

Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will

OEDIPUS REX : DESTIN, VERITE, ENTETEMENT

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Abstract: The myth of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* is revolved on the three interactive perspectives of fate, truth and self-will, making the play a most remarkable one in the fifth century Greece when all the plays focused on the manifestation of God's will under which man's behavior was undoubtedly directed. What gives the play its tragic intensity is not the horror it arouses of patricide or incest but the meaning of fate that God bestows to Oedipus in his endeavor of truth seeking. What's most important, it is the sentimental self-will of Oedipus that makes the play distinguished from other plays during the age of Sophocles' and makes him an outstanding figure in the fifth century Greek. Though Sophocles' plays could not detach themselves from the influence of religious requirement, namely, the divine will, a theme prevailing during his age, he endeavors to present a comparatively different approach of morality, a refusal to compromise of the hero's fate confined by god in literary works of the fifth century Greece. It seems that Sophocles employs the oracles not for the sake of worshipping the Gods, but rather, for the presentation of man's inner strength seeking truths about the conditions of life or about human character based on truth.

Key words: fate, truth-seeking, self-will, oracle

Résumé: Le mystère d'Oedipus Rex de Sophocles réside dans les trois perspectives interactives : destin, vérité et entêtement, qui rendent ce drame l'un des plus remarquables du XVe siècle de la Grèce où toutes les pièces se consacraient à manifester la volonté de Dieu par laquelle le comportement de l'homme était incontestablement guidé. Ce qui donne à cette pièce son intensité tragique, ce n'est pas la horreur de parricide ou d'inceste, mais le sens du destin que Dieu accorde à Oedipus dans sa recherche de vérité. Ce qui est le plus important, c'est l'entêtement sentimental d'Oedipus qui distingue cette pièce des autres de l'époque de Sophocles et le rend la plus célèbre figure du XVe siècle de la Grèce. Bien que les pièces de Sophocles ne puissent se détacher de l'influence de la demande religieuse, à savoir la volonté divine- un thème prédominant de l'époque, le dramaturge a cherché à présenter une approche relativement différente de la morale, un refus de faire le compromis sur le destin du héros déterminé par Dieu dans les ouvrages littéraires grecs du XVe siècle. Il semble que Sophocles emploie l'oracle non pour vénérer Dieu, mais pour montrer la force intérieure de l'homme dans la recherche de la vérité sur les conditions de vie ou sur les caractères humains basés sur la vérité.

Mots-Clés: destin, recherche de la vérité, entêtement, oracle

PLAY OVERVIEW

Some twelve years before the action of the play begins, Oedipus has been made King of Thebes in gratitude for his freeing the people from the pestilence brought on them by the presence of the riddling Sphinx. Since Laius, the former king, had shortly before been killed, Oedipus has been further honored by the hand of Queen Jocasta.

Now another deadly pestilence is raging and the people have come to ask Oedipus to rescue them as before. The King has anticipated their need, however. Creon, Jocasta's brother, returns at the very moment from Apollo's oracle with the announcement that all

will be well if Laius' murderer be found and cast from the city.

In an effort to discover the murderer, Oedipus sends for the blind seer, Tiresias. Under protest the prophet names Oedipus himself as the criminal. Oedipus, outraged at the accusation, denounces it as a plot of Creon to gain the throne. Jocasta appears just in time to avoid a battle between the two men. Seers, she assured Oedipus, are not infallible. In proof, she cites the old prophecy that her son should kill his father and have children by his mother. She prevented its fulfillment, she confesses, by abandoning their infant son in the mountains. As for Laius, he had been killed by highwaymen years later at the junction of three roads on the route to Delphi.

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This information makes Oedipus uneasy. He recalls having killed a man answering Laius' description at this very spot when he was fleeing from his home in Corinth to avoid fulfillment of a similar prophecy. An aged messenger arrives from Corinth, at this point, to announce the death of King Polybus, the supposed father of Oedipus, and the election of Oedipus as king in his stead. On account of the prophecy Oedipus refuses to return to Corinth until his mother, too, is dead. To calm his fears the messenger assures him that he is not the blood son of Polybus and Merope, but the foundling from the house of Laius deserted in the mountains. This statement is confirmed by the old shepherd whom Jocasta has charged with the task of disposing her babe. Thus the ancient prophecy has been fulfilled in each dreadful detail. Jocasta at the horrible realization that she has laid with her son hangs herself and Oedipus stabs out his eyes. Then he imposes on himself the penalty of exile which he had promised for the murderer of Laius.

1. GOD'S POWER

In *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles uses oracles to reveal the formation of Oedipus tragedy that finally leads to his ruin, which conveys to us the message that God's will is not to be neglected by the humans living in the religious world, even though powerful humans can doubt God's will and testify the truthfulness of the oracles through truth seeking, which is the revelation of man's free will, a self-mastery of one's own fate. It also seems impossible that anybody can escape the fate decided by God, and the result of such misbehavior will only bring disaster to humans. "We cannot, however, entirely overlook the possible religious element in Sophocles' use of oracles and the effect that this element may have upon his plays"(Kirkwood, 52).

As is revealed in *Oedipus Rex*, the people of the fifth century Greece in the religious world were strictly controlled by the gods. Gods' power was so tremendous that people were haunted with great fear of punishment that would come upon them if they did something against gods' will. People lived under the doctrine that no one would get away with their misbehavior without being punished, which undoubtedly would initiate great sufferings as human power is inadequate armor to protect against suffering. Anyway, powerful as the divine oracles are, literally, they are just ways of presenting the truths, or rather; they simply declare what will happen without giving the reasons or revealing the truth. In this sense, I should say the oracles are very obscure and sometimes misleading. As Vernant puts it, "In tragedy, the oracle is always enigmatic but never lies. It does not deceive man but allows him the opportunity to err" (Vernant, 105). This proclamation accounts for the acts of the characters in *Oedipus Rex* who are compelled to carry out some misbehavior in fear of the

fulfillment of oracles. One example is Oedipus' natural parents who gave him away after he was born, fearing that the oracle that he would kill his father and marry his mother would be fulfilled. It seems ridiculous from the perspective of modern people that Oedipus' natural parents would decide to have their newborn baby killed simply because the oracle told them something that was going to happen. It's obvious that Oedipus' parents were weak and obedient before the gods and would not dare to challenge the authority to testify the truthfulness of the oracle. They even didn't bother to find out the truth whether their son who was supposed to bring catastrophe to the family was really killed or not, otherwise the whole tragedy of Oedipus and their family would be avoided. Their act is a revelation of their feeble character in face of Gods and thus forms a sharp contrast with Oedipus' stern character.

Oedipus is destined to error and misery despite his wisdom. Oedipus' outstanding features of his character from the beginning are his self-confident pride and independent mind in his own wisdom, which displays its full strength in his quest for truth. He is a great man who tries to master his own fate. Such greatness lies in his inner strength to pursue the truth, accept and endure the horrible fate brought about by his horrible deeds that have been committed according to divine prediction, and thus human greatness is set against divine power. However, Oedipus' two features in his character make him err: being too sure of himself and too self-confident in his judgment. He is not inclined to question his own interpretation of the facts. Besides, being proud by nature, he invariably wants to be the master under any circumstances. His complex character persistently prevails in his truth-seeking and directs his truth-seeking process.

2. OEDIPUS' SELF-WILL IN SEEKING THE TRUTH

The action of Oedipus' truth-seeking begins when Oedipus heard at a feast at Corinth that he was not the natural son of his parents. As a person of swift action and great insight, he was curious about his origin and went to Delphi to ask the oracle for the truth. But Apollo made no answer to the question regarding his origin, instead, he told him that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Horrified by the announcement of the oracle Oedipus fled Corinth where he grew up and where his parents ruled as King and Queen, making the first part of oracle fulfilled by unknowingly killing his natural father, Laius, on the way to Thebes. Then, he went to the city Thebes and became the king of the city by solving the riddle of Sphinx, completing the second part of the oracle by marrying his own mother. Thus Oedipus committed his crimes that would lead him into darkness, though all these actions were done in his ignorance. It is my assumption that his fate of killing his

father and marrying his mother is not at all his own fault, but the fault of the gods, who deliberately and constantly conceals the truth (his real origins) from him and leads Oedipus to commit crimes that are unforgivable to him and torture him for the rest of his life.

The process of Oedipus' truth-seeking comes to a climax when he is obsessed with such eagerness to find out the murderer of the former King of Thebes so that he can save Thebes from the plague as the oracle prophesies. From this we can say that Oedipus is full of compassion, sense of justice and candor. He asks his people if anyone knows who killed Laius, promising that the person who knows the truth will be rewarded and the murderer will receive severe punishment. He also proclaims that if that person is a member of his own family, that person should be struck by the same exile and harsh treatment that he has just wished on the murderer. He sends for Tiresias, a great prophet who is blind and is supposed to know who the murderer is. At this phase of the play, Oedipus is still kept in dark about the whole truth, about the relationship between his past and present situation, about forthcoming disaster he is going to bring to himself. It is ironical that the prophet is blind though he can see the truth while Oedipus has his sight but cannot. When he learns that Laius and his group were killed by a gang of robbers and all died but only one survived and escaped, he goes astray in assuming that this man is an assassin hired by the Theban conspirators. Oedipus comes closer to the truth, but he becomes preoccupied with this assumption and presses the seer Tiresias for information. Tiresias, who knows the awful truth, evades his questions, and Oedipus suspects him of collusion with the murderer. Finally, when Tiresias can no longer contain his rage but retort, "I say that you are the murderer whom you seek" (Sophocles, Scene I, Line 203), Oedipus becomes more and more entangled in his misconceptions, accusing even Creon, his brother-in-law and co-ruler who recommended Tiresias to come to tell the truth, of conspiracy with Tiresias to overthrow his throne. Here, we can easily see that Oedipus is confusing his fantasy with truth, or in other words, he is much blinder than the physically blind prophet about the truth, though he taunts Tiresias for his blindness. Though Tiresias has laid the truth out plainly before Oedipus, the only way Oedipus can interpret the prophet's words is as an attack, and his quest for information only seeks to confirm what he already believes. We can perceive that the process of Oedipus truth seeking is directed by his own free will, based on his own understanding of the oracle, instead of the facts.

It seems nobody would like to believe the truth that it's Oedipus who killed the former king, or rather, everybody is trying to hide the truth from Oedipus, unconsciously or consciously, because when Oedipus explains to Jocasta how Tiresias condemned him, Jocasta responds that all prophets are false. People around him hope Oedipus should relieve himself of this

burden, and let the mystery go unsolved. Oedipus can't release himself from this obsession, not even his wife can stop him from overcoming the immense obstacle of resolving his question. Probably, Jocasta seems to have sensed something unfavourable to Oedipus from the prophet's claim, otherwise it is of course not reasonable for Jocasta to say that all prophets are false as prophets are supposed to know the truth and to be closely associated with gods' will. Jocasta tells Oedipus, "For God's love, let us have no more questioning! Is your life nothing to you? My own is pain enough for me to bear" (Sophocles, Scene III, Line 257). But as Oedipus is preoccupied with the mystification of his birth, and the death of Laius, he is striving for the truth. Oedipus replies, "I will not listen; the truth must be made known" (Sophocles, Scene III, Line 267). As a proof, Jocasta gives the facts that the Delphic oracle told Laius he would be murdered by his son, while actually his son was cast out of Thebes as a baby and Laius was murdered by a band of foreign brigands at a place where three roads met. Here, Jocasta, just like Oedipus, not fully aware of the truth about her own baby son's fate, has given some hint to the truth, in other words, against her initial intention of helping Oedipus to get rid of all these worries about the fact that he has killed the former king, she has helped to reveal the truth that will bring catastrophe to her and Oedipus. Jocasta's mistake is similar to Oedipus' because she also confuses illusions and evidence. As to Oedipus, he begins to doubt about the truth now when Jocasta tells him that the former king was killed by a gang of robbers at the place where three roads crossed. He becomes uneasy, for he, on his way to Thebes, killed all of the travelers in self-defense.

But people of Thebes are not aware of the truth and it is Oedipus' hope that he may conceal the truth from the others and will not be identified as the murderer. Here, human complexity of character is fully exposed: fear and cowardice. Strong-willed as Oedipus is, he also possesses the weaknesses of human nature, namely, fear to face reality when the truth is found out that is unfavorable to his fate. So he clings to the false report that the king was killed not by one man but by several robbers, if this is so, he can pronounce himself free from guilt. He sends for the survivor of the murder despite Jocasta's doubt on the reliability of oracles, hoping this man may prove him innocent. As it turns out, the former king was killed by only one man. Now, Oedipus truly believes he killed Laius and is willing to accept not only the responsibility both the punishment for the act.

3. OEDIPUS' TRAGIC FATE

If we say the truth finding of Laius' murderer is not wholly a tragedy for Oedipus, nor is it a decisive factor that would bring Oedipus to his ruin, his worrying and truth seeking of the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother really decides his fate. Though the

truth about the murderer of the former king is finally out, Oedipus' doubts about prophecies have not yet been confirmed, and the second phase of his truth-seeking commences. He is now worrying about another prophecy: will he kill his father and marry his own mother? However, this process of truth-seeking is interrupted by the arrival of a messenger who arrives from Corinth to announce the death of King Polybus and the election of Oedipus as king in his stead. At this moment, Oedipus and Jocasta are very excited for they find now it seems that the first part of oracle has not been fulfilled, as Oedipus' father died of natural causes. There still remains one thing that worries Oedipus: will he marry his mother? This is the second part of the oracle to be testified. As he says, maybe the oracle has been fulfilled figuratively; perhaps his father died of grief for his absence. But he's still worried about marrying his mother. When he tells his worries to the messenger, the man just tells him that he doesn't have to worry about marrying his mother because he is adopted. His worry is not groundless as the identity of the baby left in the hand of the shepherd, or rather, his own identity, is still a mystery. Oedipus seems irresistibly driven to ask questions until the truth is out, or, he is unable to face directly the reality of his origins—reconceiving his identity, which allows him a sense of control over it. But this sense of control proves rather weak and useless before powerful gods as his fate is doomed from the very beginning.

What is unknown to him is that tragedy is approaching him as he strives to find out his own identity. It is through the messenger's narration that Oedipus' identity is hinted. Smart as he is, Oedipus is slow to see the truth concerning his own origin. It is Jocasta who has realized exactly what has happened. Has Jocasta succeeded in preventing him from making further inquiry, Oedipus' tragedy would have been avoided. But as a man of strong self-will, Oedipus' desire to learn the truth about his origins lies so deep within him that he wouldn't give up until everything is clear to him. Perhaps it is because of his strong character that he refused to believe that his fate would be under the control of gods or he is endowed with the power to change his own fate. No matter what it is, the truth is he succeeds in finding out the truth concerning the prophecies but fails to change his own fate. Though he refuses to believe in the oracle, it is himself who makes the second part of the oracle fulfilled against his own will: he has killed his father and married his own mother. The blow comes with such a great force that he broke down with a loud cry: "Ah God! It was true! All the prophecies! – Now, O Light, may I look on you for the last time! I, Oedipus, Oedipus, damned in his birth, in his marriage damned, Damned in the blood he shed with his own hand!" (Sophocles, Scene IV, Line 137).

The consequences of this discovery of final truth are tragic. Oedipus' inner strength to pursue the truth at whatever personal cost and accept it fails to enable him

to be a perfect man. To some degree, we can also say that there are traits of both bravery and cowardice in his character. Though he is brave enough to seek truth and bear the consequences brought about by the discovery – exile of himself from the city as he has promised, he has no courage to face it. He chooses to blind his eyes so that he would never see any truth anymore. The inner conflicts Oedipus has experienced are so intense that he is at a loss as how to solve all the contradictions of reality. Probably the best way for him to solve all the problems is escape. In this sense, Sophocles created a tragic hero in Oedipus Rex, though his tragic fate does not result from any conscious evil act of his. It can be inferred that his tragic act of truth-seeking undermines his faith in God and in himself; it is also disastrous to his own life and the future of his daughters, who will have to bear the burden of shame, suffering misery all their lives. As to Oedipus himself, though he fails to make himself a perfect man, he does prove to us that he is a great tragic hero with great will power and faith in his persistent search for truth.

CONCLUSION

It is hard to conceive why Oedipus must suffer the worst misery imaginable when he has done nothing to deserve it. All his sufferings are destined and brought about by the gods' will, namely, the three oracles: the first one is that Laius had his newborn son exposed in the mountains to thwart Apollo's oracle and avoid being killed by his own son; the second one is that Oedipus believes his leaving Corinth could alter the fate prophesied to him by the Delphic god; the third one is the fateful search for Laius' murderer as well as Oedipus's origin. The three oracles contain a single terrible truth, and the further Oedipus progresses in his search for Laius' murderer at the prompting of the third oracle, the closer he comes to the truth of the first two oracles and the deeper he penetrates into the past. And the closer he comes to what he imagines to be truth and salvation, the closer he comes to his own ruin. In the story of *Oedipus Rex*, the hero tries hard to fight vigorously against the gods' will and flees his fate destined by the gods by pursuing the truth about himself and the world, no matter how hard he tries to defy his destiny, he still fails to escape his own downfall. It is also ironical that though his physical eyes can see, is blind to the truth; and when he finally does come to see the truth, he blinds himself. Here, Sophocles means to set up a character with strong power and self-will who tries to master his own fate but remains powerless before his fate or the gods' will. As Dodds put it, "To me personally Oedipus is a kind of symbol of the human intelligence which cannot rest until it has solved all the riddles—even the last riddle, to which the answer is that human happiness is built on an illusion" (Dodds, 187).

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