

The interplay between divine will and human responsibility in *Oedipus the King*

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Abstract

The interplay between divine will and the human responsibility has always been a dominant and fascinating theme in the whole gamut of tragic plays. Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* is not an exception to this. Oedipus Rex, the tragic hero is very noble and magnanimous but at the same time he remains a victim in the hands of the almighty God and His divine will. As a tragedy of destiny the play therefore brings out the contrast between the supreme will of the God and the vain / futile attempts of mankind to escape the evil that threatens him.

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Prof. Maurice Bowra in his famous book *Sophoclean Tragedy* when deciding the true nature of the classical tragedy *Oedipus Rex* holds the view that no Greek story has such pain & horror as that of Oedipus who after answering the riddle of the sphinx & being made king of Thebes, discovered that he had killed his father & married his mother, then blinded himself & become an outcast beggar. (Bowra 1944 p.69) He continued that it raised dark questions about the treatment of men by the gods. Oedipus who seemed the very type of fortune's favorite, was suddenly cast down & ruined. Indeed, from this point of view *Oedipus Rex* may be treated as a tragedy of destiny. The crucial events in the play have been pre determined by fate or the gods and the human beings seem rather helpless in the face of the circumstances which would mould their destiny. The voice of destiny in the play is the oracle of Apollo who told Laius that he would be killed by his own son & later told Oedipus that he would kill his father & marry his mother. Laius attempted to avoid such an event even in ordering to sacrifice his son but such in the nature of inscrutable fate in the classical tragedies that Apollo's oracle was fulfilled in the case of Laius.

The activity of Gods in this way is an essential part of king Oedipus who is their victim. They have ordained a life of horror for him & they see that he gets it, He is even the instrument by which their plans are fulfilled. The prophecy that he will kill his father & marry his mother leaves him no escape. He fulfills it in ignorance of what he is doing but he must fulfill it. In this respect he is like Heracles in the *Women of Trachis*. Both do what has been foretold & can not do otherwise. But it is interesting to note that where as to Heracles the oracle concerns only his death & does not haunt or shape his life, in case of Oedipus it is pathetically and tragically twofold in its own distinctive way. However in both cases an effort is made to nullify what has been foretold but unfortunately both the efforts are frustrated. In fact, the fated doom of Oedipus is more insistent than that of Heracles & more even than the play *Women of Trachis*, the play *Oedipus Rex* shows how human life is at the mercy of the Gods. Rightly so Sigmund Freud in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* calls *Oedipus Rex* a 'tragedy of destiny'. (Freud 1938 p.108) Its tragic effect is said to lie in the contrast between the supreme will of the Gods & vain attempts of mankind to escape the evil that threatens him.

In the *Poetics* we learn that the best sort of tragic hero is a man highly esteemed & prosperous who falls into misfortune because of some serious *hamartia* & in Aristotle's view, then, Oedipus's (as according to Aristotle's definition he is a tragic hero) misfortune was directly occasioned by some serious *hamartia*. Since *Poetics 13* is in general concerned with the moral character of the tragic hero, many scholars have thought in the past that the *hamartia* of Oedipus must in Aristotle's view be a moral fault. Oedipus, they point out, is proud & over confident; he harbours unjustified suspicions against Teiresias & Creon; in one place he goes so far as to express some uncertainty about the truth of oracles. But Sophocles did intend to create Oedipus a good man as in the eyes of the priest in the opening scene he is the greatest & noblest of man, the savior of Thebes who with divine aid rescued the city from the sphinx. The chorus which makes its own distinct deliberations regarding the situation and functions like a group of well-respected consultants that considers possibilities and consequences and at the same time is representative of the democratic spirit of Athens and the pride it bears on its democratic institutions has the same view of him: he has proved his wisdom, he is the darling of the city & never will they believe ill of him and when the catastrophe comes, no one turns round & remarks 'well, but it was your own fault : it must have been; Aristotle says so'.

But F.R. Dodds in his critical essay "On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex" like all Aristotelian scholars since Bywater, thinks that Aristotle does not say so & it is sure that he does use *hamartia* here (as he uses 'hamartema' in the *Nicomachean Ethics* & in the *Rhetoric*) to mean an offence committed in ignorance of some material fact. These parallels seem decisive & they are confirmed by Aristotle's second example – Thyestes, the man who ate the flesh of his own children in the belief that it was butcher's meat & who subsequently begot a child on his own daughter, not knowing who she was. His story has clearly much in common with that of Oedipus, & Plato as well as Aristotle couples the two names as examples of the gravest *hamartia*. Thyestes & Oedipus are both the men who violated the most sacred of Nature's laws & thus incurred the most horrible of all pollutions, but both of them knew not what they did. (Dodds 1966 p.35-47) In this respect Prof Maurice Bowra considers this 'ignorance' to be the beginning of his downfall for it leads to the plague, the curse, the discovery of the truth & Oedipus's blinding of himself. In spite of his name 'Oidipaus', with its resemblance to the greek word 'Oida' ('I know') – a theme that Sophocles hammers home with continual word play – Oedipus, who thought he knew so much, did not even know who his mother & father were. Harold Bloom's comments on the meaning of Oedipus's name: "The Greek *oida* meaning "I know" or "I have seen" is appropriate for one who solves a great riddle but does not know his own identity and ends up unable to see". (Bloom 2007 p.41) Had Oedipus acted knowingly, he would have been inhuman monster & we could not have left for him that pity which tragedy ought to produce – we feel both pity for the fragile estate of man & terror for a world whose laws we do not understand. The *hamartia* of Oedipus did not lie in losing his temper with Teiresias; it lay quite simply in parricide & incest - a moral *hamartia*, indeed, the greatest a man can commit.

But if Oedipus is the innocent victim of a doom which he cannot avoid, he would appear to be a mere puppet. The whole play in that case becomes a tragedy of divine will which denies human responsibility/ choice. But such a view would also be unsound to modern critics like Eric Segal, H.D.F Kitto & others. Sophocles has portrayed Oedipus largely as a free agent, to use Coleridge's phrase, is a 'man of ideas' who wants to know the truth and believes in the power of reason. Some of Oedipus's actions were fate bound but everything that he does on the stage he does as

a free agent – his condemnation of Teiresias & Creon, his conversation with Jacosta leading him to reveal the facts of his life to her. Oedipus could have left the plague to take its course & after hearing the words of Apollo he even could still have left the murder of Laius uninvestigated. But he does not do so – thus Oedipus becomes his own destroyer; the detective who tracks down & identifies the criminal – who turns out to be himself; from being an investigator who has summoned Tiresias, Oedipus himself becomes the investigated. Modern critic like E.R.Dodds so comments “the immediate cause of Oedipus’s ruin is not ‘Fate’ or ‘The Gods’; ...What causes his ruin is his own strength & courage, his loyalty to Thebes & his loyalty to the truths”.(Dodds 1966 p.35-47) Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz remarks that Oedipus did not have to realize the oracle literally: “If he were not so decisive, so secure in his own knowledge, he could perhaps have avoided fulfilling the terms of the prophecy” (Rabinowitz 2008 p. 172).

In the play city suffers from a disease and Oedipus is the physician to whom all turn for a care. The metaphor extends though out the play: the sickness, the care & the physician who will find it. And all these images like the plot, like the hero have what Aristotle called their *peripetia*, their reversal. In chap 11 of the *Poetics* Aristotle defines it as a change by which the action “veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessary”. Apart from this *peripeteia* there is also the *anagnorsis* or recognition in the plot of a play according to Aristotle. In *Oedipus Rex* however the reversal of the tragic hero comes about through recognition, in this case Oedipus’s recognition of his own identity that he is not the true son of polybus but of Laius & Jacosta & the murderer of his own father, Laius. And this final recognition of the hero by himself constitutes a complete reversal of the action – at the opening of the play, the Corinthian stranger, decipherer of riddles, saviour of Thebes, installed at the head of the city, whom the people venerate as the equal of a god for his devotion to the state but at the end of the investigation, the judge discovers himself identical with the assassin.

Thus, in the portion discussed above we can easily trace a distinct interplay between divine will & human responsibility in this tragedy. But in spite of the evidence to prove Oedipus a free agent in most of his actions as depicted in the play we can not forget that the most tragic events of his life – his murder of his father & his marriage with his mother – had inevitably to happen. Here, the responsibility of fate can not be denied. On the other hand, the discovery by Oedipus of his crimes or sins is the result of the compulsion of his own nature – his human choice. Hence, *Oedipus Rex* is both a play about the blindness of man & the desperate insecurity of the human condition & at the same time it is about human greatness. To conclude, 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 – because he accepts the responsibility for all his acts, including those which are objectively most horrible, though subjectively innocent. Commenting on the Sophoclean vision, H.D.F. Kitto observes that “‘Call no man happy until he is dead,’ for the chances of life are incalculable. But this does not mean that they are chaotic; if so they seem to us, it is because we are unable to see the whole pattern” (Kitto 1939, p 143). Like Icarus, who flew high into the sky only to fall down to his death, Oedipus is “the name for the ages”, who represents the soaring of the human spirit yet his tenuous life is bound by the limitations of fate and mortality.

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