

Guilt and innocence  
as illustrated by  
sophocles in his  
oedipus at colonus



A common theme throughout the Oedipus Cycle is that of guilt coinciding with innocence. In Oedipus at Colonus however in separate instances Oedipus claims to be innocent of his wrong doings as in his fight against Laius he acted in self-defense, and he also insists he was ignorant of his sins so he cannot be punished for committing them," I bore most evil things, strangers! I bore them involuntarily, let the god know! None of these things was chosen by myself." (521-23). However upon meeting Theseus, Oedipus refuses his assistance claiming that he is too impure for Theseus to touch him. Oedipus, like all people has the unfortunate fate of being damned for sins he did not choose to commit. Which causes a paradox in his mind where he know he is not in the wrong, but yet feels the societal shame of his ' wrong doings' and therefore knows that he is condemned by society and cannot let Theseus touch him as he will then also be refuting the societal norms that make Oedipus impure.

If we're going by gods' laws Oedipus has committed unspeakable acts of abomination in murdering his father, and marrying his mother. Although the gods' take sister-wives it is a thing banned to mortals. Murder is seen as a terrible act even to the gods. In these ways Oedipus unknowingly sins against the gods. However at the end of Oedipus at Colonus it appears the gods have taken pity on Oedipus, as they make his final resting place a hallowed barrier for the city of Athens. In this way is he absolved of his godly wrongs, and is validated as being innocent by reason of ignorance.

By the world's standards however Oedipus is not blameless. The sin against his father is twofold as it is murder, but also an act against his sire; a costly error in a patriarchal society. Although he was acting in self-defense society

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holds a stigma against the ac simply because someone's life was ended which is a chief thing of importance. When confronted then with the affront of his incestuous marriage he also attempts to blame the city of Thebes, " To an evil marriage bed the city bound me—I who did not know—To a disaster that came from a marriage. CHORUS. With your mother, as I hear, Did you fill your infamous bed? OEDIPUS. Alas, it is death to hear these things [. . .]." (525-29). This last line Oedipus speaks tells us that it is like death to hear the truth of situation. As he knows it is too horrible of a thing to say; that one begot four children from his mother.

The paradox between ignorance, innocence, and guilt is a tumultuous theme in Oedipus at Colonus. It is a result of a man who in his mind is absolved of his crimes in the sight of gods, but can never be clean in the light of society.