

## THE HAND OF OEDIPUS: THE NETWORK OF BODY IMAGERY IN *OT*\*



**ABSTRACT:** This article aims to demonstrate how Sophocles uses the concept of hand (in Greek *χείρ*, pronounced k<sup>h</sup>ēr) and other body parts thematically throughout *Oedipus Rex* (*OT*) and how this merges into Oedipus' investigation of the murder he committed himself. To illustrate the effect of this theme on the original audience's experience of the drama, I substantiate my study with modern cognitive theories of memory, lexical salience and priming effect. Thus I hope to show how Sophocles consciously plays with the spectator's mind throughout the performance, in order to make way for a new imagery, hands, within the story of Oedipus.

**I**MAGERY ROOTED IN THE HUMAN BODY is quite frequently employed in Attic tragedy and in Sophocles in particular, although there is still no systematic study of this figurative element. This article is a small attempt to show how fascinating Sophocles' thematic use of individual body parts is.

It goes without saying that the foot (*πούς*, *ποδ-*, *ποσ-*) in *OT* is a frequently appearing word<sup>1</sup> since a popular etymology of the name *Οἰδίπους* means Swollen Foot (poignantly referred to in line 1036) and given that the Sphinx's riddle also referred to feet.<sup>2</sup> Foot has an immediate strong lexical salience in the mind of the audience,<sup>3</sup> and thus one should not refuse, as Dawe (1982) often does in his commentary, arguing from an aesthetic perspective,

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1. At 130, 468, 479, 718, 877, 1032, 1034, and in compositions 128, 418, 445, 865, 1349. See e.g. Segal (1993) 56–7; Griffith (1996) 78–81 for a discussion on the importance of foot-imagery. The study of foot-imagery in *OT* by Cantenaccio (2012) supplements my reading of the hand-imagery. For a study of the deeper meaning of feet and movement in *OT*, see Kicey (2014).
2. On Oedipus' name, see e.g. Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (1990) 123–4; Segal (1981) 207, 223.
3. Goldhill (2012) 27–9 takes this salience for granted. So will I do, since it was known already in the fifth century that the riddle of the Sphinx placed emphasis on feet; see the vase by the Oedipus painter, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco Vaticano, 16541.

that Sophocles would not stoop so low as to use foot as a figurative element in the imagery of *OT*.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, I would argue that the playwright would hardly have been able to avoid it. The strong lexical salience of foot as mythem in the discourse of the Oedipus myth would make it extremely difficult to omit.<sup>5</sup> This does not lower the aesthetic value of Sophocles' work. On the contrary, the easiness by which he manipulates the audience's expectations by simple but well calculated means, has a distinct aesthetic value in itself, it is the mark of a master playwright. Another masterstroke, I will argue, is how Sophocles employs the idea of hands in the story of Oedipus. There is no doubt that Oedipus' hand is the hand of a murderer. Therefore, it is also noteworthy that one point has mainly eluded the attention of the huge amount of literature on *OT*: namely, that the hand appears even more times than the foot (the name *Oιδίπους* excluded) and indeed in some very unusual sentence structures, word combinations and contexts which all together suggest a conscious use by Sophocles. It also suggests that we should look for more body imagery in *OT* than merely feet and eyes and try to put the pieces together, and see how the human body plays a central part in the imagery and meaning of *OT*.

As the hand has no particular lexical salience in the Oedipus myth, Sophocles has to point out to the audience that this concept should have a prominent place and relevance within the play's figurative network by using the psychological concept of priming. Priming refers to the repeated exposure of an individual to certain perceptual or conceptual information. This exposure creates an implicit memory effect that influences how the individual interprets subsequent information of similar shape or substance.<sup>6</sup> That Sophocles must have been aware of this memory effect is obvious when we look at the frequency of the exposure to hand-related concepts and

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4. E.g. *ad* 130 ("tasteless") and *ad* 418 ("hideous overinterpretation"). But as Kicey (2014) aptly points out: "This kind of ambiguity or multivocality inflects the poetic language of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* through the conspicuous multiplication and dislocation of meaning in not only Oedipus' language but also the language of his interlocutors. From our viewpoint, the *dramatis personae* constantly mean both more and less than they say: their language is rife with double and triple meanings of which they are hopelessly unaware, even going so far as to undermine or contradict the meaning of which they are aware. They all talk a great deal, but they consistently fail to hear what anyone is saying." Thus we ought to discuss the semantic layers instead of discarding them, as Dawe for instance does.

5. See Giora (2003) on weak and strong lexical salience.

6. On priming, see Kahneman (2011) 50–70, 120–128, and Firestone (2013) on priming in Shakespeare.

vocabulary throughout *OT*. This exposure is quite commensurate to what we know today about the memory and how it works.<sup>7</sup> By means of the high frequency of hand Sophocles ensures that the spectators store hand as a relevant and clearly marked concept, meaning that every time hand occurs both phonologically (*k<sup>h</sup>ēr*) and semantically, the spectator automatically – regardless of context – links the concept to the association network<sup>8</sup> that has been established during performance so far.<sup>9</sup>

I will show that before Oedipus blinds himself (1275–7), the concept of hand is closely connected with the murder of Laius and the punishment for this murder. Furthermore, the concept is tied to other people’s treatment of Oedipus himself as an infant and associated with the state of blindness, because of the stick the blind man is forced to use, or because of the blind man’s need to rely on another person; for this reason, verbs of touching come evermore to the fore.<sup>10</sup> Initially, and before Oedipus blinds himself, all cases of touching are in negative form and associated to things one must not touch (with the exception of line 760, where Jocasta may be touched by the servant, while Oedipus ought not to, see below), while after the self-blinding these verbs are used by Oedipus in expression of his desire to touch his daughters (1413, 1465–9).

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The first time we hear of hands in the play is when Creon tells the oracle of Apollo to Oedipus (106–7):

*Τούτον θανάτος νῦν ἐπιστέλλει σαφῶς  
τοὺς ἀυτοέντας χειρὶ τιμωρεῖν τινας.*<sup>11</sup>

7. Reisberg (2010)133–66, and within theatre studies, McConachie (2008) 40.

8. Or “clustering effect” Rutherford (2012) 84–95.

9. Or as Kicey (2014) 51 remarks: “auditors do not establish the meaning of a given statement only at its end, but are rather engaged in the constructive activity of interpretation during the entire process of utterance—that the mind of the interpreter, like Oedipus, is constantly in motion.”

10. Notice how the related word stems (*θικ-* / *θιγ-*; *ψαν-*) occur late in the play and with increasing exposure. See also Calame (1996) 25: “Nothing is left to Oedipus, beyond perception by touch, but to cry over his lot.”

11. *τινας* is the reading of mss, but Dawe (1982) 97 *ad loc* detects a textual mishap here. See, however, Moorhouse (1982) 160 and Bollack (1990) II: 623. *OCT* retains the reading of the mss.

Creon is convinced of the clarity of this oracle (here and in line 96), even though this would normally not be the attitude towards Pythia's predictions, see e.g. Heraclitus (DK 22 B93). But if Apollo has spoken the truth, he must have mentioned one killer. Nonetheless, Creon mentions multiple murderers (*τοὺς ἀδοέντας*), which is furthermore supported by the survivor's statement (122–4). Creon uses firstly the verb *ἔφασκε* with Apollo as a subject in line 110, then with Laius as a subject in 114, and then with the survivor (referred to with a vague *εἷς τις*) as a subject for *ἔφασκε* here in lines 122–3:

*ληστὰς ἔφασκε συντυχόντας οὐ μῖα  
ῥώμη κτανεῖν νιν, ἀλλὰ σὸν πλήθει χειρῶν.*

The human lack of understanding of the will of the god is buttressed by man's own ignorance of the readily available facts (130–1, see below), but with *σὸν πλήθει χειρῶν* Sophocles makes hand (in plural) a metonym for *τοὺς ἀδοέντας*; hand equals a killer, a metonym that also seems relevant in Oedipus' curse later in the play (235–40), where the perpetrator is permitted to ritually clean himself.<sup>12</sup> But Apollo ordered firstly *τοὺς ἀδοέντας χειρὶ τιμωρεῖν* (106–7), thus hand (in the singular) becomes the means of revenge of the first murder, hand will kill hand. Sophocles' choice of term for murder is quite unique, *τοὺς ἀδοέντας*, in which the prefix *ἀδο-* detonates not just suicide, but murder within the immediate family (see below).<sup>13</sup> However, it is the singular *χειρὶ*, which in this context is interesting. Most commentators and translators omit the word or understand it as a metonym of physical force, so that *χειρὶ τιμωρεῖν*,<sup>14</sup> punishing by hand, is really just a periphrasis for to kill; thus hand equals violence. The spectator will initially probably wonder most at *ἀδοέντας*, which has a weak linguistic salience due to its rarity, but when Oedipus has taken on the task of retribution and repeats Apollo's words, albeit thinking in the reverse (the killer desires to punish the king by hand), the spectator would notice the dramatic irony (139–41):

12. The word *χέρνυ* connotes that the purification of *χείρ* stands for the cleansing of the entire body and soul, see Longo (1972) 92 ad 236–40. In this case the word refers to the hands of the killer. Concerning the metonymic use of *χείρ* = *πρόσωπον/σῶμα*, see Johansen, & Whittle (1980) ad 604. I owe this comment to one of the anonymous referees.

13. See Newton (1978); Caravan (1999) 195–6.

14. e.g. Manuwald (2012: 76) "zu strafen mit Gewalt"; Bollack (1990: I, 187) "de punir par un acte"; Kamerbeek (1967: 51) "by force", Longo (1972: 60) "indica che il modo della punizione è violento".

ὅστις γὰρ ἦν ἐκεῖνον<sup>15</sup> ὁ κτανὼν τάχ' ἄν  
 κἄμ' ἄν τοιαύτη χειρὶ τιμωρεῖν θέλοι·  
 κείνῳ προσαρκῶν ὄν ἐμαντὸν ὠφελῶ.

The paradoxical and ironic aspect here is that Laius' murderer would want to punish (τιμωρεῖν) the new king.<sup>16</sup> So where Oedipus with good will, but unaware of the deeper meaning, repeats the god's words in order to execute them, the referent of the subject ὅστις becomes equal to that of the object κἄμ' due to the hand (τοιαύτη χειρὶ), which Sophocles deliberately downplays by means of the pronoun τοιαύτη, "such kind of hand".<sup>17</sup> This indeterminacy contributes to the audience's awareness of this killing hand, and if the actor simultaneously made a gesture with his hand, the irony would become clear to most people in the audience. It is also worth pointing out that Sophocles lets Oedipus talk of one hand rather than multiple hands, contrary to what Creon told him, so that the murder of Laius appears to have happened by μιᾷ ῥώμῃ (ὅστις ... ὁ κτανὼν) and not σὺν πλήθει χερῶν (see below). Thus, Sophocles allows ironically Oedipus a *Freudian slip* if Apollo's oracle and Oedipus' opinion must match.<sup>18</sup>

After the chorus' entrance, Oedipus steps forward and delivers his speech about how he will stop the infection (217) for the sake of the people of Thebes (222–3). Once again Sophocles focuses on hand, but this time not as a metonym for killer. In line 231, Oedipus confuses Creon's report on τοὺς αὐτόεντας χειρὶ (τιμωρεῖν) and conflates the two nouns into one, namely the noun τὸν αὐτόχειρα, apparently used neutrally by Oedipus of the offender (since he, in the repetition in line 266, finds it necessary to add what the offender has done, τὸν αὐτόχειρα τοῦ φόνου). Nevertheless, the audience may have been aware that αὐτόχειρ as a noun in the language of tragedy is basically negative,<sup>19</sup> and not only denotes a killer, but as stated above, the prefix

15. Bollack (1990: II, 78–9) argues that we should retain the reading of the mss. ἐκεῖνος in order to emphasise the paradox of the utterance. However, even if ὅστις ἐκεῖνος ὁ... is identical with ὅτος ἐκεῖνος ὁ..., which KG §467.13 pace Bollack never claims, the emphasis in κἄμ' is on the two objects (Him and Me), not on two sentences, see Longo (1972) 68 *ad* 139–141. Furthermore, that κείνῳ should refer to Laius, when the last ἐκεῖνος is the killer, is pointless.

16. See Kamerbeek (1967) 55, *ad* 140, who defends the readings of the mss. to retain "the ironic subtlety of the wording". See also Longo (1972) *ad* 139–141.

17. For the ambiguity, see Longo (1972) *ad* 139–141.

18. Segal (1993) 101.

19. As in line in 1331, e.g. Eur. *Med.* 1281, *IA* 873, see Loraux (1991) 9 and 71 with n. 6; Parker (1996) 350–1.

*ἀπτο*- denotes murder of a family member.<sup>20</sup> The hand, by which Apollo commanded the murderer to be punished, has now in Oedipus' mouth become the murderer itself, though this time not through metonymy, but by being quite specifically embodied in and by Oedipus himself.

Thus we have in the first few hundred lines seen a thematic use of hand, where all cases are related to the murder of Laius; it is especially noteworthy how Oedipus keeps changing his interlocutor's use of the plural to singular in their conversation about the murder (see 102, 225, 231, in particular 266 and 292–3).<sup>21</sup> This changes in the following episode, in which Oedipus has a discussion with Tiresias and in his anger accuses the soothsayer of being directly involved in the assassination (346–8):

Ἴσθι γὰρ δοκῶν ἐμοὶ  
καὶ ξυμφυτεῦσαι τοῦργον, εἰργάσθαι θ', ὅσον  
μὴ χειρὸς καίωνων·

Tiresias killed, Oedipus claims, *without* the use of his hands, that is to say, he is behind the act (*ξυμφυτεῦσαι τοῦργον*). But Oedipus' attempt to push the killing hand away from himself fails, since the hand has already been well established thematically, and Sophocles discretely gives the killing hand back to Oedipus in lines 383–4, just as he was himself given away as a child:

ἦν (sc. τήνδε ἀρχήν) ἐμοὶ πόλις  
δωρητόν, οὐκ αἰτητόν, εἰσεχείρισεν<sup>22</sup>

Even though the power of Thebes is ultimately linked to Laius' death, this power continues to be a symbol of Oedipus' victory over the Sphinx for Oedipus and the chorus. But Tiresias cuts through this half-truth as he proclaims his indictment of Oedipus, which ends with the regular word for killer, *φονεύς*, in line 460 (already mentioned passingly in 362). The murder and the power of the city are thus linked to the hand of Oedipus. Although the chorus has heard whom Tiresias pointed to as the killer, they have so much faith in Oedipus,<sup>23</sup> that they rather doubt Tiresias' accusation (499–500).

20. See e.g. Aesch. *Sept.* 681; Soph. *Ant.* 56; Eur. *Med.* 1254; see Hutchinson (1985) ad 734–41.

21. Segal (1981) 214–16; Segal (1995) 150–2.

22. For this verb, see Longo (1972) ad 383–386.

23. Note that *Οἰδιπόδα* is located in the same metrical position as *ἠδύπολις* in the antode, 496 ~ 510.

It is conceivable that the actor impersonating Oedipus dragged on one or both legs to embody Oedipus' blemish, as e.g. in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, but it is not apparent from the script whether or not he used a stick that would be concomitant with such a manner of movement. Later Oedipus tells how he beat to death the group he met on the road with a stick in his hand (811: *σκήπτρω τυπείς ἐκ τῆσδε χειρὸς*).<sup>24</sup> So if Oedipus was indeed holding a stick in the play, Sophocles could have exploited the dramatic irony to the fullest by letting the still seeing Oedipus use a stick, as the soothsayer Tiresias predicts (464–6) that he will be needing one in the future:

*τυφλὸς γὰρ ἐκ δεδορκότος  
καὶ πτωχὸς ἀντὶ πλουσίου ξένην ἔπι  
σκήπτρω προδεικνὺς γαῖαν ἐμπορεύσεται.*

This would make the chorus doubt Tiresias' abilities as a soothsayer, a touch of realism (if Tiresias can not even see that Oedipus is already using a stick, how would he be able to predict the future?). Thus the early detection of Laius' murder will for a while be questioned by the spectator: Is Tiresias really right? Indeed, as the play ends, Oedipus is not forced into exile.<sup>25</sup>

Immediately following Tiresias' exit the chorus first of all wonders whose bloody hands (*φονίαισι χερσίν* 466) the oracle has spoken of. The chorusmen inadvertently answer the question through the comparisons they make, when they sing the following about the killer (467–9):<sup>26</sup>

*Ἦρα νιν ἀελλάδων  
ἵππων σθυναρώτερον  
φνγαῖ πόδα νωμᾶν·*

24. See Segal (1981) 216–17 for the ambiguity of the *skeptron* and the “third leg”; also Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (1990) 214–15.

25. See Taplin (1991) 46. Admittedly, the end of *OT* is hotly debated, see e.g. Gellie (1986); Kovacs (2009, 2014); Finglass (2009); Sommerstein (2011); Dunn (2013). Kovacs (2014: 59) remarks that “touching as a means of conveying information is without parallel... dramaturgy that is without fifth-century parallel and is also ineptly signalled constitutes strong evidence of spuriousness”. However, this argument suffers from two flaws: firstly, it is build on the premise that the surviving plays offer all we need to know about fifth-century tragedy; secondly, I hope to show in this article that the touching is far from “ineptly signalled” throughout the play.

26. On this stasimon, see Burton (180) 148–152, who detects an allusion to Oedipus' life in the imagery of the choral ode (150).

Continuing in the antode, the chorus sings about the mysterious man who wanders around like a lone bull (479):<sup>27</sup>

*μέλεος μελέω ποδι χηρεύων,*

It is clear that Sophocles consciously linked hand and foot together here (the killer's hands and his poor feet), and this is further emphasized by the chorus, who in the choral ode just mentioned Oedipus by name, while mentioning Tiresias only as the wise soothsayer (484). The first strophic pair of this choral ode thus highlights and contrasts the body parts hand and foot, while the second strophic pair highlights and contrasts Oedipus and Tiresias, who has explicitly been singled out as unable to kill with his hands (see above). It is also worth noting that the chorus by now, like Oedipus and Tiresias, talks of one perpetrator only, no longer of multiple killers.

In the following episode, the political situation of Thebes tightens, as Creon angrily defends himself against Oedipus' accusation of being in league with the murderer, the perpetrator of the assassination that Oedipus poignantly calls *τοῦ γχειρίημα* (540). Thus Oedipus again tries to transfer the killing hand to someone else — this time to Creon. Furthermore, and in spite of the otherwise problematic etymology, there is no doubt that Sophocles wants the spectator to hear the *χείρ* stem again in *θανασίμω χειρώματι*, which is the deadly attack at which Laius perished (560).<sup>28</sup> Again Sophocles lets his Oedipus push the killing hand away from himself, but it is none other than Oedipus' mother, Jocasta, who in turn relates the killing hand to Oedipus when, in the course of her report on Laius' fate, she inadvertently connects the infant Oedipus's feet with the hands that would cause Laius' death (715–19):

*Καὶ τὸν μὲν, ὡσπερ γ' ἡ φάτις, ξένοι ποτὲ  
ληστὰι φονεύουσ' ἐν τριπλαῖς ἀμαξιτοῖς·  
παιδὸς δὲ βλάστας οὐ διέσχον ἡμέραι  
τρεις, καὶ νιν ἄρθρα<sup>29</sup> κέϊνος ἐνζεύξας ποδοῖν  
ἔρριψεν ἄλλων χερσὶν εἰς ἄβατον ὄρος.*

27. On the bull image in *OT*, see Segal (1981) 219–20; 223; 228.

28. Sophocles could otherwise have used *πέσημα* as in *Ajax* 1033: *ὄλωλε θανασίμω πεσήματι*. For a discussion of the etymology and the hand imagery in *χειρώματι*, see Griffith (1999) ad 125–6 and Hutchinson (1985) ad 1022. I believe that Bollack's remark (1990 II, ad 70–2) holds true in this case as well as in others: “les étymologies poétiques ne se préoccupent pas de cette exactitude phonétique: il suffit qu'un mot éclaire, par le rapprochement des sons, la signification de l'autre”.

29. *ἄρθρον* “was applied not simply to what we could call joints but to any distinct part of the body, including the eyes, mouth, genitals and internal organs” (Osborne [2011] 40).



It is interesting here to see how Laius tries to avoid the blemish of a murder and disclaim responsibility by giving the infant to others, so that the murder becomes theirs, not his. As elsewhere in the *OT*, we notice once again the human inability to retain and understand the facts: Just as there is only one killer, it was only one man in whose hands Laius gave the infant in order to throw it away (*ἔρριψεν*). Sophocles uses all means to confound not only the protagonist's investigation, but also the spectator's perception of Oedipus (see Oedipus' reflection in lines 842–5).

The other man, the only survivor from Oedipus' slaughtering rage, asks Jocasta to be sent away from Thebes, after Oedipus has assumed power there; significantly, the man asks for this favour after having touched the queen's hand (*τῆς ἐμῆς χειρὸς θιγὼν* 760). Kamerbeek believes that this action signals the man's loyalty to Laius and the royal house. It is surely possible, but I wonder whether touching Jocasta's hand is not preferable to touching the defiled hand of a killer, even though the latter might be the king (on *miasma* see 97, 241–2, 313, 353, 1012).<sup>30</sup> In Euripides' *Orestes* (791–4) it is quite clear that it seemed dangerous to the Greek audience to touch a defiled person:<sup>31</sup>

*OP* :: δυσχερὲς ψάθειν νοσοῦντος ἀνδρός.  
*ΠΥ* :: οὐκ ἔμοιγε σοῦ.  
*OP* :: εὐλαβοῦ λύσσης μετασχεῖν τῆς ἐμῆς.  
*ΠΥ* :: τὸ δ' ὄν ἴτω.  
*OP* :: οὐκ ἄρ' ὀκνήσεις;  
*ΠΥ* :: ὄκνος γὰρ τοῖς φίλοις κακὸν μέγα.

And above all, of course, the slave wants to avoid being seen (*ἄποπτος*) by Oedipus. If Oedipus saw the slave, he might well recognize him as the sole survivor from the slaughter committed at the triple crossroads, and hence as the only remaining witness of Oedipus' crime. In that case, Oedipus might well have the slave killed, so as to eliminate the witness. One does not exclude the other, but given the lexical salience of hand and the special emphasis it

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This, however, need not indicate that such periphrases were particularly common in daily speech. See Schein (2013) ad 1201–2: “When Phil. says that the Greeks have rejected ‘the limb of my foot’ rather than just ‘my foot’, he makes his situation more concrete and pathetic, implying that they rejected him by rejecting the part of his foot that could no longer function effectively.” I believe that the use of *ἄρθρον* in *OT* strikes a similar pathetic tone.

30. Meinel (2015) 59–65.

31. On pollution in tragedy, see Parker (1996) 308–321. On pollution in *OT*, see Meinel (2015) 46–73.

has acquired, I believe that we must see here the contrast between Jocasta's purity (τῆς ἐμῆς χειρὸς θιγῶν) and Oedipus' impurity (σέ τ' εἶδ') (758–62):

... Ἄφ' οὗ γὰρ κείθεν ἦλθε καὶ κράτη  
σέ τ' εἶδ' ἔχοντα Λαίῳ τ' ὀλωλότα,  
ἐξικέτευσε τῆς ἐμῆς χειρὸς θιγῶν  
ἀγρούς σφεπέμψαι κἀπὶ ποιμνίων νομάς,  
ὡς πλεῖστον εἶη τοῦδ' ἀποπτος ἄστεως.

That Oedipus has a killing hand is instantly recognised in the *rhesis* he delivers immediately afterwards, in which he recounts the meeting at the crossroads that made him a murderer. His story is consistent with Jocasta's report, which suddenly makes him wonder whether he is also the murderer whom he is looking for and has banned (813–33):

λέχη δὲ τοῦ θανόντος ἐν χεροῖν ἐμαῖν  
χραίνω, δι' ὄνπερ ὄλετ'. (821–2)

Here for the first time Oedipus takes on the responsibility for the murder, and again Sophocles focuses on hand as a means (δι' ὄνπερ ὄλετ'), while Oedipus recognises the possibility that he may also have besmirched with his own hands the slain man's marriage bed (λέχη), a bed which here serves as metonym for Jocasta's purity — a purity that has been defiled far beyond the couple's wildest imagination: Oedipus has touched that which he should not touch — the main theme of the following choral ode. Nevertheless, there is still hope for Oedipus that this situation is just based on a misunderstanding, and so Oedipus and Jocasta leave the stage and enter into the palace as husband and wife, which of course only augments the spectators' growing ironical distance to the couple.

In the choral ode that follows, as in the previous one, foot and hand are given a conspicuous centrality by the choral voice. In the first strophic pair of this stasimon, foot is included once in each stanza; in the first stanza as a compound adjective, νόμοι πρόκεινται ὑψίποδες, “the gods' high-footed laws”. This adjective, besides being an echo of the first choral ode (ὑψίπολις 370 — both words are *hapax legomena*)<sup>32</sup>, primes the spectator's perception of the foot-theme of the choral ode, an ode in which the dramatic irony is complete down to the smallest detail. While the chorus celebrates the gods' eternal law in words that will necessarily suggest to the spectator an association

32. Dawe (1982) 184 *ad* 878 argues against such connections, while Kamerbeek (1967) supports them.

with Oedipus' destiny due to the well-primed themes of foot and hand, the chorus also unwittingly supports this association,<sup>33</sup> since in the antode they sing of Hybris (876–9):

ἀκρότατα γεῖσ' ἀναβᾶσ'  
 ἀπότομον ὄρουσεν εἰς ἀνάγκαν,  
 ἔνθ' οὐ ποδὶ χρησίμῳ  
 χρῆται.

Not only do we see the contrast between high and low, but the impossible foothold (echoing *μελέφ ποδὶ* in 479) gives the spectator the opportunity to see a contrast between the divine and the human, in particular between the god's oracle and Oedipus' / Laius' perception of the oracle. Besides the foot-theme, Sophocles forces the spectator to recognize the earlier references of the play to hands by changing the classic contrast *λόγων ἔργων τε πάντων* of the first stanza (864–5) to *χερσὶν ἢ λόγῳ* in the second stanza (883–4), effectively removing the traditional term of everyday speech.<sup>34</sup> Thus the playwright prompts the spectator to focus on *χερσὶν* in this context, a context that alludes to Oedipus and Jocasta,<sup>35</sup> who are clearly envisaged in the line *ἢ τῶν ἀθίικτων θίξεται ματάζων*.<sup>36</sup> Although admittedly this choral ode is extremely vague when it comes to directly pointing at the royal couple, the hand and foot imagery may very well have given the audience some clues concerning the persons of whom the chorus unwittingly sings.<sup>37</sup> As Charles Segal has shown,<sup>38</sup> there are some clear parallels and antitheses between Laius' old servant and Oedipus, and here we see another antithesis: The servant could touch Jocasta without shame, but Oedipus could (or ought) not. To

33. I thus follow Knox (1957) 182–4; Winnington-Ingram (1980) 188.

34. e.g. *Soph. Aj.* 1069–70, see Finglass (2015) ad loc.

35. This is a hotly debated subject, see e.g. Winnington-Ingram (1980) 179–204; Carey (1986); Sidwell (1992); Fisher (1992) 329–342; Podlecki (1993); Edmunds (2002) 82–92. I generally agree with Brandenburg (2005: 39) that “the Chorus fully and completely side with Oedipus until verse 1186, and secondly they do not sing (consciously) about Oedipus”. Segal (1993) 1993 noticed the feet imagery in this ode.

36. Winnington-Ingram (1980) 197 detects a sexual allusion here, although the weight seems rather to fall on pollution vs. purity. *Soph. Tr.* 565 does however imply some inappropriate touching by the lusty centaur, see Easterling (1982) ad loc; Davies (1991) ad loc.

37. As Beer (2012) 102–4 points out: “if it does not allude to Oedipus in some way then Sophocles is being obtuse” (102). Oedipus, as the Theban king, does not fit into the image of the hybridic criminal envisaged by the chorus, a point that simply underscores his tragedy; thus Fisher (1992) 342. However, the criminal that killed Laius may very well have been thought to have been such an evil schemer (124–5).

38. Segal (1981) 209; Segal (1995) 151–54.

Oedipus she was untouchable (*ἀθίκτων*, see above), as the Oracle at Delphi is untouchable (*τὸν ἄθικτον ... γᾶς ἐπ' ὀμφαλόν*, 898–9) to the perpetrator, and thus Sophocles links the murder by Oedipus (alluded to in *τις ὑπέροπτα χερσὶν ἢ λόγῳ πορεύεται*) and his incestuous relationship with his mother with Apollo's oracle precisely at the moment when the chorus sings about the audacity of doubting the truthfulness of the Oracle. With the word *χειρόδεικτα* in line 902, Sophocles again plays with the audience's expectations, as the chorus wishes that an oracle must be so clear that one should be able to point to the result, able to grasp the truth with one's own hand. Besides the immediate irony in this context—in that the blind will use his hands to see (a situation already pointed out in 466: *σκήπτρῳ προδεικνὺς γαῖαν ἐμπορεύσεται*), which of course will come to the fore after Oedipus' blinding—there also seems to be an echo of Creon's previous explanation concerning the reason why the Thebans never solved the murder (130–1):

*ἦ ποικιλῶδὸς Σφίγξ τὸ πρὸς ποσὶ σκοπεῖν  
μεθέντας ἡμᾶς τὰφανῆ προσήγετο.*

In this choral ode, the first strophic pair contains the concept foot, while the following strophic pair contains hand in close connection with the idea of “touching”. There can, in my opinion, be no doubt that this is a deliberate choice by Sophocles, who thus forms a network of associations in the spectator's psyche and memory, by which he can affect the spectator's perception of the play as it unfolds in the theatre here and now, even if only the “ideal spectator” got it all right.

After the choral ode, Jocasta enters with sacrificial offerings to Apollo in her hands (911–23). There is an exquisite irony in that we never hear about Jocasta keeping the infant Oedipus in her hands as a mother. We only hear about the three men, who sealed Oedipus' fate. Furthermore, Jocasta's hands become a means of contact between man and the god Apollo, whom she distrusted in the previous episode, and thus her petition causes her own downfall. Again the concept hand becomes central to the play's ironic conceptual network.

After the messenger from Corinth has told Oedipus that his “father” Polybus is dead, Oedipus tells him why he is not able to return to Corinth, where he now is the “rightful” heir to the throne (994–6):

*εἶπε γάρ με Λοξίας ποτὲ  
χρῆναι μιγῆναι μητρὶ τῆμαντοῦ, τό τε  
πατρῶον αἶμα χερσὶ ταῖς ἐμαῖς ἐλεῖν.*

Again we see how central the concept of hand is in this depiction of Oedipus' fate; in the same way as Apollo mentioned the hand in the oracle that Creon brought from Delphi, so Oedipus' old oracle also contained the word hand. Sophocles makes a case for hand as a focal point in Oedipus' dealings with Apollo and the murder of Laius, while foot is bound up with the enigma of the Sphinx (130–1) and the parents' maltreatment of their child (718–19). Sophocles ingeniously connects these two concepts through Oedipus' eyes later in the play.

The messenger explains that Oedipus has nothing to fear in Corinth since he is merely a foster child of Polybus. Oedipus, who only had misgivings about this relationship, asks how the Corinthian can be so sure. The messenger replies (1022):

*Δῶρόν ποτ', ἴσθι, τῶν ἐμῶν χειρῶν λαβῶν.*

For the second time, we hear about Oedipus as an entity transferred from one person to another. Laius gave the baby away to “other hands” so that the child might die, but Polybus, Oedipus' new father, had received it as a gift from specific hands, namely the Messenger's, with the intention that it should live. Oedipus asks (1023):

*Κᾶθ' ᾧδ' ἀπ' ἄλλης χειρὸς ἔστειροξεν μέγα;*

As the Theban kingship was given to the “foreign” Oedipus, likewise he was himself given as a gift by the messenger to the truly foreign royal family in Corinth. While Sophocles previously contrasted hand and foot, the two concepts now collide in Oedipus' dialogue with the messenger (1031–2):

*ΟΙ: Τί δ' ἄλλος ἴσχοντ' ἐν χερσῶν<sup>39</sup> με λαμβάνεις;*  
*ΑΓ: Ποδῶν ἂν ἄρθρα μαρτυρήσειεν τὰ σά.*

This merging of the two concepts is taking place at the moment when the cause of Oedipus' name is first revealed (1034–6), and the king thus takes an important step forward in the investigation of his own identity, while the murder investigation is (apparently) suspended for a short while. However, Jocasta has already realized the relationship and warns him not to know himself (1068).

The last piece is missing, and when the old servant of Laius refuses to speak up (1144–6) and turns his anger at the Corinthian messenger, Oedipus commands his attendants:

39. This text is uncertain, see Kamerbeek (1967) *ad loc* contra, Dawe (1982) *ad loc* pro. *OCT*'s text is reproduced here.

*Οὐχ ὡς τάχος τις τοῦδ' ἀποστρέψει χέρας;* (1154)

The hands that originally received Oedipus as a baby (719) are now held by force “as a first step to tying sky up ready for interrogation during torture”;<sup>40</sup> and just as Laius had another person kill the infant Oedipus, so also Oedipus peremptorily orders another man to take firm hold of the old servant; *qualis pater, talis filius*.

After the killer is discovered in lines 1180–5, both hand and foot are pushed to the background for a while – though in no manner forgotten. The focus now turns towards face and eye (e.g. 1207, 1222, 1235, 1238, 1276), but it is clear that Sophocles wants to establish a relationship between the previously used body parts hand and foot and the eye that now comes to the fore; see line 1270, where Sophocles’ distinctive periphrasis for the eyes, *ἄρθρα τῶν αὐτοῦ κύκλων* (literally “the joints of his circles”),<sup>41</sup> brings forward the lexical salience of the word *ἄρθρα* as a neutral body part, as noted above.<sup>42</sup> Already on two previous occasions Sophocles has used a similar periphrasis referring to foot (in line 718 *ἄρθρα ... ποδοῖν* and again in line in 1032 *ποδῶν ἂν ἄρθρα*) and thus *ἄρθρα* has been primed to be associated with foot right up to the point where Oedipus himself proclaims that he will poke out his eyes. At this central passage of the play foot and eye acquire a semantic community within the very nature of Oedipus (see above), a community that Sophocles actually already predicted in lines 417–19:

*Καί σ' ἀμφιπλήξῃ μητρός τε καὶ τοῦ σοῦ πατρὸς  
ἐλᾷ ποτ' ἐκ γῆς τῆσδε δεινόπους ἀρά,  
βλέποντα νῦν μὲν ὄρθ', ἔπειτα δὲ σκότον.*

Conversely, Sophocles — deliberately I believe — does not satisfy the spectator’s expectation concerning the punishing hand, known from Apollo’s oracle. Twice in the messenger’s account, we hear that Oedipus raised (1270 *ἄρας*, 1276 *ἐπαίρων*) an object. According to the translation of Lloyd-Jones (1994), *ἄρθρα τῶν αὐτοῦ κύκλων* is the object of *ἄρας*, and similarly *βλέφαρα* is the object of *ἐπαίρων*, but I believe that Kamerbeek (1967: ad loc) is right to argue that the object inferred should be either Jocasta’s hairpins (*πέρονας* 1269) or Oedipus’ own hands (*χείρας*).<sup>43</sup> I lean towards the first suggestion,

40. Dawe (1982) 212 *ad loc*.

41. *κύκλος* for ‘eye’ in poetry, see *LSJ* s.v. II 8.

42. For a similar conclusion, see Hurlbut (1903); Segal (1993) 135.

43. Compare *Ar. Eq.* 1129–30.

since the hairpins are mentioned in the immediate context, and the audience will in any case think about the hands that hold the pins. Thus we may discern the result of the hand-imagery that the audience has been exposed to throughout the play: Oedipus' killing hand becomes implicit in the self-inflicted blinding. Sophocles has calculated that the vivid messenger speech will enable the spectator to "see" how Oedipus pierces his eyes with his own hands, without even mentioning these hands. This is clearly seen in Oedipus' *kommos* with the chorus (1331–2):

Ἐπαισε δ' ἀπτόχειο νιν οὐ  
τις, ἀλλ' ἐγὼ τλάμων.

It was Oedipus' own will that there should be a straight line from the killer to the avenger (hence the use of *τιμωρεῖν*, see above), and that he should thereby fulfil Apollo's bidding. This fact becomes even clearer in lines 1399–1401, an echo of lines 994–6:

ἐν τριπλαῖς ὁδοῖς,  
αἶ τοῦμόν αἶμα τῶν ἐμῶν χειρῶν ἄπο  
ἐπίετε πατρός

But at the moment when Oedipus finds the truth about himself, he loses not only his sight and his present life but also, paradoxically, the throne of Thebes, to which he was in fact the sole heir. Blind as he is, he has fully acknowledged that he must follow Apollo's bidding and leave Thebes, so that residents there should never lay eyes on him again (*εἰσόψεσθ'*, 1412). But the moment he has claimed responsibility for the murder, the pollution (*miasma*) no longer harms society (1414–15),<sup>44</sup> and he asks the chorus to lend him a supporting hand (*θιγεῖν*, 1413), so that his once so loyal friends may banish him from the city. Creon, however, intervenes and orders Oedipus to remain inside the palace until Creon has asked anew for the command of the god (1438–9); Oedipus is thus back among his living family, a fact that highlights a new side of Oedipus: Oedipus as a father. The boys will handle their father's exile with relative ease, but he is anxious on behalf of the girls (1463–70):

αἶν οὐποθ' ἡμῇ χωρὶς ἐστάθη βορᾶς  
τράπεζ' ἄνευ τοῦδ' ἀνδρός, ἀλλ' ὅσων ἐγὼ  
ψαῦοιμι, πάντων τῶνδ' ἀεὶ μετειχέτην·  
αἶν μοι μέλεσθαι· καὶ μάλιστα μὲν χερσῶν  
ψαῦσαί μ' ἕασον ἀποκλαύσασθαι κακά.

44. Meinel (2015) 66; 72–3. See however below.

ἴθ', ὄναξ,  
 ἴθ', ὦ γονῆ γενναῖε· χερσί τ' ἄν θυγῶν  
 δοκοῖμ' ἔχειν σφᾶς, ὥσπερ ἠνίκ' ἔβλεπον.

Oedipus' hands caused his own blindness, but they have now become his way of seeing (see above), through touching. He calls upon the girls (1480–3):

δεῦρ' ἴτ', ἔλθετε  
 ὡς τὰς ἀδελφὰς τάσδε τὰς ἐμὰς χέρας,  
 αἰ τοῦ φτυτοργοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῖν ὧδ' ὄρᾶν  
 τὰ πρόσθε λαμπρὰ προῦξένησαν ὄμματα·

And here, at this point, where we hear of Oedipus hands for the last time, Sophocles personifies them<sup>45</sup> as a token of Oedipus' status in life as brother and father. Oedipus' means of vision in blindness is thus the ability of his own killing hands to feel their way around. Oedipus still has the girls in his arms as he tries to convince Creon to swear that he will take care of them when Oedipus is away (1510):

ξύννευσον, ὦ γενναῖε, σῆ ψάσας χερσί.

Oedipus' killing hand is probably stretched towards Creon in the hope of an affirmative handshake, but the text does not clarify whether Creon actually shakes Oedipus' hand. On the contrary, Creon's impatience with the parting speech that Oedipus addresses to his daughters (1515) could be an indication that he will not touch Oedipus. Oedipus' touch brings defilement and disaster after all (*pace* Meinel 2015) and this is why Creon avoids touching him.<sup>46</sup> So, when Oedipus embraces his daughters, the spectators might have dark premonitions that the girls will be doomed to misfortune because of this fatal touch. Thus in the final tableau,<sup>47</sup> we can see how Oedipus' killing hands crave the family love that the very same hands have crushed.

\* \* \*

Why did Sophocles create this focus on hands in this play? My answer is simple: the poet wanted to try something new. Oedipus' myth was well known by the time of production of *OT*, and therefore playwrights had to

45. Thus Kamerbeek (1967) *ad loc.*

46. *pace* Taplin (1991) 66.

47. See also Buxton (1996) 45 for Oedipus' the emotional separation from his daughters.



add new insights and motifs to the story. Aeschylus had already employed the self-blinding in his Theban trilogy (witness the *Seven against Thebes*),<sup>48</sup> but there is nothing to suggest that he would have focused on the hands of the culprits.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, we can see in Euripides' now fragmentary play, *Oedipus*, that Oedipus was blinded by the Thebans (fr. 541),<sup>50</sup> with a particular emphasis on the eyes:

ἡμεῖς δὲ Πολύβου παῖδ' ἐρείσαντες πέδω  
ἐξοματοῦμεν καὶ διόλλυμεν κόρας.

Therefore, there are indications that the eye, perhaps especially after Sophocles' *OT*, acquired a special pithiness in subsequent depictions of the Oedipus myth. The hand, by contrast, could be effectively used in other mythical stories (e.g. Euripides' *Medea*,<sup>51</sup> Sophocles' *Antigone*<sup>52</sup>) and has apparently not made its mark in the post-Sophoclean tradition of the Oedipus legend. This should not obscure Sophocles' aims in introducing the hand-theme. The finest task of the tragic playwright's was to surprise his audience by adding new elements to a conventional substrate.<sup>53</sup> By means of the figurative play between foot, hand and eye, all of them embodied in Oedipus himself, Sophocles accomplished this task with supreme success in his *Oedipus the King*.

48. Hutchinson (1985) xxv.

49. Eteocles and Polynices do, however, kill each other ἐκ χειρῶν ἀποκτόνων (807).

50. See Sommerstein (2010) 214; on this play see Collard et al. (2004) 105–32; Liapis (2014) for a sceptical view on the fragments, arguing that they might stem from a rhetorical exercise rather than from a play: “One might even be tempted to speculate that the novelty of having Laius's servants blind Oedipus stems from the apprentice orator's anxiety to innovate by cooking up a spectacular variant of a well-known mythic datum, namely Oedipus's blindness.” (357) Without going into this discussion, I find it difficult to see how an “anxiety to innovate by cooking up a spectacular variant of a well-known mythic datum” would not fit a tragedian? Is innovation of mythic datum not what tragedians did? See note 53 below.

51. e.g. Mastrorarde (2002) 29–31; Flory (1978).

52. Loraux (1986).

53. Sommerstein (2010) 213: “And in fact the one thing about every tragedy of which the spectators could be certain, when they sat down to watch it, was that in at least some important respects it would be different from any treatment of the same story that they had seen or heard of before. Only, they did not know what the differences would be, and therefore, paradoxically, their presumption would be, until they were given positive reason for believing otherwise, that any particular event or episode would be treated in the manner most familiar from tradition. These principles clearly gave the dramatist wide scope for misleading and surprising his audience.”

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