Oedipus: From Man to Archetype

In this excerpt, Martin Kallich explains the myth of Oedipus and how it is represented in Sophocles's dramatic work.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* [*Oedipus Rex*](c. 427 B.C.) ... the supernatural agency that dominates the action is Apollo. Unfortunately, however, there is no certainty concerning meaning of the role of the Apollonian god in Sophocles' work. Apollo appears to use a man of noble, innocent, and pious nature to undermine social and religious values, despite his horror of sinning against them. But it is obvious that interpretations of this fundamental conflict between the irresistible power of destiny and the sacredness of natural ties will vary, depending upon what tone is read into the richly human and ambiguous lines. Here a representative selection from the vast resources of Sophoclean scholarship, particularly the work of modern American and English scholars, will made in order to illustrate the diversity of interpretation and provide a basis for understanding the adaptations of the creative writers.

Sir Richard Jebb, taking the traditional position in the nineteenth century, sees in Oedipus a symbol of modern man facing a religious dilemma. Both Oedipus and Jocasta, he points out, do not reject the gods—both are reverent, both believe in the wise omnipotence of the gods. But, on the other hand, both also reject the gods' moral ministers—Oedipus, the prophet Tiresias, and Jocasta the priests at Delphi. Oedipus, Jebb states, is a rationalist, intellectually self-reliant; Jocasta, likewise, is a sceptic who questions the reliability of the oracles. Considering their views, Jebb feels that they represent a "spiritual anarchy" that not only unbalances the "self-centered calm" of Sophocles' mind but also endangers "the cohesion of society." Thus, through their experience, "a note of solemn warning, addressed to Athens and Greece, is meant to be heard." But Jebb concludes by reading into the drama the nineteenth-century problem of adjusting religious faith to the findings of science: "It is as a study of the human heart, true to every age, not as a protest against tendencies of the poet's own, that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* illustrates the relation of faith to reason." Jebb's view is interesting because it illustrates in scholarship the possibility of accommodating the myth to changing life—in general, the attitude of the later imaginative critics of the myth. The modern trend in Sophoclean scholarship, however, is historical in orientation, for the scholars look at Sophocles' work not in the light of universal values but in the light of the ancient Greek past, particularly that of Sophocles himself in the Periclean Athens of the fifth century.

For example, Sir John Sheppard, the first to demonstrate carefully the possibility of presenting Sophocles' opinions in fifth-century terms, relates ancient Greek meanings given to the maxims of the Delphic oracle, "Know Thyself" and "Nothing Too Much," to an understanding of Oedipus' character, and concludes that they provide the final moral of the play. Sheppard interprets the philosophical theme of Sophocles' play as a mild agnosticism or neutral fatalism. Oedipus, he declares, behaves normally, commits an error in ignorance, and brings suffering upon himself. "Sophocles justifies nothing.... His Oedipus stands for human suffering. His gods ... stand for the universe of circumstances as it is.... He bids his audience face the facts.... Oedipus suffers not because of his guilt, but in spite of his goodness."

Sir Maurice Bowra also synthesizes the two Delphic maxims, his point being that Oedipus has learned that he must do what the gods demand, and in his life illustrates what the Platonic Socrates means when he says the commands "Know Thyself" and "Be Modest" are the same. Oedipus finds modesty because he has learned to know himself: "So the central idea of a Sophoclean tragedy is that through suffering a man learns to be

modest before the gods." Bowra argues that Sophocles' *Oedipus*, reflecting such tragic contemporary events (noted by Thucydides) as a catastrophic plague in Athens and an unsuccessful war with Sparta, as well as a current disbelief in the oracles, dramatizes a conflict between gods and men. He concludes that "Sophocles allows no doubts, no criticism of the gods.... If divine ways seem wrong, ignorance is to blame.... For this conflict the gods have a reason. They wish to teach a lesson, to make men learn their moral limitations and accept them," (*Sophoclean Tragedy*, [Oxford], 1944). But Bowra appears to be too committed to supporting the religious establishment, and as a result misses the subtle and humane questioning suggested in the dramatic situation. For example, is not a very critical irony intended by the dramatist when Jocasta's offering at the altar of Apollo on center stage is seen still smoking at the time the messenger inform us of her suicide by hanging? Another such irony may be intended in the *epilogos* when Oedipus, blind and polluted, craves to be sent out of the land as an outcast only to have Creon reply that Apollo must first pronounce. This need not only suggest respect for the power of the god; it may also suggest the god's failure at empathy. For it is as if the dramatist were asking Apollo to show a little charity, love, and forbearance towards erring man.

On the basis of such evidence, Cedric H. Whitman takes issue with Bowra. He states that the picture of a pure and pious Sophocles never questioning the oracles and serenely supporting the traditional belief in the Greek theodicy is completely wrong. Sophocles, Whitman believes, appears in the *Tyrannus* to have suffered a loss of faith; he is bitter, ironic, and pessimistic because of the irrational evil perpetrated by unjust gods on a morally upright man who wishes to be and do good. Whitman's point is that the ancient Greeks used the gods to explain where evil came from, especially that irrational evil which seemed to have no cause or moral meaning. Thus Sophocles was doubting the moral trustworthiness of the Greek gods: "The simple fact is that for Sophocles, the gods, whoever they are, no longer stand within the moral picture. Morality is man's possession, and the cosmos—or chaos—may be what it will." Sophocles dramatizes the theodicy "with a kind of agnostic aloofness. Sophocles was religious rather than pious" (*Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism*, [Cambridge], 1951).

Such, briefly, are a few of the more significant prevailing views in American and English scholarship concerning Sophocles' handling of the myth in his masterpiece. They demonstrate, despite differences of opinion about Athenian life and Sophocles' character, that the meaning of the myth in the *Tyrannus* derives from the society and culture of Athens during the fifth century, and that Sophocles accommodates the basic story not only to his own time but also to his personal ideological and spiritual needs. So, depending upon how the critic reads the complexities and ambiguities of Athenian culture and the author's tenuous character, Sophocles, in this play about King Oedipus, is impious or pious. But whatever the stand on Apollo and his oracles that Sophocles has really taken, there is no doubt about the depth, conviction, and art with which he expresses his credo. These qualities have always been admired, and, as a result, the form in which Sophocles has cast the myth has often been imitated.

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