



Oedipus and the ‘Christianisation’ of the *Oedipus at Colonus* in Lee Breuer and Bob Telson’s *The Gospel at Colonus*

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Abstract

This paper deals with one of the most famous rewritings of Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*, the *Gospel at Colonus* by Lee Breuer and Bob Telson, first performed in 1983. This will be a two-stage discussion. In the first part, a close analysis and comparison between some relevant parts of Sophocles’s text and Breuer’s one will be proposed to show the different strategies adopted by the modern playwright to ‘accommodate’ the original pagan text into the totally new Christian-Pentecostal context staged. It will be argued that in the second part of the play the Christian *afflatus* of the rewriting intensifies, ultimately conveying Breuer and Telson’s final message of a possible conciliation between white and Black, paganism and Pentecostal Christianity. The second part will take a closer look at the figure of Oedipus and at his radical change from his past pagan condition to the newly obtained Christian power: from a vulnerable wanderer in search of a place to die in and have his sins forgiven to a symbolic redeemer of all humanity and dispenser of joy and hope for all the people gathered in the Pentecostal church and beyond.

Introduction

The Gospel at Colonus is arguably one of the most ambitious rewritings of Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*: while Lee Breuer adapted the original Greek, the music was originally composed by Bob Telson. It was first presented in 1983 at the Next Wave Festival, promoted by the Brooklyn Academy of Music: the original cast included, among the others, Morgan Freeman and Clarence Fountain, with the iconic gospel group The Blind Boys of Alabama. The great popularity of these figures must have significantly contributed to the success of the musical. In March 1988, *The Gospel at Colonus* was first performed on Broadway, where it ran for

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three months. In an online interview in 1998, the playwright Lee Breuer declared that he was receiving dozens and dozens of requests for amateur performances every year¹: this clearly testifies to the fascination that this very innovative rewriting of a Greek tragedy exerted on contemporary spectators, as well as the popular appeal and, importantly, the desire for active audience participation and enactment (a key aspect of ancient drama, of course, as well as the reception of the musical).²

As suggested by the title, Lee Breuer and Bob Telson's *The Gospel at Colonus* is an attempt to merge in a modern play two quite distant performance traditions: Greek classical tragedy on one side, American gospel music on the other. Following the plot of Sophocles's last tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus* (406–405 BC), *The Gospel* stages the final chapter of Oedipus's life. After having discovered the truth about his father's murder, the son of Laius has lost his political power in Thebes and now wanders in search of a land where he can die. He is old, blind and assisted only by his faithful daughter Antigone. In Lee Breuer and Bob Telson's adaptation, this ancient story, approached and reworked via Fitzgerald's English translation of Sophocles's text,³ substitutes the canonical readings from the Bible during a religious celebration in a modern African American Pentecostal church. The last act of Oedipus's tormented existence replaces the usual stories taken from the Bible, thus providing the cue for a communal reflection on the great themes of suffering and its redemption at the end of life by divine grace. In the *Gospel* Oedipus arrives in the church in the guise of a preacher, while Antigone takes on the role of the evangelist. The modern church chorus, like the original Greek one, follows the whole performance, reacting and commenting on it.⁴ Of course, Breuer did not transpose all the episodes and choral songs from the Sophoclean drama into his Christian adaptation; rather, he selected only a fairly small number of verses from his source text, which he combined and partly rewrote in order to adapt them to the new dramatic context.

¹ See B. Goff and M. Simpson, *Crossroads in the Black Aegean. Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora*, Oxford, 2007, p. 178. I could not consult the online article reported by the authors, probably because it is no longer available.

² For more details on the various performances of the *Gospel* between the first draft of the play in 1981 and the great Broadway success of 1988, see M. Gisolfi D'Aponte, 'The Gospel at Colonus (and other Black Morality Plays)', *Black American Literature Forum*, 25.1, 1991, pp. 103–106. P. Brown, 'Greek Tragedy in Opera House and Concert Hall of the Late Twentieth Century', in *Dionysus Since 69. Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, ed. E. Hall, F. Macintosh and A. Wrigley, Oxford, 2004, p. 298, in his review of modern musical rewritings of ancient Greek tragedies, rightly states that '*Gospel at Colonus* is one of the most remarkably creative adaptations of Greek drama that there have been, and one of the most popular'.

³ First published in 1941 (R. Fitzgerald, *Sophocles. Oedipus at Colonus. An English Version by Robert Fitzgerald*, New York, 1941), it was later reprinted together with the translations of the *Oedipus Rex* and the *Antigone* in a single volume entitled *Sophocles. The Oedipus Cycle* and edited by Robert Fitzgerald and Dudley Fitts (D. Fitts and R. Fitzgerald, *Sophocles. The Oedipus Cycle. Oedipus Rex. Oedipus at Colonus. English Versions by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald*, New York, 1955).

⁴ See the note on production itself in L. Breuer, *The Gospel at Colonus. An Adaptation by Lee Breuer*, New York, 1989, p. xv. For good general overviews of the plot of the musical, its main characters and its most salient musical elements see, among the others, U. Albini, *A tu per tu con gli antichi*, Bari, 2006, pp. 17–24, and A. Rodighiero, *Una serata a Colono. Fortuna del secondo Edipo*, Verona, 2007, pp. 67–74.

The success achieved by the play in the '80s and '90s certainly points to a precise cultural orientation towards the classics: in those years, an attempt such as Breuer and Telson's to bring into close dialogue white and Black, paganism and Pentecostal Christianity, the Greek myth and the Biblical stories, a sinful family like Oedipus's and the Christian merciful congregation of a Black Pentecostal church must have evidently seemed acceptable to the audience of the time. Today, a conclusion like that of the *Gospel*, in which the Black Pentecostal church provides a new space for Oedipus, and, in doing so, demonstrates that a modern cultural and religious environment is ready, so to speak, to accommodate the classical, would probably appear more problematic than it did in the last two decades of the last century, especially if one considers the long wave of socio-political criticism that has recently affected many of the aspects of the classical texts that are most difficult to accept from a modern critical perspective.⁵ However, there is still value, I believe, in investigating how exactly this accommodation of Sophocles within a Black church—for a Broadway audience—worked in the detail. I start, then, with the libretto.

The Difficult Balance Between Sophocles's Pagan Text and the Christian Rewriting

Even before the present moment of reckoning with classical legacies, a considerable number of critics had already expressed doubts about the success of Breuer's adaptation, arguing in particular for the irreconcilability of the Greek-pagan ritual and thought system with the Christian one as expressed in the Pentecostal service.⁶

⁵ See for example J. McConnell, 'Lee Breuer's New American Classicism. The Gospel at Colonus' "Integration Statement", in *Greek Drama in the Americas*, ed. K. Bosher, F. Macintosh, J. McConnell and P. Rankine, Oxford, 2015, p. 484 on Breuer's alleged 'accidental imperialism', as the author terms it: '[A]lthough Breuer's amalgamation of Greek drama and African-American gospel may be intended to reflect a racial reconciliation of blacks and whites [...], this motivation does not seem to me to be sustained within *Gospel*. Certainly the play can be seen as equating the Sophoclean focus on exile and integration with the experience of Africans exiled from their homelands by slavery and seeking acceptance in a new place [...]. Breuer's identification with an African-American history of oppression (on the grounds of his own artistic oppression by British culture) drives his use of the gospel medium, and it is this that is so problematic: while doing away with racial divisions is clearly appealing and desirable, to elide artistic, self-imposed oppression with forcible physical and social oppression is clearly to underestimate of enormity of the latter'.

⁶ On this point see, among the others, O. Taplin, *Greek Fire*, New York, 1990, p. 60: '*Gospel at Colonus* is deeply subversive of the Sophocles, which is set at the grove of primeval terrifying Furies, not in the hallelujah-filled Church. And Oedipus does not go to heaven: he becomes a powerful spirit of Colonus, and his children go to grim death in accordance with his curse'; on more specific difficulties related to Oedipus's figure in the *Gospel*, see K. J. Jr. Wetmore, *Black Dionysus. Greek Tragedy and African American Theatre*, Jefferson and London, 2003, p. 112, and E. Wilson, 'Black Oedipus', in *A Companion to Sophocles*, ed. K. Ormand, Chichester, 2012, p. 577. More positive evaluations of the play have been expressed, for instance, by M. McDonald, *Sing Sorrow: Classics, History, and Heroines in Opera*, Westport, 2001, p. 176, '*Gospel at Colonus* features not only brilliant and inspiring music from the African-American tradition, but merges it with one the greatest classical texts of antiquity. Sometimes the fit is uncomfortable, but as Christianity accepts all comers, so this opera/service takes the classical text as affirming God and man's salvation. Past merges with present and promises a bright future, with

However, such observations have always remained on a general level, questioning, for example, the behaviour of some characters or the articulation of certain scenes. What still seems to be missing in the not insignificant amount of literature that has sprung up around the *Gospel* is a more detailed analysis of Breuer's adaptation strategies that pays some attention to his reading of Sophocles. It is this kind of analysis that I propose to carry out in the first part of this essay: focussing on some particularly significant moments in the play, I will try to provide a study of how Breuer attempted to create a kind of balance between the cultural and ritual paganism of his source text and the Christian context of the Pentecostal ceremony staged in the *Gospel*.

First, then, I note that the play is roughly divided in two parts by a central intermission, and that in the first part Breuer seems to have attempted to find the difficult balance between paganism and Christianity on the one hand by omitting from the verses taken from Sophocles some of the traits too clearly linked to the pagan world, and on the other hand by introducing small groups of new verses that, in their new context, carry a Christian content. A first example that well illustrates this rewriting strategy is the ode 'Fair Colonus', sung by the 'friend' in falsetto without accompaniment and the lyrics of which were reworked by Breuer from the first stasimon of Sophocles's tragedy:

Fair Colonus
Land of running horses
Where leaves and berries throng
And wine-dark ivy climbs the bough
The sweet sojourning nightingale
Murmurs all night long

Here with drops of Heaven's dew
At daybreak all the year
The clusters of narcissus bloom
Time-hallowed garlands for the brows
*Of the great ladies whom we fear*⁷

In constructing this ode, Breuer selects only a few verses from the total of sixty-six that make up Fitzgerald's English version of Sophocles's first stasimon. What is retained is the description of the amenities of Colonus's flora and fauna, while the absence of (almost) all references to the pagan gods contained in the original text is immediately noticeable. Between the first and the second stanza, for instance, Breuer has completely omitted the third stanza of Fitzgerald's translation, which mentions the god Dionysus and his followers, the Maenads, who live among the vineyards of

Footnote 6 (continued)

all believers glory-bound to paradise'. On the critical reception of the *Gospel* in terms of the theatrical reviews received shortly after its first performances, see A. S. Green, *The Revisionist Stage. American Directors Reinvent the Classics*, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 63-66, and McConnell, 'Lee Breuer's New American Classicism' (n. 5 above), pp. 481-482.

⁷ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. 11.

Colonus. The second stanza, on the other hand, mentions the dew of Heaven that promotes the flowering of the narcissus: here, the term 'Heaven', already present in Fitzgerald's translation and not coincidentally retained by Breuer, takes on an obvious Christian meaning foreign to the Greek text, which simply spoke of 'heavenly' dew (οὐρανια ἄχνη, ll. 681–82), i.e. dew derived from the condensation of the air above the earth. Further on, in the first stasimon of Sophocles, the Muses and Aphrodite are mentioned dancing along the Cephissus (ll. 691–93), and there is also mention of Zeus and Athena protecting the sacred olive tree of Athens (ll. 704–6). However, there is no trace of these deities of the pagan pantheon in Breuer's ode, which completely omits the stanzas in which they were sung in the original text. Only Demeter and Kore appear in the text of the ode, but they seem to go almost unnoticed as they are masked under the appellation 'the great ladies whom we fear' ('great goddesses' in Fitzgerald's translation). The rewriting of this stasimon therefore seems to follow two fundamental adaptation strategies with respect to the original text. On the one hand, omitting most of the references to the pagan pantheon in order to adapt it as much as possible to the new Christian performance context; on the other, retaining some essential coordinates (the name of the place of worship, Colonus, and the fleeting mention of two pagan goddesses) to avoid giving the audience the impression of a total distortion of the Greek original text.

A very similar rewriting scheme appears to have been employed by Breuer in composing the song 'Stop do not go on', sung by the members of the gospel quintet, who order Oedipus to immediately leave the holy ground of Colonus, while the old blind man replies asking them for hospitality.

Choragos Quintet and Balladeer

Stop! Do not go on
This place is holy
Stop! Do not go on
You cannot walk this ground
Stop! Do not go on

Daughters of darkness bar the way Saying, 'Stop!
Do not go on.'

Stop! Do not go on
This place is holy
Stop! Do not go on
First you must kneel down and pray
Stop! Do not go on
Till the Gods answer 'Yes, you may!'

Saying, 'Stop!
Do not go on.'

Singer Oedipus with Quintet

Here I stand a wanderer
On life's journey
At the close of the day Hungry and tired
Beaten by the rain

Won't you give me shelter
All I need is a resting place
*Promised so long ago*⁸

In this song, starting with some Sophoclean verses, Breuer partly reworks them and partly interweaves them with some new verses composed by himself. The first

⁸ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), pp. 12–13.

strophe is entirely reworked from ll. 36–40 of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which the inhabitant of Colonus admonishes Oedipus to immediately move away from the ground sacred to the Furies that he is trampling upon in an ungodly manner.⁹ The reference to the Erinyes is maintained by Breuer from the original text, but their mention is quick and, so to speak, masked by an appellation (‘daughters of darkness’) that makes them almost unrecognisable and, consequently, less jarring to the overall Christian atmosphere of the rewriting. In the second strophe of the song, the motif of the admonition not to proceed further returns, but this time Breuer inserts a verse (‘First you must kneel down and pray’) that has no counterpart in Sophocles’s text, and it is quite easy to understand why. With it, in fact, Oedipus is invited to kneel down and pray for permission not to leave the sacred ground, but kneeling to address the deity is an act not so much typical of pagan prayer as of Christian prayer.¹⁰ Yet, those who should grant the old blind man permission to stand there are deities who, given their plural number (‘Till the Gods answer’), are to be understood as pagan. In this second strophe, therefore, Breuer’s adaptation seems to encounter a sort of short-circuit: striving to preserve some (veiled) ‘traces’ of the pagan background of the text he is rewriting, the director places some Christian elements alongside these, apparently without caring that such a juxtaposition may be problematic. In this case, Oedipus is exhorted to pray to divinities of the pagan pantheon in a mode of prayer that is more Christian than Greek: could this not generate a sense of strangeness as in spectators accustomed to ancient tragedy as in those more familiar with the Christian world of gospel plays?

If in the quintet’s exhortation the pagan background seems to be prevailing, in Oedipus’s response the Christian *afflatus* of the rewriting intensifies. Only the two verses ‘Hungry and tired | Beaten by the rain’ are reworked from Sophocles’s tragedy,¹¹ while all the others are composed originally by Breuer. In particular, when Oedipus states that the only thing he needs is a place where he can stay and rest, a place that he was promised so long ago (‘All I need is a resting place | Promised so long ago’), the reference to God’s promise to Abraham’s descendants of the Holy Land, where the Hebrews could stop and reside in peace, is evident enough. On

⁹ From Fitzgerald’s translation: ‘(Stranger) Do not go on; | First, move from where you sit; the place is holy; | It is forbidden to walk upon that ground. | (Oedipus) What ground is this? What god is honored here? | (Stranger) It is not to be touched, no one may live upon it; | Most dreadful are its divinities, most feared, | Daughters of darkness and mysterious earth’.

¹⁰ In classical Greece, worshippers typically used to pray standing on their feet with their hands up to the sky. The only exception to this mode of prayer seems to have been those cases where someone wanted to pray Hades or, more rarely, other deities associated with the underworld. The standard study of prayer practices in the ancient Greek world is S. Pulleyn, *Prayer in Greek Religion*, Oxford, 1997, with further references. It is of course true that in this case the Furies could be seen as those goddesses that a Greek would have probably prayed to on their knees, but here the Christian connotation of a kneeling prayer seems too strong not to have prevailed in the ears of an audience who was essentially attending a Christian service.

¹¹ The original verses (ll. 349–350) are not actually part of the speech of the inhabitant of Colonus that Breuer is rewriting here, but they belong to a speech that later in Sophocles’s tragedy Oedipus delivers condemning his two sons who have abandoned him to his misfortune, and praising instead his daughter Antigone, who has long since taken care of her aged father; from Fitzgerald’s translation: ‘[She wandered] often in the wild | Forest going without shoes, and hungry | Beaten by many rains, tired by the sun’.

closer inspection, these verses by Breuer could also subtend those uttered in Sophocles's tragedy by Oedipus when he realises that he has finally reached the land that Apollo's oracle had promised him many years before (Il. 86–90): 'Therefore [Spirits] be mindful of me and of Apollo, | For when he gave me oracles of evil, | He also spoke of this: | A resting place, | After long years, in the last country, where | I should find home among the sacred Furies' (Fitzgerald's translation). However, the Christian reference to the biblical story is, in the words of the Oedipus of the *Gospel*, too strong and clearly prevailing over the pagan one: all the more so if one thinks that in opening the Pentecostal ceremony the preacher had directed the attention of the congregation gathered there to the fictitious *Book of Oedipus* and in particular to the *Exodus*, 'where it speaks of his [Oedipus's] death in a place called Colonus... which was sacred... And his redemption there...' ¹². The story of the Hebrews as told in the true biblical book of *Exodus* is thus juxtaposed with the fictional one taken from Oedipus's book of *Exodus*, and the promise of Apollo becomes, by implication, the promise of another god, the Christian one. For the song 'Stop do not go on', therefore, what Breuer seems to have attempted is a sort of balancing act between certain pagan elements of the source text that are retained and other clearly Christian ones that are introduced (almost) *ex novo*. ¹³

This adaptation strategy is pursued for much of the play, and many other examples could be cited. ¹⁴ However, after the central intermission one can notice a certain change in Breuer's choices: the Christian rewriting of Sophocles's text becomes more and more present and evident, while the pagan elements of the source text recede. The second part of the *Gospel* opens with Oedipus, who is still deprived of his daughters kidnapped by Creon, intoning the lament *Lift me up*:

I wish the wind would lift me up
I wish the wind would lift me up

¹² Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. 6.

¹³ The tradition of doing some mixing of Greek and Christian elements in the rewritings of Greek tragedies has actually deep roots that go back at least to Monteverdi's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*, first performed in Venice in 1640. For the 20th century one can compare, above all, Igor Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1927), where Jocasta is welcomed on stage by a Christian Gloria and equated with the Virgin Mary (as Penelope was already in Monteverdi's opera), and Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (1973), which features a ritual meal clearly reminiscent of the Christian Eucharist as well as many other parallels between the Dionysiac and the Christian traditions. On this see McDonald, 'Sing Sorrow' (n. 6 above), pp. 159–160, and Albini, 'A tu per tu' (n. 4 above), pp. 17–18.

¹⁴ A very striking one can be found, for instance, in the prayer Oedipus utters so that he may remain in the sacred territory of Colonus. At first, this prayer carries a Christian tone, in which the Lord is invoked, among other things, to save Oedipus's soul: 'A voice foretold | That at my grave | Down my God shall come | My soul to save | And I shall be | Endowed with grace | And I shall find | My resting place | [...] O hear my prayer | O Lord, won't you hear my prayer', (Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), pp. 21–22); immediately afterwards, the same prayer is addressed by Oedipus to the Erinyes, and Breuer's text follows much more closely that of Il. 83–110 of Sophocles's tragedy, in which, for example, the phrase 'O hear my prayer' is no longer followed by 'O Lord', but rather by 'Sweet children of original Darkness!' (Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), pp. 22–23). But even this pagan prayer incorporates at least one Christian element, where Oedipus, almost at its close, says 'Therefore, *in the name of God*, give me shelter': the Greek text of Il. 275–78, from which this statement by Oedipus is taken, bears instead, in Fitzgerald's translation, 'Therefore I beg you *before the gods*, | for the same cause that made you move me – | *in reverence of your gods* – give me this shelter' [My emphasis].

Like a dove
I wish the wind would lift me up
So I could look with the eyes of the angels
For the child that I love
I wish the Lord would hide me
I wish the Lord would hide me
In a cloud
I wish the Lord would hide me
I'd fall like a rain of fire
*And I'd lie like a shroud*¹⁵

The verses sung by Oedipus are a partial re-elaboration of ll. 1081–84 of the second stasimon of Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, where the chorus tries to imagine the places where Theseus's soldiers will clash with Creon's ones.¹⁶ However, there is no mention of the battle in Oedipus's lament, which is instead, as it appears in Breuer's rewriting, particularly full of Christian references: it will be sufficient to note the flight of the dove (already present, to be fair, in Sophocles's text at l. 1081: *πελειάς*), but also that of the angels, as well as of course the explicit invocation of the Lord and the rain of fire descending on the earth. This lament in which Oedipus wishes to be lifted up from the earth opens the second part of Breuer's play, which will end precisely with the resurrection from beyond the grave of the old blind man.

Yet, even in the second part of the play there are still various references to pagan religiosity borrowed from Sophocles's text. Polynices, for example, speaking about his expulsion from Thebes by Eteocles, attributes this to the 'Furies' who pursue his brother (ll. 1298–99 in Sophocles's text)¹⁷: then, he refers to the oracles according to which in the clash of the two whoever obtains the support of his father Oedipus will prevail (ll. 1331–32 in Sophocles).¹⁸ Furies and oracles are certainly not part of the Christian creed, but are rather those various not particularly cumbersome elements that, as I have said, Breuer seems to want to keep from Sophocles's text in order not to distort it completely, and to offer, so to speak, a few 'footholds' to spectators more familiar with the original Greek tragedy. Even the death of Oedipus as it is staged in the *Gospel* has markedly pagan connotations, not to say even more pagan than those of Sophocles's description of his character's death. For, if in the *Oedipus at Colonus* the messenger's account (ll. 1586–1666) does not make clear how Oedipus exactly dies,¹⁹ in Breuer's play his death is staged through his symbolic descent into the

¹⁵ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), pp. 35–36.

¹⁶ From Fitzgerald's translation: '[I] wish the wind would lift me like a dove | under the tall cloud cover | to look with my own eyes on this affray'.

¹⁷ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. 39: 'Of this I believe the furies that pursue him [Eteocles] | Were indeed the cause – so I hear | From clairvoyants whom I afterwards consulted'.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 'Father! These same oracles... | They say that those you bless | And only those... shall come to power'.

¹⁹ For Oedipus's mysterious death and its significance in the framework of the performance of the play see P. E. Easterling, 'The death of Oedipus and what happened next', in *Dionysalexandros. Essays on Aeschylus and his fellow tragedians in honour of Alexander F. Garvie*, ed. D. Cairns and V. Liapis, Swansea, 2006, pp. 133–144.

underworld on a moving platform together with the members of his quintet and the stage piano.²⁰ The death of Oedipus in the *Gospel* is thus entirely in keeping with the Greco-pagan conception of the end of life as the moment in which the soul of the deceased descends into the underworld, although such a descent into the afterlife is certainly not entirely foreign to Christian eschatology either. This passing, as well as being visually staged, is accompanied by the gospel quintet, who sings a song appropriate to the scene depicted:

*Down, down, down he goes
He goes among the ghosts
Down, down, down below –
O eternal sleep
Child of earth and hell
O eternal sleep
Sleep on, sleep on, sleep on
O eternal sleep
Let him sleep well*²¹

The invocation of eternal sleep, son of the Earth and Tartarus, is taken from the close of the fourth stasimon of the *Oedipus at Colonus* (ll. 1574–78)²² and obviously refers to a pagan divinity, just as Oedipus's descent into the underworld is precisely pagan.

After Oedipus's death, Antigone and Ismene painfully mourn their father, but a very significant Christian overturn of the situation is imminent, and it will be on this that the *Gospel* will close. After Theseus has attempted to console the two young women, first the soloist and then the whole chorus intone the following song:

*Well I'm crying hallelujah
Yes I'm crying hallelujah
I was blind, he made me see
Yes I'm crying hallelujah
Lift him up in a blaze of glory
With a choir of voices heavenly
Lift him high – lift him high – higher
Lift him high – lift him high – higher
Crying hallelujah – crying hallelujah
I was blind and now I see
Crying hallelujah
Lift him up in a blaze of glory
With a choir of voices heavenly
[...]*

²⁰ See Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. 49.

²¹ Ibid.

²² From Fitzgerald's translation: 'I pray you, even Death, offspring of Earth and Hell, | To let the descent be clear | As Oedipus goes down among the ghosts | On those dim fields of underground that all men living fear. | Eternal sleep, let Oedipus sleep well!'.

Lift him up – lift him up
O lift him up – lift him up
O lift him up – lift him up
Lift him high high high high high high high high – higher
*Lift him high high high high high high high high – higher*²³

This is a crucial point in Breuer's play: the chorus essentially invokes the resurrection of Oedipus from beyond the grave, singing a song that is obviously not present in Sophocles's text. The hallelujah, the ascent to heaven, and the chorus of celestial voices are all elements that recall an event of Christian resurrection, which is in fact what occurs on stage parallel to the chorus' singing: Oedipus and his quintet re-emerge from the underworld lifted up on the same mobile platform that had accompanied them down, visually restoring the idea of miraculous ascension upwards suggested by the choral song. At this point, all the participants in the service sing the song of jubilation in unison:

Crying hallelujah – crying hallelujah
I was blind! He made me see
Crying hallelujah
Lift him up in a blaze of glory
*With a choir of voices heavenly*²⁴

The miracle of the resurrection is completed with Oedipus regaining his sight: the verse 'I was blind! He made me see' evidently recalls the famous episode recounted in the *Gospel of John* of the man blind from birth who is healed by Jesus and who, when questioned by the Pharisees, famously replied 'whereas I was blind, now I see'.²⁵

Before the end of the play, however, Breuer seems once again to have felt the need to recall his pagan source text, by having the preacher deliver a long speech in which Oedipus's death is described along the lines of what the messenger does in Sophocles's tragedy (ll. 1586–1665). The story includes the description of a libation that Oedipus makes just before his death at a hill sacred to Demeter: the reference to a purely pagan ritual is evident, and the explicit mention of the goddess Demeter, retained in the text by Breuer, points in this direction ('From there, they [Antigone and Ismene] saw the hillcrest of Demeter, | Freshener of all things'²⁶). But once again, the director's adaptation choices are more nuanced than they might appear

²³ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), pp. 51–52.

²⁴ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), pp. 52–53.

²⁵ See *Ev. Jo. 9, 25 (King James Version)*. According to E. W. Scharffenberger, 'Oedipus at Colonus', in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Sophocles*, ed. R. Lauriola and K. N. Demetriou, Leiden and Boston, 2017, pp. 373–374, the exclamation about the recovery of sight rather recalls a verse from the famous hymn *Amazing Grace*: 'I once was lost but now I'm found | Was blind, but now I see'. This is certainly possible, considering that *Amazing Grace* is one of the best-known hymns in the Christian tradition, certainly well known to the *Gospel* audience; however, no less well known must have been the episode from the *Gospel of John*, which is perhaps the most obvious reference to assume for Breuer's line.

²⁶ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. 53.

at a first sight, and in fact at one point the preacher thus narrates about Oedipus's death:

*It was not lightning, bearing its fire
That that took him off. No hurricane was blowing.*²⁷

In Fitzgerald's English text, we read 'It was not lightning, bearing its fire from Zeus, that took him off; no hurricane was blowing'²⁸; from these verses of his source text Breuer removed the mention of Zeus. Why such a choice at this very point? Let us consider the immediately following verses, where it is said that 'some attendant from the train of Heaven | Came for him [Oedipus]'²⁹: these words of the preacher can be interpreted in both a pagan and a Christian sense, depending on whether one reads in the attendant descending from heaven a messenger of some pagan god or an angel sent by God the Father. Of course these two possible interpretations of the text would not have arisen if Breuer had kept the explicit reference to Zeus's thunderbolt in the preceding verses. Therefore, the director's idea seems to have been to blur, so to speak, the boundaries between paganism and Christianity at this point in his text, leaving open the possibility of understanding the preacher's words in both ways. This ambiguity in Breuer's text also recurs in the play every time a character uses the word 'God', in the singular, without the context making it clear whether it is one pagan god among many or the unique Christian god.³⁰ Among the many possible examples of this tendency, we can cite one taken again from the preacher's final account of Oedipus's death:

*Again and again the call came from his God:
'Oedipus! Oedipus! Why are we waiting?
You delay too long. You delay too long to go.'
This much every one of us heard God say.*³¹

In this case, who is Oedipus's god ('his God')? Zeus or some other pagan god, or rather God the Father? If we consider that we are here talking about the same Oedipus who some lines earlier in the play has just offered up a libation with the water drawn from the hill sacred to Demeter, the first option would seem the most obvious. However, the preacher's own account ends with an invitation addressed to the entire congregation in which there can be little doubt about the Christian identity of the 'God' he mentions:

*Now let the weeping cease
Let no one mourn again
The love of God will bring you peace*

²⁷ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. 55.

²⁸ These are lines 1658–1660 in Sophocles's text.

²⁹ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. 55.

³⁰ The fact that in the libretto of the play 'God' in the singular is always printed with a capital letter cannot be considered a diriment fact, because the play is meant to be staged and those who listen to the characters' speeches have no indication of whether the letter is upper or lower case. And, in any case, even 'Gods' in the plural, referring to pagan deities, is always printed with a capital initial.

³¹ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. 54.

*There is no end*³²

At the end of the preacher's narrative, these four verses are sung as a hymn by the entire religious congregation gathered in the Pentecostal church, and on them the *Gospel* closes. The line 'The love of God will bring you peace' is a manifestly Christian reworking of the final verse of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, which in Fitzgerald's translation sounds 'These things are in the hands of god' (l. 1779: πάντως γὰρ ἔχει τόδε κῦρος). In this case, it almost seems that Breuer wanted to dissolve once and for all, so to speak, the ambiguity about the identity of the generic 'God' recalled several times throughout the play: the love of God sung in the final hymn can only be that of the Christian god, benevolent and merciful even to those who have greatly sinned like Oedipus.

The *Gospel at Colonus* thus presents a Christian closure: it reflects the orientation of the second part of the play, which in fact, after the central intermission, exhibits a 'Christianising' intervention by the director on the original text that is decidedly more evident than in the first part. The desire expressed by Oedipus at the beginning of this second part to ascend like a dove or an angel towards heaven is realised, with the closure of a sort of ring structure, near the end of the performance on the occasion of his resurrection from the world of the dead. Finally, the hymn to the love of God the Father dissolves any residual tension and fulfils the cathartic function claimed by Breuer in the opening of his libretto.³³ Catharsis is precisely, according to the playwright, what can form the bridge between the pagan and the Christian culture,³⁴ and in the *Gospel* it is also conveyed by Telson's gospel music, which of course plays a key role in the success of the entire performance.³⁵ Now, catharsis is of course a concept that is too broad and complicated to be covered in a few words, but here it will suffice to emphasise its connection to the resonance of gospel music itself, which, by its very history, often sounded as a song of liberation and hope. The famous gospel performer Mahalia Jackson wrote in her autobiography:

³² Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. 55.

³³ See Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. ix.

³⁴ Ibid.: 'As was the classic Greek performance, the Pentecostal service is a *communal catharsis* which forges religious, cultural and political bonds' [My emphasis].

³⁵ A detailed technical analysis, which is beyond the scope of the present article, of Telson's original music used in the *Gospel* can be found in McDonald, 'Sing Sorrow' (n. 6 above), pp. 164–177. Also, the role of gospel music as an element with a cathartic function in Breuer and Telson's spectacle has been emphasised by numerous critics: see, among the others, A. K. Koger, 'Dramaturgical Criticism: A Case History of The Gospel at Colonus', *Theatre Topics*, 1, 1997, p. 23, and Green, 'The Revisionist Stage' (n. 6 above), p. 62: 'Telson's gospel melodies, which a reviewer called "one of the best white-man's captivations of the essence of black music since Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*," easily bridged the gap between the Greek story and the Christian setting'. For other musical reworkings of some of the most famous classical myths and tragedies, a very good starting point is McDonald, 'Sing Sorrow' (n. 6 above).

Gospel songs are the songs of hope. When you sing them you are delivered of your burden. You have a feeling that here is a cure for what's wrong. It always gives me joy to sing gospel songs. I get to sing and I feel better right away.³⁶

Yet, as much as everything in the final part of the play seems to be permeated by the redemptive force of the Christian religion, Breuer does not renounce, in the preacher's final speech, to preserve a trace of his text's pagan past, citing a ritual and a goddess from the Greek world.³⁷ This set of rituals and pagan divinities that are scattered here and there, albeit often veiled, throughout the *Gospel* text seem to give Oedipus's story a sort of archaic background, of which the elements most easily interpretable in a folkloric or metaphorical sense, such as the furies and the oracles, are retained. The antiquity of the story of Oedipus is never denied and its temporal setting is certainly to be understood as predating the coming of Christ, with respect to whom in fact there are no real anachronistic references. It is a bit as if the troubled existence of Oedipus were to be compared, as Luigi Battezzato points out to me, to the events of the Old Testament, in which there actually are some cultural and religious elements linked to paganism, and in the context of which certain behaviours by some of the *Gospel* characters, such as Oedipus's refusal to grant forgiveness to his pleading son Polynices, can become acceptable, while they would no longer be so after the coming of Christ.

More important still than the Old Testament is the awareness that the gospel tradition itself stems from distant and ancient roots that are themselves non-Christian. These roots are of course the African roots of the many Black people to whose communities the development of the American Pentecostal Christianity was closely linked between the 18th and the 20th century. The design itself of the production's major stagings was clearly Afrocentric: to the obvious element of gospel music, one

³⁶ M. Jackson, *Movin' on up*, New York, 1966, p. 72. To quote Breuer's himself words: 'I've always been interested in the idea of catharsis because I've always been a bit of a maverick. [...] I really feel that if you go one step further with cathartic theatre you might find pity and terror turning into joy and ecstasy. We have a jubilee in this, an expression of pure ecstatic joy. It may not seem typically tragic in the way we've come to understand what the tragic experience should be, but I have a feeling that catharsis can go right on through pity and terror into joy' (G. Rabkin, 'Lee Breuer. On "The Gospel at Colonus"'. Interviewed by Gerald Rabkin', *Performing Arts Journal*, 8.1, 1984, p. 48). On African American gospel music as a manifestation of faith and hope, see also W. T. Walker, 'Somebody's Calling My Name', *Black Sacred Music and Social Change*, Valley Forge, 1979, pp. 127–172, and L.-C. Harvey, 'Black Gospel Music and Black Theology', *The Journal of Religious Thought*, 43, 1986, pp. 19–37. It was precisely from the traditional gospel music that the so-called 'gospel musicals' were derived: they had a great success in US theatres between the '60s and '70s, and they are rightly identified by Gisolfi D'Aponte, 'The Gospel at Colonus' (n. 2 above), p. 102 as one of two fundamental influences behind the genesis of Breuer's musical. For a brief overview on gospel music in the context of Breuer and Telson's play see also McDonald, 'Sing Sorrow' (n. 6 above), pp. 159–164.

³⁷ The only other name of a pagan god that is explicitly mentioned in the play is that of Apollo, the god of the oracles on Oedipus's fate. These names of pagan gods in Breuer's libretto were omitted in the 1995 staging of the *Gospel* produced by Danny Fruchter for the 'People's Light & Theatre Company', a non-profit theatre of Chester County in Pennsylvania (recently revived in 2018: see J. Timpane, *It's a joyous 'Gospel at Colonus' reunion at First Unitarian Church*, 2018, <https://www.inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/arts/gospel-at-colonus-bruce-parham-first-unitarian-20180521.html>, accessed 5 September 2025). As he himself told me in a recent conversation, in his opinion, these sporadic mentions of pagan gods were absolutely superfluous in a Christian rewriting of Oedipus's story and risked producing only alienation and confusion in the audience attending the *Gospel*.

could add all the black performers who shaped the production's premiere, as well as their Sunday ceremonial outfits recalling typical African colours and patterns.³⁸ As far as the history of American Pentecostal Christianity is concerned, then, this was largely the history of many Black churches that, over the aforementioned centuries, played an important function of support and comfort for all those Black believers who, outside of that specific space, suffered constant social discrimination and exclusion.³⁹ Hospitality, social cohesion and mutual help in the face of the harshness of the surrounding environment were what many Pentecostal realities were able to offer to those men and women who would embrace their religious and human mission. Were not hospitality and support what Oedipus also sought at the end of his life in Sophocles's tragedy? But just as many Black believers often found no such help from the 'Christian' community in general, but specifically from its Pentecostal branch, so Oedipus was received and welcomed not by any pagan man or city in ancient Greece, but specifically by the Athenian elders of Colonus and their king Theseus. Athens was, in other words, the only politico-ritual community that, through the authoritative voices of its elders and its king, could welcome such a sinful man like Oedipus. The setting of the last act of Oedipus's life in the Athenian suburb of Colonus is thus fundamental to the soteriological arc of the play, both from a ritual and a political point of view, since such soteriology could not have taken place anywhere else and in any other politico-religious reality except Athens.⁴⁰ Specularly, the Oedipus of the *Gospel* asks for assistance not from any Christian community, but specifically from a Black Pentecostal congregation, as representative of a long-standing tradition of welcome and hospitality towards any person in distress. The Pentecostal, and not generically Christian, setting of the *Gospel* thus serves the soteriology of Breuer and Telson's musical as Colonus did in Sophocles's tragedy: just as in the *Oedipus at Colonus* the protagonist was welcomed and protected in Athens by an authoritative chorus of elders in their capacity of custodians of Colonus's sacred grove and of the local Athenian cults associated to it,⁴¹ so the Oedipus of the *Gospel* is welcomed into the Pentecostal church by a Black chorus representative of the authentic Pentecostal spirit of mutual assistance and consolation among all men

³⁸ See, for instance, the 1985 production at the American Musical Theatre Festival in Philadelphia, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ZyQP_zrD2U.

³⁹ On this see, for instance, M. S. Weaver, 'Maker and Redeemers: The Theatricality of the Black Church', *Black American Literature Forum*, 25.1, 1991, p. 56, who, commenting on the social role of the African American church broadly understood, writes: 'it [the African-American church] is a place where Black people come to seek a sense of order in their lives and to gain some respite from the rigors of living in American society as a disadvantaged and oppressed group. Certain cultural traits, including music and language, are affirmed in the church, as the cultural reality is interwoven with Black religion, which itself was created from African and European strains'.

⁴⁰ See, for instance, F. I. Zeitlin, 'Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama', in *Nothing To Do with Dionysus? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context*, ed. J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin, Princeton, 1992, pp. 166–167: 'Only in Athens, where the outsider may enter into a new status through rituals of supplication and political rights of residency, can Oedipus himself [...] make permanent his value to the city in the institution of the hero cult'.

⁴¹ On the importance of the chorus of elders for Oedipus's acceptance into the deme of Colonus see especially U. S. Dhuga, *Choral Identity and the Chorus of Elders in Greek Tragedy*, Lanham, Md., 2011, pp. 13–42.

and women of the earth, even the most sinful. Therefore, just as Sophocles's choice to set his last tragedy in the Athenian deme of Colonus was by no means accidental, but rather served a precise policy of celebrating Athenian politico-ritual traditions, so Breuer and Telson's choice of a Pentecostal setting for their *Gospel*, rather than a generically Christian one, seems to have been informed by a similar programme of praising the Pentecostal values of hospitality and human brotherhood as exemplified by the behaviour of the Black chorus towards a disgraced man like Oedipus.

What is key in *The Gospel at Colonus* is therefore its authors' commitment to the idea that different traditions, however chronologically distant, can come together, one accommodating the other, and lend power to one another, illuminating each other's most virtuous ideals and policies. This prospect is ambitious, and the final result is interesting from the point of view of a possible interaction and coexistence of Athenian paganism and Black Pentecostalism. In the first part of the play, this coexistence finds its way in a sort of balance between some pagan references retained from Sophocles's source text and many new Christian elements added by Breuer himself. In the second part, the Christian rewriting strategy becomes more explicit, and the final outcome of the story of Oedipus cannot leave any doubt as to the necessarily Christian—but in the *Pentecostal* sense of the word—orientation of Breuer's adaptation. It is as if between the first and second part the director wanted to prepare the final and definitive reinterpretation in a Pentecostal sense of his source text, progressively bending its pagan background by inserting verses originally written by him and permeated with Christian creed and eschatology: the dramatic unfolding of the story itself, with Oedipus's final resurrection, follows this line. The Greek protagonist, a sinful, blind and old man, had come to the Pentecostal church to find a place where he can die and rest in peace; the chorus' initial reaction of revulsion, parallel to that of the original Sophoclean chorus, towards him could also be read, in a way, as a form of scepticism towards a man who had come from so far away and with such a heavy past. Some pagan elements are retained in the musical as a kind of 'residue' of this cultural and theological friction, but the end of the play, when all the merciful brothers and sisters welcome Oedipus into the Black church in which they are gathered, loses all these tensions.

The Pentecostal reality staged in the *Gospel* therefore demonstrates to be able to accommodate the classical myth even with the weight of one of its most problematic protagonists much more easily than other forms of Christianity, where paganism is a force to resist rather than incorporate into the uplift. This generous offer to Oedipus opens the doors to his painless death and subsequent joyful resurrection, demonstrating the ability of Black gospel music—and indeed Black culture—to transcend racial as well as religious divides.⁴² Ultimately, this also shows the full potential of Breuer's transhistorical theatrical multiculturalism, as well as the power of such a message of mutual acceptance, connection and respect. In the *Gospel*, Oedipus no longer finds a new home in the Athenian deme of Colonus, but, very significantly,

⁴² From this point of view, gospel music has strong similarities with Greek tragedy itself: both of them, in fact, have a way of speaking also to communities quite distant from those for which or within which they were created, thus developing a kind of unique massive appeal that is not so common in other art forms.

in a Black American Pentecostal church. With this change it is as if Breuer and Telson wanted to suggest to their audience a possible way through which ancient pagan texts can continue to be read and performed in modern times, and not just to white atheists, as it were: Sophocles, and with him other Greek ancient authors, can find a new home in the Afro-American cultural and religious tradition, just as Oedipus reached out and was generously welcomed into the Black Pentecostal Church of Breuer and Telson's musical.

The New Oedipus of the Gospel Between Vulnerability and Redemption Power

The philological analysis pursued up to this point should have showed how the *Gospel*, especially in its second half, moves towards a sort of more and more perceivable 'Christianisation' of its original text and message: Oedipus's final resurrection and the closing hymn 'Let's the weeping cease' are clear evidence in this sense. What has just been argued on the basis of a close study of the text of the *Gospel* in respect of its Greek source is well reflected, on a broader level, in the figure of Oedipus himself, who in fact shows a significant evolution throughout the play from a vulnerable wanderer, as he was in Sophocles's original tragedy, to a redeemer of the whole of humanity through his resurrection. This evolution is foreign to the *Oedipus at Colonus*, but a better analysis of it can well give the idea of Breuer's rewriting strategy, hitherto considered from a close-reading perspective.

At the beginning of the *Gospel*, Oedipus's figure clearly recalls that of Sophocles's tragedy: Antigone evokes with some verses originally written by Breuer himself the ruin of his father's previous condition of power and prosperity:

*Majestic Oedipus!
O naked brow of wrath and tears,
O change of Oedipus!
I who saw your days call no man blest –
Your great days – like ghosts gone.
Of all men ever known
Most pitiful is this man's story.*⁴³

Oedipus has basically lost whatever he had: his wife (and mother), his political power, his land, and last, but not least, his sight. Precarity and vulnerability are probably the words that best describe the new condition of the one who was once the admired king of Thebes who solved the famous Sphinx's riddle. Now Oedipus is obliged to wander from one foreign land to another, with only the assistance of his daughter Antigone, in hopes of finding someone who will welcome him and offer a place to die. 'Who will be kind to me? Who will give alms?'⁴⁴ Oedipus asks disconsolately to his daughter echoing Il. 3–4 of Sophocles's play. And a little further on, in a passage already quoted, Oedipus sings with his gospel quintet:

⁴³ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. 8.

⁴⁴ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. 9.

*Here I stand a wanderer
On life's journey
At the close of the day
Hungry and tired
Beaten by the rain
Won't you give me shelter
All I need is a resting place
Promised so long ago.*⁴⁵

A vulnerable wanderer, hungry and tired, who is only looking for a place to rest: this is Oedipus's new condition of life, which is also emphasised, later in the play, by the hypocrite Creon, who in the middle of the gospel enters the church trying to persuade Oedipus to come back to Thebes: his body will, in fact, be necessary to protect the city from external enemies.

*Poor Oedipus.
Come home.
Your people summon you. Come home.
I grieve for your unhappiness.
I see you ravaged. A stranger everywhere,
Never at rest, leading a beggar's life,
With only a girl to help you.*⁴⁶

Now, it should be emphasised that both in Sophocles's tragedy and in Breuer's rewriting, the vulnerability of Oedipus's mortal condition is contrasted by the power he repeatedly claims to possess, both when he arrives in Colonus (the Black Pentecostal church) and when he meets Theseus and asks him for hospitality. In Sophocles's play, this power is essentially to protect the land where he will die, while in *The Gospel at Colonus*, another relevant Christian element to this 'divine' power is added. Some words spoken by Theseus after Oedipus's mysterious death are illuminating from this point of view:

*He told me to keep secret always.
This way God will preserve us from our enemies.
And hold us and our city safe forever.
We must be mindful of his suffering,
His death and his redemption. And this our land
And all our people will be blessed.*⁴⁷

Here, the two words 'redemption' and 'blessed' in Theseus's speech clearly have Christian resonance and, significantly, they anticipate the conclusion of the play, which is, as it has been said before, typically Christian. After the mourning performed by Antigone and the reassurances by Theseus about Oedipus's painless death, the chorus starts to sing calling Oedipus back from the grave. When he

⁴⁵ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), pp. 12–13.

⁴⁶ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. 26.

⁴⁷ Breuer, 'The Gospel' (n. 4 above), p. 47.

actually ascends with his quintet on a mobile platform from below, the whole congregation starts joyfully to sing and dance to celebrate the resurrection.⁴⁸ Again, this is something that has already been discussed before, but what can be noted at this point is that Oedipus's initial condition of life has now been completely overturned: from a vulnerable man with an extremely precarious existence to a sort of resurrected redeemer of humanity. At the beginning of the play, when he arrived in the church, he was in search of a place where he could die and obtain redemption for his so pitiful past. Now he has obtained it, thanks to the divine gift of resurrection, and is ready to redeem the whole congregation of believers from their pities, sufferings, unhappiness.⁴⁹ In the *Gospel*, the similarities between the figure of Jesus Christ and that of Oedipus are quite remarkable: both of them went through a long series of pains, but in the end their resurrections symbolically defeat death and sin, and offer hope to other people who are still suffering.⁵⁰

This is Oedipus's new power, radically opposed and at the same time born from his past condition of precarity and vulnerability. The final message of *The Gospel*, already quoted before,⁵¹ is very eloquent from this point of view: stop mourning and weeping, the love of God, here obviously the Christian God, has redeemed and resurrected even Oedipus, probably the most pitiful man on the earth. He is the living testimony that the love of God is incommensurable and able to overturn even the most desperate men's condition of life.⁵² To sum up: Oedipus's initial condition of vulnerability is maintained by Breuer from Sophocles's tragedy, but the Christian

⁴⁸ There is ample scope here to think about the relationship of the *Gospel* to Sophocles and Greek drama, because Oedipus's final ascent visually reverses the Greek mechanism of the *deus ex machina*, by which the god comes down from the crane among the other characters on the stage.

⁴⁹ See Albini, 'A tu per tu' (n. 4 above), p. 24: 'La tragedia di Sofocle è una delle più desolate: gli dei hanno oppresso con sciagure il protagonista e ora improvvisamente gli concedono una grazia misteriosa. Ed è un atto che implica una inspiegabile scomparsa. Nel *Vangelo a Colono* la resurrezione è il giusto compenso per tutti quelli che soffrono e l'eroe resuscita anche nella carne. Viene trasmesso, dunque, un messaggio di speranza. Non a caso, ma coerentemente l'opera si conclude con un briossissimo ballo a cui prendono parte tutti'.

⁵⁰ See McConnell, 'Lee Breuer's New American Classicism' (n. 5 above), p. 487: 'in Breuer's version, Oedipus is a kind of katabatic Christ-figure: first descending to the Underworld and then arising once more from it [...]. Breuer's Oedipus arises from his grave as the singing Oedipuses are raised back up onto the stage, but in a nod to Jesus's time on earth after his crucifixion, we also see the Morgan Freeman Oedipus come down to earth once more, to impart a final message: that of the Messenger speech from Sophocles' play'.

⁵¹ On the final hymn, see above pp. 11–12.

⁵² From the perspective of Oedipus's final redemption as depicted in the *Gospel*, it is worth remarking that a highly influential German line of interpretation represented mainly by Schelling, Hegel and later Nietzsche had already considered the end of the *Oedipus at Colonus* through Christian concepts such as reconciliation and reward: 'Hegel and Schelling represent some of the most influential statements of a strand of criticism that sees the *OC* as a drama of religious reconciliation. This is not necessarily to assimilate it specifically to Christian religion, though in practice it often has that effect. [...] Oedipus' acceptance of death and heroization can seem to look forward to the Passion, and the pervasive concern with redemption makes the work particularly powerful in a Christian context' (J. Billings, 'The Ends of Tragedy: *Oedipus at Colonus* and German Idealism', *Arion: A Journal of the Humanities and the Classics*, 21.1, 2013, p. 122). On this topic, see also G. Ugolini, 'Friedrich Nietzsche, il mito di Edipo e la polemica con Wilamowitz', *Quaderni di Storia*, 34, 1991, pp. 41–53; W. Bernard, *Das Ende des Ödipus bei Sophokles: Untersuchung zur Interpretation des 'Ödipus auf Kolonos'*, Munich, 2001, pp. 9–41, and Rodighiero, 'Una serata a Colono' (n. 4 above), pp. 93–101. These (mis)readings of Sophocles's tragedy

conclusion of the *Gospel at Colonus* determines, among other things, a significant change in the nature of the power granted to the protagonist at the end of the play. In the *Gospel at Colonus*, this power is no longer only, as it was in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, to provide political protection of the place where he will die (the land of Colonus, i.e. the Black Pentecostal Church), but, according to what has here been called the final 'Christianisation' of Sophocles's tragedy, it also becomes a spiritual power, able to offer redemption and hope, in the Christian sense, to the mourning congregation gathered there, to the public attending the show and to readers and amateur performers beyond.

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Footnote 52 (continued)

have actually influenced, more or less directly, a not irrelevant amount of bibliography flourished around the *Oedipus at Colonus* in the past century, from I. M. Linforth, *Religion and Drama in 'Oedipus at Colonus'*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951 onwards.