

Oedipus Paper

by Matthew Gieseke

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Matthew Gieseke

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Oedipus the Innocent

Oedipus Rex, part one of Sophocles' *Three Theban Plays*, is one of the most timeless and renowned pieces of theatrical literature in the history of drama. It is a work which has lost none of its πάθος or potential for κάθαρσις to the millennia it has survived. It is a work of profound language and theme, continuing to evoke great emotion in audiences across the globe, regardless of the language it is performed in. One of the reasons that *Oedipus Rex* is such an enduring piece of theatre is that it presents a higher level of ambiguity than typically is present in Greek tragedy, bringing with it questions of morality and spiritual blindness.

Hamartia, from the Greek ἀμαρτία, is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the fault or error which entails the destruction of the tragic hero (hamartia)." It has been used for millennia to humanize or to balance out the good traits of a character. A hero's hamartia need not be an objectively bad trait, but rather some slight or aberration of character, or simply a chance of fate, which leads to their downfall. Hubris, or ὕβρις, a commonly used ἀμαρτία, historically held a far more violent connotation than it does today, often referring to forms of sexual or dominance crime which sought to bring shame upon the victim, rather than the simple feeling of pride or arrogance we now perceive it to entail (Cohen). "Ὑβρις is an ἀμαρτία which is often, and erroneously, attributed to Oedipus, as

many modern scholars attribute his crimes and successive fall to a sense of impunity and narcissism (Ahrensdorf). While indeed hostile and resistant to the notion that his actions caused Theban suffering, the ἄμαρτία of Oedipus was not pride, it was blindness to the words of his oracles and the ignorance of his parentage.

Oedipus Rex follows a common form for tragedy, outlined in Aristotle's *Poetics*: a central character, neither objectively good or bad, of regal stature, and around whom the majority of action flows (Moles). Oedipus, the king of Thebes, is a paradigm example of this 'tragic hero;' the entirety of the plot is spun around his moral ambiguity and question of guilt. Unlike many tragic heroes, however, Oedipus exhibits many traits of nobility, and his downfall comes not from his own shortcomings, but from events laid out prior to his existence. He is guilty from the moment of his conception; can he be considered morally responsible for his actions, or is he a simple pawn in the great game of the gods? It is this ambiguity and moral questioning that amplifies his tragic fall and inspires greater πάθος for the plight of this king of Thebes. Oedipus is presented to the audience first as a resplendent king of a suffering people, dedicated to ending the plague upon his city. Over the course of the play, he becomes consumed with guilt following his discovery that the famine has resulted from his actions and ends a broken man. Although at fault for the plague in Thebes, the guilt of Oedipus was forced upon him by his father, Laius, not heeding his own prophecy; Oedipus himself cannot be wholly blamed for his ἄμαρτία, as his life serves as a machination of the gods in the fulfilment of the prophecy given to Laius (Dodds). He

never sought to kill his father, nor did he wish to have sex with his mother, as a certain Austrian neurologist would have one believe; these actions were predetermined by the gods and foretold first in the prophecy given to Laius, and later in the same prophecy when it was told to Oedipus himself. Both men took actions to thwart this prophecy, and yet this proved to be both of their undoings. Oedipus knows his guilt, and his self-enucleation is done because he can no longer bear to face his fellow man, in this life or the next.

The blinding of Oedipus bears special significance to the play; Oedipus spends almost the entirety of the play and before spiritually blind to the workings of gods and men (Knox). His relentless search for the murderer of Laius sets events in motion, not least of which the summoning and questioning of Tiresias, whose spiraling fall can lead only to his own doom. Oedipus' continued stumbling closer and closer to the truth of his parentage present a dramatic rise to the action of the play, driving Oedipus to his climax. His confrontation with a messenger from Corinth removes the final support from his innocence, releasing a torrent of previously unknown guilt upon him. His discovery becomes inevitable, as does Jocasta's, despite her pleas for Oedipus to forego his investigation. When he is at last confronted by the knowledge of his incest and parricide, Oedipus, rather than simply take his own life and be forced to confront Laius and Jocasta in Asphodel, blinds himself so that he can never look upon his parents again (Sophocles). Oedipus' ἀμαρτία was ignorance and blindness to the nature of the world, and only through inflicting physical blindness was he truly able to "see" (Golden).

Oedipus is one of the few truly noble tragic heroes of classical Greek theatre. He frees the Thebans from the sphinx without expectation of reward or compensation, but purely out of a sense of honor and duty to those who require help (Ahrens Dorf). He shows genuine concern for his citizens during the plague in Thebes, referring to and treating them as though they were his own children, fostering a sense of paternalism. Not once in the play does Oedipus express desire for personal gain, he ever seeks to oust and punish the culprit of Laius' murder, despite numerous warnings that it will lead to his downfall. It is his dedication to the good of Thebes which makes his fall all the more tragic. Here was a man so utterly consumed with selflessness that he sought to save his city from famine, a goal he achieved, but only at his own expense. Even following his discovery of self-guilt and subsequent blinding does he stay true to his word that the murderer of Laius shall be exiled from Thebes, pleading with Creon to banish him forthwith from the city (Sophocles).

Shortly before he is confronted with a vague truth of his parentage for the first time from Tiresias, Oedipus reminds the masses of why he is their king:

“When the Sphinx,
 that singing bitch, was here, you [Tiresias] said nothing 470
 to set the people free. Why not? Her riddle
 was not something the first man to stroll along
 could solve—a prophet was required. And there
 the people saw your knowledge was no use—

nothing from birds or picked up from the gods.

But then I came, Oedipus, who knew nothing.

Yet I finished her off, using my wits

rather than relying on birds (Sophocles).”

In the face of a truth he cannot bear to accept, Oedipus eschews the words of oracles as worthless superstition, stating that man is free to form his own destiny and is not bound by prophecy. Oedipus is unwilling or unable to see the truth of his situation after it is reluctantly revealed by Tiresias, instead blaming Creon for attempting to usurp his power. Even when confronted directly with the knowledge he seeks, Oedipus remains blind to the gods' will.

Classical Greek stories are awash with accounts of men attempting to evade their destinies. The gods portrayed in Greek drama, poetry, and folklore always achieve their ends, regardless of man's efforts to escape their projected fate. Laius is told that if he conceives a child by Jocasta, that child will be his killer, and yet he does not heed this, setting events in motion that take shape into one of the truest examples of the tragic form in human history. Laius realizes his mistake, and attempts to have the child killed, but it is too late; the prophecy has been set in motion. Oedipus, upon learning of his destiny, leaves his adopted family in Corinth, fearing that the prophecy refers to them. His well-intended efforts only lead to his confrontation with Laius, and his marriage to Jocasta. Laius performed his actions out of willful malicious intent to kill his child and defy the gods of

prophecy, Oedipus because he did not wish to bring harm to his adopted family (Dodds).

Κάθαρσις arrives in the completion of Oedipus' Theban woes. His wife and mother has committed suicide, he is blinded, and he soon will depart the city to finish his life at Colonus.

Oedipus Rex is commonly, and rightly, considered to be Sophocles' greatest work - a true magnum opus of Greek drama. It is a testament to the timelessness of tragedy, with high, spiritual themes that have never ceased to hold relevance to audiences worldwide. Even modern audiences, accustomed to quick action and simplified language, are held with rapt attention to the plight of Thebes and the fall of a fictional Greek from two thousand years prior. Few other works can claim to continue to inspire heated arguments concerning the nature of plot and character for so long a lifespan, and it is the ambiguity of its theme which allows it to endure and thrive. Who among Western society has not heard the name of Oedipus spoken of, be it in psychological, literary, theatrical, or any other conversation in the plethora of fields in which it holds relevance?

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FINAL GRADE

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GENERAL COMMENTS

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