

## Oedipus: Possibly the Greatest of all Tragedies

In this essay, Jennifer Lewin argues that the story of Oedipus qualifies as the greatest of all tragedies.

*Oedipus Rex* is arguably the most important tragedy in all of classical literature. Ever since Aristotle used it in his *Poetics* in order to define the qualities of a successful tragedy, its strengths have been emphasized again and again by countless notable authors, whose remarks illuminate the play's historical reception as much as they help us to understand the broader critical climate in which they wrote. When Freud, for example, helped to shape the direction of twentieth-century thought with his 1900 *The Interpretation of Dreams*, his coinage of the term "Oedipal Complex" was an integral part of his definition of dreams and imaginative literature as representations of wishes that usually remain hidden during normal social interaction. For Freud, then, Oedipus's predicament dramatizes the desire of every man to marry his mother and kill his father, but whereas most people tend to harbor or hide these feelings, Oedipus unknowingly acts them out. While still remaining extremely controversial, his theory's suggestive placement of Oedipus in closer psychological proximity to his readers throughout history raises fundamental questions about possible relationships between literature and reality. Other twentieth-century scholars have occupied themselves less with these issues than with local readings of the play's characters, its plot, structure, and, finally, what it can teach its readers about religious values and human knowledge in fifth-century Athenian culture, a moment of great historical importance for its artistic achievements as well as its political culture.

The character of Oedipus has historically inspired a combination of fascination and repulsion. It is generally acknowledged, however, that he is to be admired for many reasons, and especially for demonstrating, as a responsible leader, his desire—from the very opening lines of the play—for honesty and directness in approaching the problem of Thebes's plague. In the Prologue, when he asks the priest to speak for the petitioners before him, he does so with majestic generosity: "Tell me, and never doubt that I will help you / In every way I can; I should be heartless / Were I not moved to find you suppliant here." The Priest responds to him with equal magnanimity, praising Oedipus for his past achievements (he solved the riddle of the Sphinx, sent to Thebes as divine punishment for Laius's sins) and pleading for the help that the capable Oedipus has proven he can provide. Oedipus's position of power in relation to the Priest is extraordinary; as C. H. Whitman pointed out in *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism*, pagan culture customarily reversed those roles: "The appeal of the priest, with its moving yet dignified description of the general suffering, is especially remarkable in that it is an inversion of the usual situation, in which the secular ruler consults the priest or seer about divine things, as Oedipus later consults Teiresias."

The scene establishes Oedipus as a ruler not with divine intuition (the Priest also says "You are not one of the immortal gods, we know"), but with the intellectual prowess to ameliorate Thebes's grave situation. A later exchange between Creon and Oedipus and the first scene's dialogue between Teiresias and Oedipus, in which Oedipus presses both figures publicly to utter the oracular knowledge they possess (but are extremely reluctant to offer) show Oedipus as extremely eager to gain the knowledge that will help to rid Thebes of its ills. In her recent study of Sophocles, *Prophesying Tragedy: Sight and Voice in Sophocles's Theban Plays*, Rebecca Bushnell agrees that the play establishes Oedipus as someone "who believes in speaking freely, but he is not content merely to speak himself; he also forces others to speak." Oedipus shows fearlessness in the face of turmoil, and his unstoppable quest for public utterance of the truth of the oracle leads him, tragically, to the knowledge that he has fulfilled its terms. His perception of his responsibilities as king, however, have led him to be compared to Pericles, the

ruler when Sophocles lived and wrote, remembered for heroically facing the most famous epoch of war and civil strife in Athenian history.

Oedipus has also been noted for possessing a less desirable quality related to his desire for disclosure, and that quality, *hamartia*, is an ancient Greek concept that B. R. Dodds, in *Greece and Rome*, classified as "sometimes applied to false moral judgments, sometimes to purely intellectual error." Hamartia can be understood to refer to the all-too-human limitations possessed by the tragic hero, his faults that make him less than perfect but not blameworthy in any moral sense. While he may have flaws (like the heel of Achilles), we cannot attribute his downfall to them. Oedipus's impatience with Teiresias's attempt to withhold the contents of the oracle, for example, led him to suspect the prophet of conspiring against him on behalf of Creon. He calls Teiresias a "sightless, witless, senseless, mad old man."

A. J. A. Waldock related Oedipus's hamartia to his approach to oracular knowledge. In his *Sophocles the Dramatist*, Waldock wrote: "he was in fault for not perceiving the truth, now he is in fault because he is too urgent to see it." In other words, Oedipus's eagerness to use his mind to act upon and thereby to solve every problem he encounters, when taken to its logical extreme, leaves no room for the gods' influence over the fate of man, an idea considered somewhat heretical in a culture which places much emphasis on, and had faith in, the role of the gods in shaping man's destiny. Readers such as W. P. Winnington-Ingram, in *Sophocles: An Interpretation*, have criticized Oedipus because he "trusts his intellect too much and must learn how fallible it is."

Ultimately, while we can regard Oedipus as both admirable for his leadership skills and noble intentions and imperfect for his overconfidence and harsh treatment of others, he is a figure whose fate inspires pity and terror because of his ability to endure misfortune. He blinds himself in an act of self-punishment and self-protection, since he is deeply horrified by his own crimes and unwilling to face others' gazes: "After exposing the rankness of my own guilt, / How could I look men frankly in the eyes?" Rather than ending his life, Oedipus lives to bear the weight of two curses, one imposed on his family line by the gods and the other self-imposed when he announces his intention to send Laius's murderer into exile. Dodds nicely captured the pathos of his suffering: "Oedipus is great, not in virtue of a great worldly position—for his worldly position is an illusion which will vanish like a dream—but in virtue of his inner strength: strength to pursue the truth at whatever personal cost, and strength to accept and endure it when found."

Notably, the end of the play does not show Oedipus leaving Thebes; although we see him ask Creon again and again to lead him into exile, the play ends with him being led into the palace, into a private space and away from a public domain polluted by his presence. In a detailed discussion of the last scene, M. Davies wrote in an issue of *Hermes* that it leaves our vision of Oedipus as a commanding figure very much intact: it "shows him still acting spontaneously like a king, in the old imperious manner, although the once equivalent temporal power has now fallen away."

In order to understand both the protagonist and the play itself in the larger context of fifth-century Greece, it is important to consider the conflicting roles of oracular knowledge and Athenian self-confidence in their culture's perception of man's place in the universe. At the time of the Peloponnesian War, oracular knowledge was often doubted because the oracles came from Apollo's shrine at pro-Spartan Delphi; the messages often reflected an anti-Athenian bias. In an essay on *Oedipus Rex* in *Homer to Brecht: The European Epic and Dramatic Traditions*, Paul Fry noted that "around 427 B.C., when the play was first acted, the priests of Apollo were out of favor because Apollo's oracles considering the Peloponnesian War were all pro-Spartan."

While this historical fact does not mean that the Priest and Teiresias would have been ridiculous figures for the play's first audiences, it does mean that Oedipus's skepticism would have been understood and sympathized with. In the context of the very different times of turmoil that the play depicts, however Oedipus's disbelief may have appeared slightly more threatening, since, as Bushnell argued, Oedipus has no system of belief other than his own intellectual power with which to replace oracular knowledge: "Tiresias's arrival initiates the conflict between Apollo's signs and Oedipus's voice—a conflict that strikes at the roots of the city's order, which is based on the cooperation between sacred and secular interests. Oedipus seems to threaten directly the stability that the fulfillment of oracles represents, without establishing any new structure." In the plot thus conceived, Apollo's oracle is truth and Oedipus chastises himself for having believed otherwise: "Oedipus, damned in his birth, in his marriage damned, / Damned in the blood he shed with his own hand!" As an efficacious tool by which to shape human destiny, the power of oracular knowledge is retained by the gods, while Oedipus is able to reach lyrical heights in expressing the tragic consequences of being confined in such a world.

In ancient Athens, dissatisfaction with oracular knowledge was coupled with a growing sense that, in the words of Protagoras, "man is the measure of all things." Self-confidence in man's ability to order and rule his world reached even new heights under the leadership of Pericles, whose extensive training in sophistry and lack of fear in the gods led him to be a highly persuasive thinker who inspired in his subjects a sense of man's ability to accomplish limitless goals. For Sophocles's contemporaries, Oedipus's intellectual prowess was probably strongly reminiscent of Pericles—his eloquence and devotion to his country in a time of upheaval were legendary, and his investment in public building projects (the Parthenon among them) employed laborers and inspired artists to create beautiful memorials to their epoch.

While Oedipus's affection for Thebes is of a very different nature, his expression of care is moving: "Let me purge my father's Thebes of the pollution / Of my living here, and go out to the wild hills, / To Kithairon, that has won such fame with me, / The tomb my mother and father appointed for me, / And let me die there, as they willed I should." His desire to "purge [his] father's Thebes" and move mentally and physically towards death provides a powerfully cathartic closure for the play. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the philosopher Nietzsche wrote of the spirituality of this final scene, its ability to leave audiences with a sense of rejuvenation: "Sophocles understood the most sorrowful figure of the Greek stage, the unfortunate Oedipus, as the noble human being who, in spite of his wisdom, is destined to error and misery but who eventually, through his tremendous suffering, spreads a magical power of blessing that remains effective even beyond his disease."

Source: Jennifer Lewin, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997.