

## “Parthenon and Oedipus”

Simonides of Ceos is reported to have made the cryptic remark: “painting is mute poetry and poetry is a speaking picture.” His statement encapsulates a question which has plagued artists ever since language in the form of written symbols was distinguished from pictorial images; how are the visual and verbal arts alike or different? Simonides’ statement that painting is poetry and poetry is picture implies that there is some similarity between the written image and the pictorial image. Painting and poetry are similar in that they are both means of expressing ideas in the form of images. Simonides divides the two forms into “mute” and “speaking”, distinguishing them as different means of expression. The question remains; how are the two means of expression related.

Careful comparison of sculpture and drama, and analogs to painting and poetry, might answer this question. Specifically, I would like to examine the relationship between the sculpture of the Parthenon at Athens and Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex; how elements of order in sculpture, rhythm and symmetry, are related to order in Oedipus and how architectural refinements in the Parthenon parallel Sophocles’ poetic license. In comparing sculpture and drama, it is helpful to define two unifying elements of artistic expression as understood in Classical Greece. The elements are: ethos, character as formed by predetermined factors, and pathos, the spontaneous reaction of character to external forces. As a point of departure, I will examine ethos and pathos in the context of the Parthenon’s sculpture and Oedipus.

Sculpture of the Parthenon expresses fixed combinations of ethos and pathos. “Theseus,” from the east pediment of the Parthenon, exists in a permanent state of reclining. His facial expression reveals a noble character, a divine ethos. His musculature

describes a state of relaxation. But how was a synthesis of ethos and pathos achieved in drama, where masks aided in expressing the ethos of a character, but restricted variation in the expression of pathos. Pathos was not conveyed through action and gesture because action occurred off-stage and movement onstage was restricted. Events in Oedipus, such as Jocasta's hanging or Oedipus' blinding took place off stage. Pathos had to be expressed through words. "Darkness! Horror of darkness enfolding, resistless, unspeakable visitant sped by an ill wind in haste! Madness and stabbing pain and memory of evil deeds I have done!" The passionate words constitute Oedipus' reaction to his experience, his pathos. An audience combines knowledge of Oedipus' character with his reaction to experience, a synthesis of elements of ethos and pathos, to form a complete image of Oedipus. In the sense that a whole image is formed through a union of the two elements, the image of Oedipus and the divinity in relaxation are quite similar. The difference between the formation of the two images is the expression of pathos through gestures perceived by the eye and words heard by the ear. With this difference in means of expression in mind, I will discuss some common elements of drama and sculpture.

A sculpture is limited by its medium to the expression of one static moment. When faced with the problem of rendering naturally dynamic and realistic human figures, Classical Greek sculptors devised gestures for their figures that were suggestive of whole movements. Portrayal of tension in muscles combined with characteristic positioning of figures called *rhythmoi* could accomplish, in a captured moment, the sense of continuous passage of moments in time. Sculpture, although physically static, could give the illusory appearance of existing in a state of change. In the metopes of the Parthenon, for example, there is a sense of dynamic struggle between centaurs and men. The *rhythmos* of centaur

and man suggest tension and movement. Movement, which occurs over time, conveys to the viewer the passage of time. Drama faces a similar problem, although its mode of expression is speech, which occurs over a period of time. How does a dramatist, in a limited period of time, depict events occurring on a much greater time-scale?

Sophocles, in Oedipus Rex, solves the dilemma in much the same way as the sculptors of the Parthenon. Sophocles must present an audience with the story of an entire lifetime in the space of several hours. Sophocles telescopes time by choosing a *rhythmos* for Oedipus through which his whole story can be conveyed. The perspective is the moment of Oedipus' discovery of his past. Prior to the discovery, Oedipus is figuratively blind to the true nature of his character—he does not know who he is. After the discovery Oedipus sees clearly his downfall—the “fate” which he has been assigned. At the moment of transition, the whole progression of Oedipus' character can be understood.

Progression of a larger narrative order is developed through the *rhythmoi* of the Parthenon's ninety-two sequential metopes. Through a battle of men and centaurs, the Periclean ideal of triumph of man's ordered state over his barbaric and chaotic nature is developed. A Greek observer might have felt the power of this victory, as the story unfolds metope by metope. Identification with the victor's ethos through the pathos of the battle, would have ultimately resulted in the reinforcement of the Periclean ideal. The ideal or concept had to be developed through a sequence of images.

Although the focus of Oedipus is a single moment of discovery, a progression of connected *rhythmoi* which develops a concept also occurs. Oedipus unfolds in stages and the audience's perspective changes at each stage. He is first presented as a benevolent king, eager to fight the plague in Thebes. Each subsequent character to take the stage introduces

new insights while the audience observes Oedipus in a new *rhythmoi*. In the Teiresias scene, Oedipus' pathos has turned from passionate concern for the city to careless wrath. Oedipus says to Teiresias with certainty, "you are blind in mind and ears as well as eyes," but he later says, "O dear Jocasta... there comes upon me a wandering of the soul— I could run mad," "I have a deadly fear the old seer had eyes." He has lost his certainty and he is plagued by the curiosity about his origin. Different *rhythmoi* or perspectives demonstrate his fall from an assumed respectable ethos to his actual despicable ethos.

Through identification with Oedipus' "good" ethos at the start of the play, the audience also undergoes a discovery and a fall. The dramatic fall of Oedipus conveys certain abstract ideas which are internalized through identification and experience of the fall. As Parthenon sculpture can illustrate a Periclean political ideal, the dramatic fall of Oedipus can convey Sophocles' commentary about the human condition. The nature of Sophocles' commentary is a matter of speculation. Assumed knowledge of "truth" about oneself is blind pride which can result in ruin. Individuals can act without knowledge of "truth" and the acquisition of "truth" results in condemnation of past action. Cycles of *hybris* (excess), *ate* (folly) and *nemesis* (retribution) manifest themselves through powerful characters like Oedipus.

The expression of concepts and ideals is accomplished through modification of an established form. In the case of Oedipus, it is through the presentation of a well-known myth. In the case of the Parthenon, it is through the alteration of the basic design of a Greek temple. As optical adjustments were made in the architecture of the Parthenon so Oedipus' speeches were carefully contrived. The Parthenon's compensations balance distortions perceived by the human eye. Such refinements reinforced the larger ideals at work in the

Parthenon. Corner columns were thickened to counteract optical illusions and solidify the appearance of the building. Interpreted abstractly, refinements reinforced Athens' political ideals. The base of the building was designed to bow slightly upward, compensating for the appearance of a sagging façade, figuratively adding solidity and correctness to an ideal of Athenian greatness.

Sophocles did not create the myth of Oedipus, but he wrote Oedipus in a way that would present conflicts, suggest questions not necessarily contained the in the basic myth; a form of poetic license. For example, Oedipus' curse of the murder of Laius ironically reinforces his lack of knowledge of the "truth." Oedipus calls Teiresias a foolish blind man when Oedipus doesn't understand his own blindness. Use of sophisticated metaphors of sight and blindness of knowledge of truth add significance to the fall of Oedipus, ultimately reinforcing Sophocles' concepts of *hybris*, *ate*, and *nemesis*. The story of Oedipus embodies Sophocles' commentary about the human condition, expressed through poetic license and literary devices. The life of Oedipus, the discovery he endures, embodies this commentary.

Similarly, the Parthenon is a perfect embodiment of the ideals it represents. It is a combination of architecture and sculpture; highly refined and proportionate. It is a temple modified into a monument representing "the glorification of Athens as a political power and cultural ideal." It exalts, with the religiosity of a temple, order, democracy and triumph of rational man over his irrational nature.

In the course of this paper I have shown that drama and sculpture, through Oedipus and the sculpture of the Parthenon, have much in common. As forms of expression, they embody *ethos*, *pathos*, and *rhythmos*, refined to express more accurately the ideals and concepts they signify. Despite these similarities, they are very different forms of

expression. Sculpture captures and preserves, in marble, a single, transitory moment. But single moments can appear to suggest movement through characteristic positioning. Drama, composed of a sequence of moments, depicts movement and change, such as Oedipus' discovery, through the spontaneous, momentary medium of human speech.

The Parthenon represents an attempt to preserve and exalt an ideal of greatness. Athens' splendor was temporary, but the ideal of Athens' greatness was granted the appearance of solidity and permanence by refinements, just as a momentary pose suggests a whole movement. Oedipus illustrates the fall of greatness, a cycle of change, through a medium that is movement and change itself. As history has shown, Athens' greatness was transitory, and only the modification of appearances could embellish temporal greatness with a sense of permanence. The spontaneous, momentary medium of drama expresses a process of decline, the loss of greatness, which has permanent relevance so long as individuals and societies are "fated" to fall.