

The Crying of Lot 49: A Source Study

Adrian Emily Richwell

Although the heroine of Thomas Pynchon's novel The Crying of Lot 49, Oedipa Maas, has a name that has invited comparison to Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, critics have overlooked the striking parallels between Pynchon's novel and Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus. Both The Crying of Lot 49 and Oedipus at Colonus open with a journey and end on a note of religious mysticism; and both are concerned with the wandering and exile of their major characters. In addition to these structural and thematic similarities, explicit verbal links between the two works establish the later play as a major source for the novel.

According to Edward Mendelson, "it was an act of courage [for Pynchon] to name his heroine Oedipa. [The Crying of Lot 49] contains not even a single reference to her emotional relations with her parents or her impulses toward self-creation."¹ This view is typical of the puzzlement critics feel when they compare Oedipa to her more famous Sophoclean namesake in Oedipus Rex. Yet an examination of Oedipus at Colonus reveals that this is the play that Pynchon had in mind when he selected a name for his heroine.

When we realize that Pynchon's Oedipa is a character who "wants to right wrongs 20 years after it's all over"² we see the importance of taking Oedipus at Colonus into account as a source for the novel. What appears to be merely a facetious remark by Oedipa's lover, Metzger, about her political commitment turns out to be an explicit verbal link between The Crying of Lot 49 and Oedipus at Colonus. Not only is twenty years the approximate time that has elapsed between the action of Oedipus Rex and Oedipus at Colonus, but also Metzger's words are a remarkably pithy recapitulation of the theme of the later play. For it is precisely Oedipus' determination "to right wrongs twenty years after it is all over," to lay down the burden of his guilt and restore order and justice to his conflict-torn state, that initiates the drama of Oedipus at Colonus.

Other important verbal links between the two works establish a correspondence between Oedipus' arrival at Colonus, near Athens, and the arrival of Oedipa Maas in San Narciso. Both Athens and San Narciso are characterized by the same flower: Athens is a city where "the clusters of narcissus bloom,/Time-hallowed garlands for the brows."³ And San Narciso, of course, refers to the narcissus. Moreover, if Athens is best known as "the land beloved of horsemen" (line 668), the San Narciso of which Pynchon writes is also a city notable for its horsemen, the Tristero riders. Thus, both works open with the arrival of their protagonists in a new city, an arrival that emphasizes the central importance in each work of a journey motif.

Structural similarities are also apparent at the conclusion of each work. Oedipus' death, like the Tristero auction, is not represented in the text, and the mystery surrounding the circumstances of Oedipus' death and burial is paralleled in The Crying of Lot 49 by the ominous air of secrecy surrounding the auction of the Tristero forgeries. It is even hinted that the auction may be Oedipa's death scene, for "The men inside the auction room wore black mohair and had pale, cruel faces. [. . .] An assistant closed the heavy door on the lobby windows and the sun. She heard a lock snap shut: the sound echoed a moment" (137-38). Like the death of Oedipus, the auction is attended by religious ritual. In the closing scene of the novel, Passerine, the auctioneer, spreads his arms "in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture, perhaps to a descending angel" (138). Hence, both works not only begin with a journey but also end on a note that emphasizes a theme of religious mysticism.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence supporting Oedipus at Colonus as a source for The Crying of Lot 49 is the fact that Oedipus' transformation into a hero at the end of the play⁴ is matched by Oedipa Maas' hard-won dignity and stature. (A nationalistic impulse informs both works, and Oedipus stands in the same relation to Thebes as Oedipa does to America.) "I am an exile," proclaims Oedipus (line 208) in response to the chorus; and in a like manner, Oedipa wonders, "How

many shared Tristero's secret as well as its exile?" (136). Yet despite their alienation, Oedipus is able to confer honor on Athens, and Oedipa realizes that the legacy she has discovered is America. Thus, the verbal, structural, and thematic links between Oedipus at Colonus and The Crying of Lot 49 indicate that the play is an important source for the novel.

--University of California/
Los Angeles

Notes

¹ Edward Mendelson, "The Sacred, the Profane and The Crying of Lot 49," in Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 118.

² Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49 (1966; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1967), 53.

³ Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus, in The Complete Greek Tragedies, ed. David Greene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1954), l. 685.

⁴ C. M. Bowra, Sophoclean Tragedy (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1944), claims that the theme of Oedipus at Colonus is the transformation of Oedipus into a hero.