

Zeus Reigns:  
Ate, Tragedy, and Catharsis  
in Oedipus the King

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## Introduction

The period 480-323 B.C. is heralded as the Golden Age of Greece, and it has every right to be so considered. It was this span of a century and a half, for instance, in which Herodotus wrote his chronicles. During this period, too, Socrates and Plato and Aristotle propounded their time-honored philosophies.

As History and Philosophy reveled in their achievements of the age, so too did Theater--in the persons of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. These playwrights' tragedies seem sufficient reason to term this period the "Golden Age of Drama" as well, with only some risk of applying a misnomer.

In this paper I will offer a glimpse of the genius of this age by treating Sophocles' Oedipus the King. More specifically, I am undertaking a study of Oedipus as tragic hero and explaining the impact of the tragedy on the spectator or reader, since story and response are unalterably linked.

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The critic of Greek tragedy cannot be insightful unless he has some understanding of its connection to Greek religion. Early Greek tragedy has as its origin the myths, which were dramatized to illustrate such themes as sacrificial death and purification.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, performed tragedy was public ritual. At the semiannual Festival of Dionysus, for example, the two days of ritual culminated in drama. Tragedy was the servant of religion. Religion, of course, presumes a theology; consequently, each tragedy-ritual made an existential statement to the Athenian audience.

It appears that in his theology Sophocles is a mouthpiece for the popular view of his time. According to Evelyn Abbot, Sophocles upholds the complete power of the gods, their hands shaping man's lot.<sup>2</sup> Sophocles depicts Zeus's kingdom as somehow based on moral law;<sup>3</sup> yet the fact remains that Zeus himself has a history of acting immorally: the anthropomorphic myths entailed his being an adulterer with Semele and Danae and Alcmena.<sup>4</sup> Even though Zeus is regarded as "father" in Greek piety, there is no mention of mutual love between the creator and his creatures, which leads Abbot to conclude of the God-man relation: "The picture is severe, even in the

most favourable light."<sup>5</sup>

The Greeks, in sum, viewed their deities as omniscient and omnipotent as well as capricious; consequently, they were a god-fearing, self-conscious people. The guilt and anxiety they harbored were commensurate with their scrupulosity: given their human imperfections, they felt they could never appease the gods.

A universal theological conundrum confronted by the Greeks, as manifested in the tragedies, is this: If the gods know all that is to happen and control the execution thereof, does man have free will? To what extent is he responsible for his actions? Is man a mere plaything of the gods? Does he merit for himself welfare or ruin, or do the gods' incomprehensible whims--fate--determine his fortune? These are crucial questions, everyday questions, questions that must be addressed.

No medium offered itself so suitably to exploring answers to these questions as did tragic drama. The throngs of spectators were compelled to identify with the plight of the tragic hero, who was the expression of a possible answer to the same questions to which they were subjected. Oedipus was--and continues to be--one such hero.

The gods' capriciousness can spell destruction for man. Walter Kaufmann, in his Tragedy and Philosophy, declares of Oedipus the King:

The most widely accepted interpretation of this play

is that it is a tragedy of fate. It is seen as a futile struggle to escape ineluctable destiny.<sup>6</sup>

That this theme is preeminent is evident in the very diction of the characters. The omniscient Chorus, for instance, can see divine hostility at work in Oedipus:

Apollo lunges at him  
his infinite fire branching out everywhere  
and the steady dread death-hungry Fates follow  
and never stop  
their quick scissors seeking the cloth of his life.<sup>7</sup>

The shepherd realizes that Oedipus was saved for "a fate so horrible, so awful, words can't describe it" (p.77).

Jocasta speaks of the "mysterious whims of the gods" (p.52). The priest likewise shows the thematic conditioning of the lexis as he refers to Thebes' seizure by the Sphinx as one of the "mysterious, strange disasters hammered against us by the gods" (p.25).

Oedipus himself knows well the force of fate. In addressing Laios' death, the king remarks that "fate swooped out of nowhere and cut him down" (p.35). He knows that the plague on the city has been wrought by the gods (p.34). Once he sees the truth about himself, he exclaims, "O Zeus, Zeus, what are you doing with my life" (p.57). Oedipus laments his "wandering through the mazes of a fate like this" (p.58), but when the mazes become less labyrinthine he pities himself

even more as one destined: "What force, what tide breaks over my life? . . . Fate howling out of nowhere" (p.84). Probably the most pregnant illustration of the gods' disfavor is the hero's assertion of himself as "the man more hated by the gods than any other man, ever" (p.85).

"Fate" in the above citations does not refer merely to bad things that just happened to befall Oedipus; rather, it means a predestination by the gods of biting misfortune, downfall, ignominy. The seer Teiresias declares starkly to Oedipus, "You, you and your fate belong to Apollo. Apollo will see to you" (p.40). Oedipus is forced to believe him after his true identity is revealed: "Apollo, it was Apollo, always Apollo, who brought each of my agonies to birth" (p.85). Precisely in order to claim an action as his own, Oedipus stabs out his eyes--but ironically even his blindness had been prophesied.<sup>8</sup> The overwhelming tone of predestination is writ large in Oedipus' outcry to Jocasta as the facts point to incest:

Wasn't I born evil--answer me!--

isn't every part of me unclean?

Oh some unknown god, some savage venomous demon

must have done this,

raging, swollen with hatred. Hatred for me (p.60).

After the facts are conclusive, Jocasta does heed her husband's admonition to answer him. "God help you, Oedipus," is all she can muster, "you were born to suffer, born to misery and

grief" (p.71).

At this point it must be considered whether Oedipus, through a fault of his own, brought the gods' wrath on himself. Aristotle held that the tragic hero meets misfortune as a result of some character "flaw," or hamartia.<sup>9</sup> What is the flaw in Oedipus?

The initial speech of Oedipus reveals his compassionate soul. In seeking a resolution to the plague, he addresses the Thebans as follows:

How can I help? Ask.

Ask me anything. Anything at all.

My heart would be a stone

if I felt no pity for these poor shattered people  
of mine kneeling here, at my feet (p.23).

"My whole being wails and breaks for this city" (p.26), he says, and the Chorus later laud him as "wise and sweet to the city" (p.46). His motives are wholly pure. From his lips comes the dictum that "no work is more nobly human than helping others, helping with all the strength and skill we possess" (p.37).

Unequivocally flawless, too, is Oedipus' piety. He sends Kreon to Delphi, asking rhetorically, "What kind of man would I be if I failed to do everything the god reveals" (p.26)? The concern of the king is "justice and vengeance"--- and he wants them not for himself but "for Thebes, for the god." In sincerity he pledges to do everything commanded by

the oracle for the salvation of all through Apollo (p.29).

If Oedipus is full of love and piety, why do incest and wrath become his lot? Posited by some readers as Oedipus' tragic flaw might be his stubbornness in the quest for knowledge of Laios' murderer. Oedipus deserves to be exonerated from such a claim, however. The plague will only be nullified once the murder is solved. When put into context, the insolence is proof of his piety, his fidelity to duty as king of the state.

Other readers of the play might maintain that Oedipus deserved his fate because of the primordial Greek intellectual-moral vice, rashness.<sup>10</sup> The most frequently cited instance of this alleged flaw is his slaying of Laios and the retinue, this being seen as a crime demanding retribution, thereby justifying Oedipus' downfall. First of all, one of Laios' attendants initiated the violence by shoving Oedipus off the road. Moreover, in the fight that ensued it was the father who first struck the son, the latter only subsequently dealing a blow--a single blow, which proved to be fatal (pp.59-60). "Murder" in such a case is really an inaccurate term: Oedipus, no doubt, did not intend to kill the men. While it is true that his own hands killed them, it is also true that he was acting in self-defense, as only a courageous man could when outnumbered so. Oedipus' nobility can be seen even in this event and its aftermath, as he does not readily recall the incident. He is admirable in refusing himself the intemperance of gloating over past heroic feats.<sup>11</sup>



A second exhibition of rashness, some believe, is Oedipus' implication of Teiresias and Kreon in a plot to overtake the throne. But is not the implication a matter of logical thinking rather than of rashness?<sup>12</sup> When Teiresias declares "You, you are the killer you're searching for" (p.40), Oedipus cannot help but think him mad. After all, the oracle was "very clear," Kreon had reported: "Avenge the murderers of Laios. Whoever they are" (p.28, emphasis added). The report from Delphi of a plurality of murderers gives plausibility as well as justification to Oedipus' suspicions. Besides, if Teiresias is so knowing, why didn't he answer the riddle of the Sphinx? And Kreon, as the prophet's conspirator, would be young enough to take over the state as a figurehead.

The character of Oedipus is impeccable, then, if one accepts the arguments in refutation of stubbornness and rashness as his hamartia. S.M. Adams has made this point more bluntly:

There seems to be a tendency to seek in Oedipus some hybris [flaw of arrogance or abusiveness] to account for all that happens. It is not there.<sup>13</sup>

If Oedipus does not effect his own demise, though, who does?

Here we must look to the efficient cause of the action. We find that it is none other than Ate, the divine hostility that brings men to ruin. The gods' disfavor with Oedipus looms boldly in an issuance of doom: the age-old curse on the House of Cadmus (in myth, Oedipus' great-great grandfather)

that is part of the play yet outside it. In Oedipus the King the curse is concretized in the oracle of Apollo, and it is the oracle that generates the action with its puissant plot.

Edith Hamilton explains that the curse over the House of Cadmus was a genuinely mysterious one. The gods helped Cadmus establish the city of Thebes. Cadmus married Harmonia, daughter of gods Ares and Aphrodite. The gods were pleased with the match, sanctioning it by their presence at the wedding. But Hephaestus fashioned a necklace as a gift for the bride--and thereby hangs a tale. The necklace, "for all its divine origin, was to bring disaster in a later generation."<sup>14</sup> In short, the curse was purely arbitrary.

The capricious curse on Cadmus, of course, is not without ramification for Oedipus. André Michalopoulos, longtime student of Greek tragedy, has this insight into the transmission of curse from generation to generation:

The original curse which plays so great a part in Greek legend is similar, in its apparent unfairness, to the idea of original sin more familiar to us, for by its agency succeeding generations pay the penalty for ancestral crime.<sup>15</sup>

But why should Oedipus inherit the curse when there is no Adam in his ancestry? He is forced to face up to retribution, not for "ancestral crime," but for ancestral bad luck.

There are some questions, furthermore, that need to be raised about the oracle. While the youth Oedipus is in the

household of Polybus, a drunkard at a party calls him a "bastard." Polybus assures him the outburst was a fluke, but Oedipus speeds to Delphi to inquire of his true origin. The Oracle will not disclose it. It will only say that he's destined to kill his father and marry his mother (p.59). According to tradition, even if it is the wrong time to consult the Oracle, the Delphic spirit is to forewarn of that time, a time when it would be silent or even tell falsehoods.<sup>16</sup> But alas, in the writings of Sophocles "men are even divinely deceived in order to bring them the more certainly to their ruin."<sup>17</sup> Oedipus is told a truth, but not the whole truth. The oxymoronic divine corruption has led Kaufmann to state that Oedipus the King "questions the justice of the gods more hauntingly than any other tragedy."<sup>18</sup>

The prophecy had come to Laios and Jocasta before Oedipus was born. They were the first to attempt to circumvent the oracle's consummation. After their failure, Oedipus himself takes action to preclude it. Obviously, both Oedipus and his parents had noble, pure motives in their efforts to undermine the oracle. Who can despise those who do everything in their power to deter a fate whose calling-card is incest and death? Who can blame Oedipus for entertaining the passion that he should "never see those words, those dreadful predictions, come true" (p.59)? In fact, Oedipus shows more faith in the oracle by trying to thwart it than he would show were he to traipse blandly back to those who he had every reason to believe were his parents. Oedipus, in seeking to frustrate

the oracle in piety, fulfills it in shame.

How utterly and truly tragic this is.

This incompatibility of intention and outcome underlies the ubiquitous ironic thrust of the play. By virtue of its power we speak proverbially of "Sophoclean irony." Aristotle praised Sophocles for his masterful plot construction, and indeed Oedipus the King claims for itself such cogency because "the whole plot is itself built on the irony of fate, where the engineer is hoisted with his own petard, and the very means which should bring safety brings only ruin."<sup>19</sup>

Ford Madox Ford, in The March of Literature, complains that Oedipus is not really a tragic character, since he has no Aristotelian-defined flaw. He concludes that the play is thus an "almost insupportable tragedy."<sup>20</sup> What could be farther from the truth? It is precisely because Oedipus is guiltless that his fate is so tragic. That Oedipus gains his doom through moral integrity is not flippantly paradoxical. It is a fact--a tragic fact.

A servant asserts near the end of the play, "The griefs we cause ourselves cut deepest of all" (p.80). Oedipus did not truly cause his grief, except in the technical sense that he performed the actions leading to it. Rather, his grief is more accurately the unintentional fulfillment of the arbitrarily disseminated oracle. His is "the story of human blindness leading human effort to checkmate itself."<sup>22</sup> His strength of will is subverted by, simply, a bad destiny.<sup>23</sup> By portraying a guiltless sufferer, of course, Sophocles proffers

for exhibition a universal theological conundrum. What is to be made of the horrors allotted to the Jobs of the human race? C.M. Bowra poses one answer:

King Oedipus shows the humbling of a great and prosperous man by the gods. This humbling is not deserved; it is not a punishment for insolence, nor in the last resort is it due to any fault of judgment or character in the man. The gods display their power because they will. But since they display it, man may draw a salutary lesson . . . : that men must be modest in prosperity and remember that at any moment the gods may destroy it.<sup>24</sup>

Bowra points to the fact that since a logical connection between innocence and suffering will never be found, a metaphysical account must be sought. For Sophocles, suffering befalls the guilty and the guiltless alike. The noble suffering of unmerited doom, he wants to tell us, is the stuff of character aggrandizement. The singular injustice must bow to the furthering of mankind's moral mettle.<sup>25</sup> This ideal would be wholly stagnant, however, were it not effected--however piecemeal--through cathartic design.

The audience, witnessing the humiliation of a man not unlike themselves, are inextricably woven into the skein of Oedipus' plight. By arousing pity and fear, Aristotle dogmatized in the Poetics, tragedy brings "relief" (AKA catharsis) of such emotions, pity being evoked by beholding "unmerited

misfortune" and fear by the "misfortune of a man like ourselves."<sup>27</sup> This explains why Oedipus the King is so overwhelmingly stimulating.

The efficacy of tragedy's catharsis is due to a great extent to the very essence of art. Art breaks through the confines of time-conditioned existence, allowing the artist to concentrate a wealth of meaning into a minimum of space or time.<sup>28</sup> With the tautness of the form of tragedy (especially that of Sophocles), mimesis allows for a purity of action unequaled in "real life." It is the catharsis which turns an isolated story into a captivating experience.<sup>29</sup> The Athenian audience did not just intellectualize about the fall of Oedipus, they fell with him, as does the modern reader. Theretofore repressed in their psyches, fears and self-pity and uptightness found an outlet through "histrionic sensibility."<sup>30</sup> The servant who reports Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus' self-blinding, then, speaks not only to those within the play but to those without as well: "You will shudder with disgust and try to turn away while your hearts will swell with pity for what you see" (p.83).

The audience experiences purgation when Oedipus finally meets his nemesis. Sophocles' masterful ironical entanglement has finally come to its denouement. The doom known to the spectators from the outset, already visited, has at last been recognized by its victim. Oedipus discovers in dread that he is his siblings' father and his mother's husband. Once the quintessence of the beneficent ruler, he now wallows obliviously in abasement. Each of the onlookers is instilled with

fear for his own security as he mentally joins in the Chorus' pity:

We are you  
 we are you Oedipus  
 dragging your maimed foot in agony  
 and now that I see your life finally revealed  
 your life fused with the god  
 blazing out of the vast nothingness of all we know  
 I say  
 no happiness lasts nothing human lasts (p.78).

The crowd is stricken ever so forcibly by Oedipus' apprehensiveness. "I live in fear," he states. "This fear is necessary. I have no choice" (p.67). The fear is not only necessary for him; it is necessarily contagious. Empathizing with the extraordinary suffering of an innocent person, the audience is fatigued by the assiduity of emotional involvement of such intensity.

It is this, the audience's vicarious confrontation with Ate, that results in their experience of catharsis. Their feverish excitement turns into angst-filled exhaustion as they are reminded of their appointed place in the scheme of Existence. They glean that the allotting of fate is the gods' domain, that questioning the deservedness of it is not worth the effort, that even the holiest of purposes may accrue perdition.

But this fear, this pity, this angst, thus aroused, is

assuaged. Aleatory divine hostility, after all, is not contingent upon a man's nobility; the pious and the impious alike are potential targets of Ate. The viewer of Oedipus the King is left to fester in mystery, reminding himself at once bitterly and consolingly that there is no necessary connection between position and merit. The man of self-pitying abjection, therefore, is relieved that he may not have issued his own plight. The man of high office and wealth, on the other hand, is freed from the shackles of paranoia; if his prosperity is fated to collapse, it will do so regardless of his fearing so. Passions are alleviated in catharsis. Stoicism reigns; obsequious submission to the gods requires it.

Jocasta, prior to the illumination of identities, exhorts Oedipus to mitigate his relentlessness in uncovering the truth. Her argument is that the gods alone can know anything of the future, that anxieties are hence moments of futility. Her advice confirms her conviction: "It's best to live in the moment, live for today" (p.66). The argument, for all its logic, falls nonetheless on unreceptive ears.

At another time, however, Oedipus finds Jocasta's limp body. He impales his eyes with her brooches, blinding himself in repulsion of what he now sees so clearly. In passionate resignation he asks to be exiled. Utterly subjugated, Oedipus echoes the very injunction he once could not condone. The purged man's parting words to his daughters embody the ultimate message to an equally purged audience:



I give you this prayer--

Live,

live your lives, live each day as best you can (p.93).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, W. Hamilton Fyfe, trans. and introd., The Poetics, by Aristotle, ed. T. E. Page, et al. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. xv: "Tragedy arose as a means of interpreting the saga stories in the light of a later morality."

<sup>2</sup> "The Theology and Ethics of Sophocles," in Hellenica, ed. Evelyn Abbot (London: Rivingtons, 1880), p. 40. Cf. Aristotle in chapter 15 of The Poetics, p. 57: "For we ascribe to the gods the power of seeing everything."

<sup>3</sup> Abbot, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Tragedy and Philosophy (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> Sophocles, Oedipus the King, trans. Stephen Berg and Diskin Clay, introd. Diskin Clay, gen. ed. William Arrowsmith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 45. All page references, hereafter parenthetically cited in my text, will be to this edition. I have maintained a fidelity to this

translation's punctuation.

It is important to note that the description of the Fates, while metaphorical in our understanding, was literal in the anthropomorphic Greek imagination.

<sup>8</sup> Teiresias, in speaking of Laios' murderer, had prophesied: "Now he has eyes to see with, but they will be slashed out" (p. 44).

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, chapter 13 (p. 47).

<sup>10</sup> All of the following comment on how the hamartia is both intellectual and moral in essence: Kaufmann, p. 62; S. M. Adams, Sophocles the Playwright (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), pp. 18f; and Fyfe in The Poetics, p. 117.

<sup>11</sup> Kaufmann, p. 129.

<sup>12</sup> Adams (p. 82) explains that inherent in the notion of tyrannos, sole ruler, is suspicion of overthrowers.

<sup>13</sup> Adams, p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> Mythology (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1969), p. 255. Cf. Clay in his introduction to the text: "The only emotion attributed to the gods of the Oedipus is anger and their hatred for Oedipus. There is nothing in Sophocles' treatment of his life and family that could explain that hatred" (p. 13).

<sup>15</sup> "Oedipus," Encyclopedia Americana, 1957 ed.

<sup>16</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, fourth-century theologian and historian, in Frederick William Henry Myers, "Greek Oracles,"

in Hellenica, p. 479.

17 Abbot, p. 45.

18 Kaufmann, p. 133.

19 F. L. Lucas, Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics (London: The Hogarth Press, 1949), p. 91.

20 The March of Literature (New York: The Dial Press, 1938), p. 115.

21 See Adams, p. 19 and p. 82.

22 Lucas, pp. 104f.

23 C. M. Bowra, Sophoclean Tragedy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), p. 200.

24 Ibid., pp. 175f.

25 Abbot, p. 65.

26 Aristotle, chapter 6, p. 23.

27 Aristotle, as interpreted by Martin Kallich, et al., eds., Oedipus: Myth and Drama (New York: Odyssey Press, 1968), p. 271.

28 Kaufmann, p. 78.

29 H. D. F. Kitto, "Catharsis," in The Classical Tradition, ed. Luitpold Wallach (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 146.

30 Alister Cameron, The Identity of Oedipus the King: Five Essays on the Oedipus Tyrannus (New York: New York University

Press, 1968), pp. ix-x. Cf. Clay, who speaks of the "repressed feelings created by tight family and civic bonds" (p. 16).

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