eliminated entirely. In a society founded on absolute, broad-reaching, inherent order, any person whose very presence defies that system of order threatens the entire conception of the polis, a conception that must be kept in place so that democracy and the state as a whole can function. In order to see why Oedipus and Ion are not able to take their rightful places, then, it is necessary to examine exactly which secondary social prescriptions they violate that threaten the order and unity of the polis.¹²

THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF BLOOD

While the primary concern of a genealogical social organization is creating a clear order, it must also be a self-sustainable system. What this means is that in order to

10 Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Oedipus Between Two Cities: An Essay on Oedipus at Colonus," in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, eds. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 331; 334.

11 Sophocles, 132, lines 8-9; 136, lines 14-15.

12 Ion is the son of the sun god Apollo and the Athenian princess Creusa; Oedipus is the son of two Theban monarchs. Thus, both theoretically should be included in their respective poleis on the basis of blood, especially since it is the blood of the elite.

reproduce viable citizens, and thereby the entire social order, secondary behavioral prescriptions become necessary. A system meant merely to determine whether or not one was citizen (i.e., pure lineage) became instead a guiding social principle, dictating not only social standing but also desired social behavior. To borrow a term coined by James C. Scott, the requirement of pure lineage in a genealogical society set into motion “a process by which ‘a measure colonizes behavior’”—that is, what is meant to be descriptive becomes prescriptive.¹³ In the quest to create social order and obtain clarity through kinship organization, a blood-based society generated secondary regulations that helped further its own existence. No longer did it merely order society, but the desire to adhere to the blood standard now shaped the ways Athenians lived their lives.

For example, the stringency of claims to autochthony biased societal perceptions of preferable marriages. Athenian-Athenian matches, or, more generally, marriages between members of the polis with clearly-defined statuses were considered more appropriate in ancient Athenian society. These biases played into the need for social order: if one was certain who one’s parents were, one’s own status was clearly defined. Conversely, if one was uncertain about their parentage, their social status was diminished due to the social order. We see this bias throughout history, with orphans and bastards historically being treated as lower-class citizens, inferior to those of straightforward lineage. With unclear parentage, one is not immediately stateless, per say, but one experiences a sort of social statelessness. As Creusa says of Ion, “It was for your good that Loxias settles into a noble house. If you were called the god’s son, you would not have had a house as your inheritance or a father’s name.”¹⁴ Because Athenian women could not hold property, Ion must pass as the son of a metic in order to inherit a name of any meaning. Indeed, we see at the beginning of the play that Ion has no name at all until Xuthus gives it to him.¹⁵ Naming is a familial claim, but as a bastard of Apollo, Ion has no name to claim whatsoever. While his Athenian mother ought to make him Athenian as well, revealing his true parentage would render Ion not only destitute, but without any form of social identification. To have a subordinate place in the social order is better—at least as Ion is coerced to believe by Xuthus and Athena—than to have no place at all.

While his parentage is clear, Ion’s social status is not, revealing one of the major failures of a blood-based system. Inheritance can only deal with facts that it was built to incorporate for it is based on the grounds that it stems from absolute fact. While being the son of a god ought to have positive effects on his social stand-

13 James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 114.

14 Euripides, *Ion*, trans. H.K. Lee (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1997), 503.

15 Euripides, *Ion*, 403.

ing, the fact that Apollo has entered the social order from a place completely external to it means that Ion and all of his progeny are also unable to fit into the social system at all. Ion cannot even be defined by one of the catch-all categories such as “orphan” that have been built into society for extreme, non-standard cases. A social order based on genetic lineage “expresses a demand to repeat (over generations) what can only happen once (the original birth).”¹⁶ Genealogical in-grouping made both citizenship and violations of its reproductive practices iterative: if one’s ancestors made a mistake in marriage or reproduction, it would be reproduced throughout the entire genealogical line with no chance of correction, save through covering it up. Once revealed, Apollo’s original sin of impregnating Creusa—or, as it was more likely to be seen in this society, Creusa’s original sin of giving birth to Ion—would haunt Ion’s family line forever. Ion therefore must follow Athena’s advice and pass as a metic until the end of his days, his knowledge of his true parentage keeping him from fully joining the polis lest he become disenfranchised and lose his social classification of orphan, along with the protection that classification affords.

While Ion’s crime against the social order is his very birth, Oedipus’s crime is more nuanced, hinging on his transition from ignorance to knowledge of his own parentage. Oedipus at Colonus thus explores what happens when that which goes against the social order is revealed, instead of staying safely hidden. While Ion confounds orderly overall social classification, Oedipus hopelessly confuses the internal family ordering upon which the whole of Athenian society was based. Oedipus not only confuses this order by killing his father, upending the proper power dynamic and sinning against the polis’s conception of the ideal family, but also by marrying his mother and having children by her. This creates social positions untenable within Athenian society: sister-daughters, son-brothers, father-siblings, grandmother-mothers, etc. In his ignorance, Oedipus commits crimes that, upon coming to light, make both himself and his entire family socially unclassifiable, for the social order has no way of coping with the complications of incest. Just as Ion’s potential outing could contaminate the legitimacy of his entire line, Oedipus’s revelation does contaminate his entire family structure because of the supposedly inherent and unifying qualities of blood. This inherited contamination is evident in the ill fate of Oedipus’s daughters in the following play, *Antigone*. What brings people together in the social order can just as quickly spread social contamination.

Oedipus and his family, especially his offspring, each inhabit multiple social categories, which contradict each other in their implications of exclusion and inclusion. Despite Oedipus and by extent his children being at least doubly

16 Kasimis, “The Tragedy of Blood-Based Membership,” 13.

Theban, the revelation of Oedipus's parentage means they cannot be allowed to remain in the polis. Society has no outcast category in which to put the members of this family, so they must be expelled. They have violated the social order and thus cannot stay in the city since their continued presence threatens the myth of broader social unity. While the concept of unity was not as important in Thebes as in Athens, at least from an Athenian perspective, incest was still taboo. To some extent, Oedipus's family had to be Theban since Thebes served as Athens' dramatic foil, a place where scenes were allowed that couldn't play out in Athens, even mythically.¹⁷ Thebes was a place to explore social possibilities. If Oedipus's stories took place within Athens' idealized system, even in fiction, they risked exposing too directly its fragility. The slight distance between the two cities, both physically and ideologically, was what made such socially-shattering myths as Oedipus palatable. They were allowed to explore the potential effects that taboo events such as incest could have within Athens without threatening the social order with its intense emotional baggage.

CONCLUSION

The Athenian social order tolerates certain types of aberrations as long as they fall within the outcast categories it has created so that its myth of unity can persist despite inevitable anomalies. If an individual falls outside of these catch-all categories then they must be eliminated. Indeed, we see this occur through the plays as Oedipus's children—who break no laws but whose very existence as daughter-sisters and brother-sons exposes the fragility of blood-based social order—eventually kill themselves and each other. The sin must be cut off at the source or else it will grow exponentially with every following generation. All of Oedipus's family must end to cleanse the blood and the city.

Unlike with Ion, Oedipus's familial social transgressions are known, precluding him from the approved social order. Therefore, Oedipus faces no other socially-viable option but to be expelled from the polis. He threatens the polis's behavioral unity, the myth of unity that the entire polis is founded upon, and therefore, the polis itself. The mythically-unified polis, for whom all included individuals are metonymic representatives, cannot include an individual who has violated its secondary socio-familial prescriptions even if those transgressions are not intentional. Interestingly, Oedipus is asked to conditionally rejoin Thebes after his expulsion because the metonymic power the polis has over its citizens supersedes all other considerations. The claim which Athens newly asserts over Oedipus

17 Vidal-Naquet, "Oedipus Between Two Cities," 334: "There is one place where stasis [social division] finds a special home: It is Thebes, . . . an anti-city."

infringes upon that primary consideration, and so his secondary sins can be overlooked in favor of his primary birthright.

Oedipus's parentage is revealed, while Ion's is not, and these revelations are what shaped their tragic fates. However, in a genealogical system that gains legitimacy based on the claim that blood is objective, inherent, and unfakeable, how is it possible that either of their lineages, at any point, not be revealed? The answer, in short, is that despite its apparent objectivity, blood does not speak for itself. One cannot look at someone and tell who their parents are, and, like Ion, individuals might be mistaken about their true parentage. This opens up the possibility of acting and passing as a citizen, even unintentionally, when one is not. This possibility threatens the autochthonous myth of blood being self-evident and inherent—thereby threatening the entire Athenian social order. As the bastard child of a god and an Athenian, Ion, while objectively an Athenian, does not fit neatly into the social narrative. Revealing his parentage may lead to questions about his autochthony. To secure his high position of power, a palatable lie must be constructed to ensure the propagation of his own line and the social order as a whole. Blood in this case is a performance, willing or not, for the sake of the social order to which his own exceptional circumstances must be subsumed. Because the autochthonous genealogical citizen myth is founded on the basis that it has no exceptions, having a questionable figurehead at one of the most important family lines might incite social crumbling from the top down. As an inevitable consequence of the need to preserve the mythical unity that this society was founded on, Ion, whose familial transgressions can be subsumed into pre-existing social categories, is able to be a metic as long as he hides his familial transgressions under a socially-acceptable genealogical narrative. Oedipus, on the other hand, who reveals his familial transgressions under extreme emotional duress,¹⁸ must necessarily be evicted from his polis for his violation of its secondary prescriptions since the assertion of his status along family lines implicates his other behavior.

The tragedy of Oedipus and Ion is that the knowledge they gain of their parentage, which should shift them from their marginal social positions into the sociopolitical centers of their respective poleis, actually means that they cannot claim their rightful places in society. The knowledge of their parentage is inextricable from the knowledge that either they or their parents violated the secondary prescriptive norms of their genealogically-based society. Despite its claims to being inherent, providing clear order, and unifying the polis, (blood) autochthony failed in almost every one of these respects, as does any other basis for social

18 Euripides, *Ion*, 104, lines 17-18: "Nothing so sweet / As death, death by stoning, could have been given me." Oedipus's distress comes from his internalization of the prescribed external social standards, which hold so much weight as taboo that he, as a metonymic citizen, feels anguish from actively breaking these rules, even if unaware he was doing so.

organization and delineation of citizenship. In order to preserve and reproduce this order, the reproduction of individuals needed to adhere to secondary behavioral prescriptions that blood-based membership entails, lest their entire family lines be contaminated. Due to the different natures of Ion's and Oedipus's social crimes, as well as the secrecy of sensitive information or lack thereof, Ion is able to pass within the polis while Oedipus must be expelled in order to preserve the social myth. However, neither is able to claim what is rightfully theirs: the title of citizen.

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