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Oedipus Rex

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How dreadful knowledge of the
truth can be
When there's no help in truth!
- Oedipus Rex

The people of Thebes have been stricken by a terrible plague, and in prayer and supplication, they go to their king, Oedipus. He assures them that he has already moved to discover the cause of the affliction and has sent Creon, his brother-in-law, to the oracle at Delphi to learn what should be done. Creon soon returns with the message that the plague will vanish as soon as Thebes finds and casts out the murderer of the late king, Laius. Oedipus then consults the blind prophet, Tiresias, who is hesitant to speak. After much urging and threatening by the king, Tiresias announces that Oedipus himself is the cause of the scourge and is furthermore guilty of both incest and patricide.

This accusation enrages the king and he accuses Creon of plotting with Tiresias to discredit him. Only the intervention of the queen, Jocasta, prevents further rashness and hostility among the men. In this most famous of Greek tragedies and one of the most skillfully plotted plays ever written, a man tries to defy fate by the power of his own personality, and in doing so, discovers the truth about himself.

A man's character is his fate.
- Heraclitus (c. 540-c. 480 BC)
On the Universe, fragment 121

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Glossary

Abae — Place north of Thebes where an oracle of Apollo presided.

Apollo — God of music, poetry, prophecy and medicine in Greek and Roman mythology. In this play, he is important as the source of the prophecies of the oracle.

Ares — Greek god of war.

Artemis — Goddess of the moon, wild animals and hunting in Greek mythology. She is Apollo's twin sister.

Athena — Goddess of wisdom and warfare.

Bacchus — God of wine and fertility. Also called Dionysus.

Cithaeron — Mountain range between Thebes and Corinth. Here, the place where Oedipus was abandoned.

Corinth — Ancient city in Greece located in the northeast Peloponnesus, west of central Greece. A city noted for its luxury and the home of Oedipus after his adoption.

Delphi — A town in ancient Phocis, on the slopes of Mount Parnassus; seat of the famous oracle of Apollo.

Oracle — Among the ancient Greeks and Romans, the place where or the medium by which deities were consulted.

Dionysus — God of wine and revelry. Also called Bacchus.

Dorian — A native of Doris, a member of one of the four main peoples of ancient Greece. Here, the term describes Oedipus' adoptive mother.

Hermes — God who is herald and messenger of the other gods.

Olympus — Highest mountain in Greece and thought to be the home of the gods.

Pan — God of fields, forests, wild animals and shepherds.

Parnassus — Mountain in central Greece, sacred to Apollo.

Phocis — Region in central Greece where the roads from Delphi and Daulia meet. The place where Oedipus killed Laius.

Sphinx — a winged monster with a lion's body and the head and breasts of a woman. Here, the monster plagued Thebes by devouring anyone who could not answer her riddle.

Thebes — Principal city of ancient Boeotia, in eastern central Greece and the location of the tragedy.

Zeus — Chief deity of Greek mythology, son of Chronus and Rhea and husband of Hera.

The Playwright

Sophocles was born in Colonus, a part of Athens, about 495 or 497 BC. He died about 406 BC, his life having spanned nearly the entire fifth century in Athens. During his lifetime Pericles became leader of Athens; the Parthenon was built; the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta was fought (431-404 BC), and democracy took root and flourished.

As the son of a wealthy weapons-maker, Sophocles studied poetry, music, dancing and gymnastics — subjects regarded as the basis of a well-rounded education for a Greek citizen. This early schooling prepared him to serve as a leader in all aspects of public life, including the military, foreign policy and the arts.

Sophocles lived during the Greek Classical Period (500 to 400 BC), a time of transition when political and cultural events were changing and reshaping Athenian culture. As a dramatist, Sophocles played an important

role in the creation of this civilization, which included looking backward to ancient tradition and the works of Homer, which greatly influenced him. Sophocles also studied under the Greek playwright Aeschylus whose plays had won prizes at the Festival of Dionysus.

Over the years Sophocles actively participated in Athenian political and cultural life, often in positions of responsibility. In 443 BC, Pericles chose him to be treasurer of the Delian Confederation as a sort of tax collector. In 440 BC, Sophocles served as a general at the siege of Samos, an island that challenged the authority of Athens. Despite all his public service, though, Sophocles remained first and foremost a dramatist. Upon his death a national cult dedicated a shrine to his memory.

Chronology of Important Dates

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>SOPHOCLES' LIFE</u>	<u>THE SOPHOCLEAN AGE</u>
497-496 BC.....	Birth of Sophocles.	
490		Persian defeat at Marathon.
c. 485-84		Euripides born.
480		Persian defeat at Thermopylae, Salamis.
479.....		Persian defeat at Plataea.
477.....		Delian League established.
468.....	First victory in tragedy competition.	
458.....		Aeschylus' <i>Oresteia</i> presented.
c. 456-55		Aeschylus' death.
447-32		Construction of Parthenon.
440's	Sophocles' <i>Ajax</i> performed.	
443-42	Serves as imperial treasurer.	
c. 442.....	<i>Antigone</i> performed.	
441-40	Elected general.	
430s	<i>Trachiniae</i> performed.	
431.....		Start of Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta.
429.....		Death of Pericles.
429-25 (?).....	<i>Oedipus Rex</i> performed.	
428-27		Birth of Plato.
after 420	<i>Electra</i> performed.	
415-413		Athens' unsuccessful expedition against Syracuse.
413.....	Served as special state commissioner.	
409.....	<i>Philoctetes</i> performed.	
406.....		Euripides' death.
406-405	Death of Sophocles.	
404.....		Fall of Athens and end of war.
401.....	<i>Oedipus at Colonus</i> presented posthumously.	
399.....		Death of Socrates.

Athens, Oedipus and the Fifth Century in Greece

Athens in the fifth century was the most powerful city-state in Greece and most acknowledged leader in every area of cultural activity. It was a center for philosophy, literature, architecture, sculpture and painting at a level that rarely has been surpassed.

Why was there such an explosion of creativity at this time and place? Part of the answer lies in the development of a democratic constitution at the beginning of the century; the confidence gained from defeating Persian invaders and the building up of a powerful navy; the energy and initiative of the Athenian people, and the strong, gifted but controversial leadership of one man — Pericles. Among his achievements, Pericles sponsored the rebuilding of the Acropolis, the construction of massive temples to the gods Athena and Hephaestus, and the building of long walls to connect the city with the harbor. He was the patron of Pheidias, the greatest sculptor of the time, and Polygnotus, the greatest painter. In addition, he brought to Athens the most inquisitive minds of his time. Among his friends were Herodotus, the historian, and Anaxagorus, the philosopher-scientist who speculated that a substance called Mind (Nous) governed the world and that all life “could be explained by physical processes and the interactions of material substances.”¹

Athens supported the principle of free speech where diverse currents of thought could mingle and conflict. Its wealth and intellectualism attracted the Sophists (a group of thinkers led by Protagoras) who lectured about the power of reason to solve the mysteries of

existence and to challenge the authority of spiritual powers. There was a shift from mythical and symbolic thinking so prevalent in the works of Homer, Hesiod and Pindar, to more conceptual and abstract modes of thought. For example, “the gods might be regarded as psychological forces within man — or as allegorical expressions of the forces of nature.”² Religion was deemed created by man; laws as creations of councils, not given by gods, and cities were seen as human institutions, not seats of divine power.

This new confidence in man’s power to understand and shape his world found expression in the arts. Pheidias and Polyclitus sculpted the male body in the Classical style and executed the frieze of the Parthenon, showing the citizens of Athens in a religious procession. Literary expression of this humanistic confidence is expressed in the first choral ode of Sophocles’ *Antigone* which begins “Many the wonders but nothing walks stranger than man.”³ Philosophers debated the deceptiveness of the senses and the concealment of reality beneath a false appearance. Historians Herodotus and Thucydides argued about the explanation of the oracles, the nature of the gods and the origin of religion.

But the old ways of thinking persisted alongside the new. Thus, the tragedies of Sophocles are a kind of dialogue between the older and newer ways of looking at the world. *Oedipus Rex*, for one, raises questions about the power of human reason against the mysterious forces of the archaic world.

Bernard Knox, in his book *Oedipus at Thebes*, writes “the character of Oedipus is the

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character of the Athenian people.”⁴ Both have magnificent vigor and faith in action and both engage in constant activity which provides a wealth of experience. Oedipus has great courage, as witnessed by his confrontation with the Sphinx, and Athenian courage was the admiration of all Greece.

Speed of decisionmaking and action was qualities of both the man and the city. But because of this speed and action, Oedipus, like the Athenians, was impatient with the slowness of others and the progression of events. However, swift action was tempered with careful reflection in Athens’ case. As Pericles said: “We do not believe that discussion is an impediment to action.”⁵ But Oedipus did not reflect on the words of Tiresias, Creon and the messenger. Instead, he depended on his own intelligence and self-confidence — qualities typical of Athenians who had overcome opposition and obstacles. Oedipus’ adaptability and versatility flourished in unfamiliar surroundings as did those of the Athenians. Pericles emphasized this when he said, “The individual citizen addresses himself to the most varied types of action as a self-sufficient personality with the utmost versatility....”⁶

Unfortunately, all these admirable characteristics are marred by a sense of suspicion and outbursts of anger. Oedipus suspects Tiresias and Creon of conspiracy and tells them so in anger; Athenians, too, could turn on their leaders when displeased.

Therefore, Knox concludes, “The [Athenian] audience which watched *Oedipus* in the Theatre of Dionysus was watching itself.”⁷

The Oedipus Myth

and its Interpretations

In Ancient Greece, myths were a living part of the consciousness of the average person who felt perfectly comfortable with them. Thus, writes C. M. Bowra, “myth provided the framework of drama, which illustrated in a highly concrete and cogent way some important crisis or problem...”¹

The first mention of Oedipus is in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (740-700 BC?) where the author refers to the struggle between Oedipus’ two sons for the throne of Thebes. A later account of the myth occurs in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Odysseus, recounting his adventures, tells how he saw Jocasta in the underworld. He describes her as beautiful but “in the ignorance of her own mind had done a monstrous thing and married her own son.”²

The most important treatment of the myth before Sophocles is Aeschylus’ trilogy of 467 BC which was comprised of *Laius*, *Oedipus* and *Seven Against Thebes*. In these plays, Aeschylus told the story of the kidnapping of the young Chrysippus by Laius and the curse brought on the house of Laius by Pelops, the boy’s father. For the first time in drama, Aeschylus uses the self-blinding of Oedipus along with the killing of his father and the incestuous marriage.

In Sophocles’ play the plague is mentioned for the first time and may have been influenced by the Athenian plague of 430 BC. Sophocles also adds the element of Laius piercing the baby’s feet (hence the name Oedipus which means “swollen feet”) and this action brings with it the Herdsman and the Corinthian messenger, both necessary to Sophocles’ focus on the search for a hidden truth about the hero’s identity.

The riddle of the Sphinx is an important part of the Oedipus myth. The Sphinx, pos-

sessing wings, paws and a human face, is herself a living riddle and so the appropriate figure to stand over the confused movement of Oedipus’ life. Sophocles presents his hero struggling with riddles and these are important to Sophocles’ interpretation. The answer to the Sphinx’s riddle is both “Man” and “Oedipus.” Oedipus gives the first answer to the Sphinx in events before the play begins and he gives the second answer to the audience within the play. But both answers are intertwined, as “Oedipus’ and man’s fundamental nature is always to be a riddle to himself and never to be reducible to a single, sure meaning.”³

Interpretations of and viewpoints on the Oedipus myth cover the centuries. Plutarch (552 BC) in his book *On Curiosity* writes that Oedipus is too curious and that this quality is his greatest misfortune. Hegel, a 19th-century German philosopher, saw in the myth the terms of the development of human consciousness, and in Oedipus he saw the dawning of man’s moral and intellectual awareness.

On the other hand, Friedrich Nietzsche viewed the myth as man’s guilt about his power to dominate nature. Solving the riddle of the Sphinx is solving “the riddle of nature”, but the unnatural acts of incest and patricide do violence to nature. Sir James Frazer in his book, *The Golden Bough*, sees in Oedipus the remnants of an ancient fertility god. The old king has to be killed and replaced by a younger and more potent successor.

The most influential and controversial reading of the myth in the late 19th century came from Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis. For Freud, the oracle that Oedipus receives about his parents contains the repressed wish of the unconscious. In his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes:

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“... It is the fate of us all, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so.”⁴ These words, of course, are the basis of the “Oedipus complex,” the theory that each child must somehow come to terms with the repressed infantile hatred and desire so he can mature into an emotionally healthy adult. While the Oedipus complex theory has been discussed, debunked and discussed again, Freud makes some insightful remarks on the process of discovering unconscious knowledge. “...The work portrays the gradual discovery of the deed of Oedipus, long since accomplished, and brings it slowly to light by skillfully prolonged inquiry, constantly fed by new evidence....”⁵ This “inquiry” is the foundation of psychoanalysis, the “talking cure”.

“I therefore claim to show, not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men’s minds without their being aware of the fact.”

– Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964). Overture.

The Development of Greek Theatre

For Athenians, theatre represented an essential public experience — at once social, political and religious. Theatre served as an expression of public unity, for one. Ancient Greek myth — the theme of most tragedies — not only touched members of the audience individually, but drew them together as well. The dramatization of stories from a shared heritage helped to nurture and preserve a cultural identity through times of hardship and war.

But beyond its social and political importance, Greek drama also held a religious significance that made it a sacred art.

Originally, the Greek theatre tradition emerged from a long history of choral performance in celebration of the god Dionysus. The Festival of Dionysus served as a ritual to honor the god of wine and fertility and to ask his blessing for the land. To attend the theatre, then, was a religious duty and the responsibility of all pious citizens. In addition to being religious ceremonies, dramatic presentations were contests in which first, second and third prizes were awarded. Each playwright of tragedies was required to submit a tetralogy (a group of four plays). Three were tragedies and the fourth was a lighter piece. The three plays might or might not be related to one another. Although the word “trilogy” means a group of three, it is frequently used to describe three plays about the same story or group of events. Only one trilogy has survived complete, Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*.

Drama began, the Greeks say, when the writer and producer Thespis separated one man from the chorus and gave him some lines to speak by himself. In 534 BC, records show that this same Thespis produced the first tragedy at the Festival of Dionysus. From then

on, plays with actors and a chorus formed the basis of Greek dramatic performances.

The theatre itself was simple, yet imposing. Actors performed in the open air, while the audience — perhaps 15,000 people — sat in seats built in rows on the side of a hill. The stage was a bare floor with a wooden building (called the skene) behind it. The front of the skene might be painted to suggest the location of the action, but its most practical purpose was to offer a place where actors could make their entrances and exits.

In Greek theatre, the actors were all male, playing both men and women in long robes with masks that depicted their characters. The acting was stylized, with wide gestures and movements to represent emotion or reaction. The most important quality for an actor was a strong, expressive voice because chanted poetry remained the focus of dramatic art.

The simplicity of production emphasized what Greeks valued most about drama — poetic language, music and evocative movement by the actors and chorus in telling the story. Within this simple framework, dramatists found many opportunities for innovation and embellishment. Aeschylus, for example, introduced two actors and used the chorus to reflect emotions and to serve as a bridge between the audience and the story.

Later, Sophocles introduced painted scenery, an addition that brought a touch of realism to the bare Greek stage. He also changed the music for the chorus, whose size swelled from 12 to 15 members. But most importantly, Sophocles increased the number of actors from two to three — a change that enhanced the possibilities for interaction and conflict between characters on stage.

The Mask

The mask is the earliest man-made visual realization of our dual existence: of day and night, waking and sleeping, life and death. The immobile and unchanging aspect of the mask is the face that lives without living. The application of the mask was twofold. In the early years of homo sapiens, when a warrior killed his adversary, his dried and then stuffed skin was turned into an artistic trophy. Primitive man often wore the mask of his slain enemy with the intent of absorbing his spirit. At the other extreme were the priests of early religious cults. They would don masks before stepping in front of a god's altar. The mask may have been used to create more readily the mysterious tie between the priest and the divine spirit, but mainly it helped the priest shed his humanity and create a "spiritual" identity.

The stage masks of Greek and Roman antiquity were of several kinds—comic, tragic and satiric—and were called "personae." In Greek tragedy, particularly, the mask gave an indication of age, station and the prevalent mood. We know of 30 masks made for tragedy, including old men, young men, divinities and servants. The crudest and oldest masks were made of tree bark; others were made of leather lined with cloth. Some were constructed of light wood to ensure the preservation of the model. The mask was proportioned to the size of the amphitheatre so that it could be seen

clearly from the most distant seats. The vocal volume was increased by strips of brass fastened inside the mask near the mouth, or else the lips of the mask were widened and exaggerated to form a crude megaphone. Seen at close range, all the masks looked frightening, but if they had not been so crudely fashioned, they would have seemed without features from a distance.

Man is least himself when
he talks in his own person.
Give him a mask and he'll
tell the truth.

– Oscar Wilde

The Greek Chorus

There is always a Chorus in Greek tragedy; in fact, tragedy began with choral songs to which actors were added.

Almost always present, the Chorus fulfills a number of functions. The splendid poetry of many of the odes or songs contribute to the spectacle of performance, the continuity of theme and the emotional effects of the play. It is like another actor, showing us the communal background of the action. Greek tragedy assumed that no life is entirely private and that the community's fortunes are linked with the individual and vice versa. Because Greek tragedy is a public art form, the chorus reflects on such issues as the nature of authority, justice, the worship of the gods and the pull between civic responsibility and individual desires.

Although the major divisions of the plays are not indicated in most English translations, the choral odes are set apart. The Chorus was usually divided into two groups, giving a balanced visual effect on stage. The first lyric they sing is called the "strophe" (movement) and the second the "antistrophe" (counter-movement). The afterpiece is called the "epode" and an exchange or lamentation between the chorus and an actor is called a "kommos."

In *Oedipus Rex* the chorus assumes the role of wealthy, prominent men of Thebes. They have been living there since Laius' day, so they know the past, but are not necessarily old. Their first impression is one of uncertainty and a desire for truth about the plague that is wasting them. The sufferings they face are not just personal, but affect the whole city. Thus, they are portrayed as responsible leaders and representatives of the citizens of Thebes and their songs use military metaphors. The exchanges with Oedipus are like a consultation between a concerned ruler and his counselors, a cooperative effort in a search for answers. Following the confrontation between

Creon and Oedipus, the chorus continues to express their concern for the city and display their reliance on reason, evidence and common sense.

As advisor to the king, the chorus assists in the progression of the drama, but Sophocles also uses it to establish a contrast with the king. He seems to compare the chorus' plodding common sense with Oedipus' brilliant intuition, its caution with the king's bold passion. Members of the chorus are loyal to the king, but when Oedipus begins to veer from his civic responsibility to his personal fate, it is their duty to remind him—and the audience—of the consequences. As representatives of the body politic, they say at the end of their final ode, "from you I drew breath [of life] and through you I have closed my eyes [in death]."

Oedipus: A Tragic Hero for our Time?

The hero of my tale, whom I love with all the power of my soul, whom I have tried to portray in all his beauty, who has been, is, and will be beautiful, is Truth.

– Leo Tolstoy, *Sebastopol*,
May 1855

In Charles Segal's lengthy study of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, he writes that Sophocles created the form of the "tragic hero" in Western literature: "a figure whose force of personality and integrity set him [or her] apart for a special destiny and enable him to confront that destiny with clarity and courage after a painfully won struggle for self-knowledge."¹

Bernard Knox in his book *Oedipus at Thebes* almost agrees with Segal but inserts the power of the gods when he writes that "Oedipus had a special destiny, an invulnerability to ordinary calamities.... His greatness [at the end] is now based on knowledge of man's ignorance ... and aligned with the powers that shape destiny and govern the world."²

In his essay on "Fate, Freedom and the Tragic Experience," Ian Johnston, writing in 2000, says a "hero is likely to be someone who confronts fate in a very personal manner and whose reaction to that encounter serves to illuminate for us our own particular condition."³ Johnston then proceeds to elaborate on the qualities that make Oedipus a hero. From the very beginning of the play, Oedipus has

an enormously powerful sense of his own excellence and the people demonstrate their confidence in him by asking him to stop the plague. He saved the city once before using his intellect to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, so past experience reinforces their belief in and regard for him. When Oedipus receives the oracle's report, he says he will find Laius' murderer and his words reassure the people. But Oedipus, in accepting this responsibility, will share the problem with no one else. "As a measure of his own greatness, he will resolve Thebes' distress and he will do it openly for all to see."⁴

That's why he dismisses Creon's suggestion that he listen to the oracle's report in private; he is taking on the task as a personal challenge and will share all information publicly. He answers only to himself, to the standard by which he measures his own greatness. Therefore, Johnston wonders, is it Oedipus' desire to help his city or his desire to manifest his own greatness? Johnston concludes that Oedipus has little political sense and will do and say everything openly. Oedipus is someone with "the view that his conception of what matters is, in fact, the truth."⁵

When Tiresias, the blind prophet, says Oedipus is the curse on the city, the king interrupts him to remind everyone of his previous triumph over the Sphinx (stressing that Tiresias did not help Thebes then) and will not consider more complex possibilities. His sense of right is based on his past achievements. At the heart of his greatness is Oedipus' enormous self-confidence. We could criticize that as a flaw, but without this self-confidence, "this absolute trust in his own power to act

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decisively, publicly and quickly, Oedipus would be like the chorus, impotent in the face of crisis....”⁶

Oedipus’ actions make the play compelling and increasingly tense in irony by the fact that we, the audience, know the truth. But Oedipus doesn’t and he freely chooses to initiate the chain of events which eventually lead to his fate. The interplay between Oedipus’ sense of freedom and our knowledge of the outcome is the battle between fate and free will and sets up the main dramatic power in the play. Oedipus thinks he has gained the knowledge that a man does not have to submit to fate; that thought is abhorrent to him and, possibly, to the play’s modern audience. But even with all his excellence and past success, Oedipus doesn’t know enough about what “fate is really like to recognize what it has in store for him.”⁷ And when he finally discovers the truth about himself, which he set in motion, it will be he who determines his own punishment.

Then is Oedipus a “tragic hero”? The reexamination of his personality might help. First, Oedipus chooses to defy fate by making his own decisions his own way and living with the consequences. Secondly, he is a man committed totally to his own freedom to be what he thinks he must be, to live up to his standards of heroic greatness. If an obstacle gets in the way such as Tiresias, that obstacle must be removed. Third, he has an enormous ego and he must assert that sense of himself. But “with this powerful ego comes a narrowness of vision, which has no room for alternative opinions or dissenting views....”⁸ However, he is prepared to accept the consequences of his actions; he does not blame the gods because

he remains the master of what happens to him. The force of the play comes from the connection between Oedipus’ suffering and his own freely chosen actions.

We admire Oedipus for his qualities of freedom and integrity, but we question his attitude: “the expression of his own freedom, to demand that the world answer to him rather than the other way around.”⁹ The human being who sets himself up to live life only on his own terms, as the free expression of his own will, is going to come to a self-destructive end. There is no happy ending because the tragic hero rarely displays intellectual or emotional flexibility.

Segal says that we read *Oedipus* because the play asks: “Why do our lives turn out to have the shape that they finally have?”¹⁰ Sophocles opens up a myriad of possibilities: the circumstances of our birth, our character, parental nurture, sheer luck, a wrong decision at a crucial moment, a mysterious destiny. Finally, in a 21st-century viewpoint, Johnston suggests the play may be “a prophetic insight into the nature of our own human confidence in our ability to confront fate. Perhaps, we in our scientific confidence, our optimistic spirit with which we think we can deal with fate, may turn out to be like Oedipus....”¹¹

Fate versus Free Will

“Lead me, Zeus and you,
Fate wherever you have
assigned me, I shall follow
without hesitation; but even
if I am disobedient and do
not wish to, I shall follow no
less surely.”

—Cleanthes.(c. 330-232 BC)
from Epictetus, *Enchiridion*,
sec. 53.

The Chorus is the instrument that chants prayers to the gods Zeus, Apollo, Athena and Artemis, describing the horrors of the plague. It begs for deliverance from the gods, thus confirming its belief in higher powers. When these men hear Tiresias’ accusation that Oedipus is the murderer of Laius, they stand by their king but still recite an ode which continues the theme of belief in spiritual power as contrasted with the practice of reason and common sense. The final resolution, the self-blinding of Oedipus and his yielding to his fate, serves to confirm the Athenian belief that no one can withstand the blows of fate, anymore than one can avoid death. Even the action and determination of the king fails. The pity and terror aroused by Oedipus’ tragic fall brings about a catharsis, the realization that the power of fate cannot be overcome by will—even the will of a king.

In his essay, “In Sophoclean Tragedy, Humans Create Their Own Fate,” Frank Jevons writes that Sophocles was more concerned with man than with gods. “It is difficult to always realize that Sophocles knew nothing of the free will controversy and

consequently felt no alarm at fatalism.”¹ But Sophocles shows how men run to their fate by their own free will. Oedipus is warned by Apollo of his doom and he fulfills it, but all his acts are his own and not of the gods. “The lesson as well as the art of Sophocles is that man’s fate, though determined by the gods, depends on man’s actions and his actions on himself and his circumstances.”² The gods may warn man, but man will do whatever he wants to avoid the warning. The heavens may speak, but man will not listen or understand. If we can’t blame Oedipus, we can’t blame the gods. Thus, “for Sophocles, fatalism was consistent both with free will and with the justice of the gods....”³

Tragic **Flaw** or **Flawed** Personality?

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle writes of the good man “whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous—a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes or other illustrious men of such families.”¹ He continues to elaborate that “the change of fortune should be... from good to bad... and come about as the result...of some frailty.”²

In the last century, some scholars have come to doubt this theory of “the tragic flaw.” Sophocles went out of his way to present Oedipus as an extremely capable, beloved administrator. “The playwright never suggests that Oedipus has brought his destiny on himself by any ‘ungodly pride’ [hubris] or ‘tragic flaw’ [hamartia].”³ Other scholars, including Bernard Knox, write that not one trait of Oedipus is designated a tragic flaw, but the actions that produce Oedipus’ catastrophe stem from all sides of his character, of the total man. And the total man, as Aristotle wrote, is more good than bad.

Knox is supported by Charles Segal. In the confrontational scene of Tiresias and Oedipus, both men lose their tempers and their shouting just goes past each other. “Rather than providing a basis for a tragic flaw, this scene is the play’s most dramatic enactment to this point of the tragedy of knowledge: truth is trapped in illusion and in the disturbances of language and emotion.”⁴ The difference is in their beliefs: Tiresias looks toward the gods whom he serves, the king toward reason and the human motives that he can understand.

In a somewhat irreverent but intelligent analysis of *Oedipus*, Daniels and Scully in their book, *What Really Goes On in Sophocles’ Theban Plays* assert that Oedipus

does not ask six significant questions that have clung to him before the plague arrived in Thebes. They are: “1. Where did the scars on my ankles come from? 2. Who are my real parents? 3. How can I best avoid killing my father and marrying my mother? 4. Is this old man who forced me off the road and rudely swatted me from his carriage my father? 5. Who killed the king whose throne I have just been given? 6. Is this widow I am about to marry my mother?”⁵ The more we learn as the plot unfolds, the more it becomes clear that Oedipus’ one intellectual success, solving the riddle of the Sphinx, was a fluke.

In Daniels and Scully’s opinion Oedipus has a mistaken pride in his investigative skills, loves the limelight, and has a huge ego that thirsts for acclaim. In addition, he is extremely defensive when he perceives a threat to himself or his reputation. In summary: “Oedipus is an unintelligent macho posturer.”⁶

“The flaw, or crack in the character [of Oedipus] is really nothing—and need be nothing—but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status. Only the passive, only those who accept their lot without active retaliation, are flawless. Most of us are in that category.”

—Arthur Miller⁷

Activities

1. What is the relationship in this play between fate and free will?
2. The people of Thebes turn to Oedipus to save them again by ridding them of a terrible plague. Sophocles may have written this play shortly after a great plague which struck Athens; Thucydides' *History* presents a powerful depiction of this plague. Compare the two and how they function in each text.
3. The people of Thebes call upon the Healer Apollo. What does Apollo have to do with healing? Why should Oedipus consult this god's oracle?
4. Consider: does Oedipus strike you as arrogant or is Oedipus a case of the saying of that great philosopher and baseball great Dizzy Dean: "It ain't bragging if you can do it"?
5. After Creon enters and tells the words of Apollo, note the discrepancy between the number of outlaws in the account of each character. Why do you think Oedipus says "thief" while Creon says "thieves"? This will happen again later.
6. The Chorus calls on a series of gods for help. Why invoke these gods in particular?
7. Find at least three instances of dramatic irony. Why does Tiresias refuse to help Oedipus?
8. Why can't Oedipus understand the information Tiresias gives him?
9. Read carefully Jocasta's account of her loss and then Oedipus' reaction to it. Does anything in his reaction strike you as strange? Consider this especially in light of the almost identical story he tells later in the same scene. Why doesn't Oedipus make a connection?
10. Why is the connection between Oedipus' name and his ankles so important?
11. At what point do you think that Jocasta begins to suspect the truth?
12. When the Shepherd arrives, why won't he talk willingly?
13. When Jocasta runs off stage, Oedipus thinks she is afraid he will be proven a peasant. Why does this idea make him so happy? And how does Jocasta seem to you now?
14. Aristotle believed this was the finest tragedy because the protagonist's recognition of the truth coincides with the reversal of his fortunes. Where, exactly, does this occur in the play?
15. What was Oedipus trying to do when he finds his wife-mother dead?
16. Is blinding an appropriate punishment? Why doesn't he commit suicide?
17. How would you describe Oedipus' state of mind and attitude? Does anything surprise you about the way he views his disaster?
18. Think about the Chorus' near panic about him, its complete inability to respond coherently to his presence.
19. Is Creon fair to Oedipus? Consider especially his admonition.
20. Why are Oedipus' daughters in particular so special to him?
21. What effect has blindness had on his knowledge?

Colorado Model Content Standard for Reading and Writing

1. Students read and understand a variety of materials.
2. Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences.
3. Students write and speak using conventional grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.
4. Students apply thinking skill to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.
6. Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.

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