

A STUDY GUIDE TO SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS THE KING

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I. BACKGROUND MATERIALS:

SOPHOCLES: "About the life of Sophocles there exists a modest amount of information almost none of which is of any help in the interpretation of his plays. Living as he did throughout the 5th century BCE, he saw in succession the Persian invasions of Greece and their defeat, the growth of Athens as an imperial power and center of culture under the regime of Perikles, and the long, cruel, ruinous war with Sparta and her allies which began in 431 BCE. He was a native of Colonus, on the outskirts of Athens, where a local cult honored the hero Oedipus, said to have been buried there. Rich, successful, sociable, witty, long-lived, Sophocles was a prolific and highly acclaimed writer in his own time. He won a large number of dramatic victories; one of his occasional defeats is said to have been the result of *Oedipus Rex*. Several technical innovations in theatrical art are attributed to him, including the introduction of scene painting and the use of scenes involving three actors. He found time as well to hold several high public offices and to serve as a priest of a minor healing-god. He was honored by those who knew him for his charm and good temper." Peter Arnott

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND: "At this particular time Athens was not only the center of political power and source of law; it was also the center of the intellectual revolution of the fifth century. With the practical innovating spirit of the democratic Athenian in politics, commerce, and warfare were now combined the intellectual innovations of philosophers and teachers who explored and explained a revolutionary view of man's stature and importance. It was in Athens that the new anthropological and anthropocentric attitude reached its high point. The idea that man was capable of full understanding and eventual domination of his environment found its home in a city which could see no limits to its own unprecedented expansion. The attitude and activity of Oedipus are images of the critical spirit and great intellectual achievements of a generation of sophists, scientists, and philosophers. Oedipus investigates, examines, questions, infers; he uses intelligence, mind, thought; he knows, finds, reveals, makes clear, demonstrates; and his relationship to his fellow man is that of a liberator and savior. The Greek words to which the items of this list correspond are in large part the vocabulary of the play; they are the words which sum up the spirit and serve the purposes of the new scientific attitude and activity." Bernard Knox

MYTH AND FOLKTALE: "Thus, the drama belongs to the general story of the lost one found. The lost one may be a wife, husband, brother, sister, or any close friend, thought dead but discovered to be present, unknown. A popular variant has been the one that makes the baby or foundling the lost one: the type to which Oedipus belongs. The pattern seem to generate certain features that are almost required: the child is noble; the child is unwanted and is put away and is usually thought dead; but the method is always indirect, a servant is usually delegated to do the dirty work; and the child grows up by being rescued and some-times nourished miraculously by animals. The child grows up in the wild and is thought to be plebeian, but is at last recognized by tests and tokens and restored to its proper station. Thus the story is in part a story of the triumph of truth over rumor or opinion, and the triumph is likely to occur after the darkest moment." R. Lattimore

"The story of Oedipus is among the best-known classical legends, largely because of the use made of it by psychologists since Freud's naming of the 'Oedipus complex' in 1910. This is a legitimate use of the legend, but it must not be taken as an explanation of it. We should be skeptical of attempts to interpret the legend in purely psychological terms; Sophocles and his predecessors were concerned with other aspects—for example, historical and theological—and we must accept the story as the Greeks have transmitted it, whatever use we may make of it." M. Morford & R. Lenardon

II. DRAMATIC STRUCTURE WITH STUDY QUESTIONS:

PROLOGUE (1-151) - procession and dialogue between the Priest, Oedipus & Creon. What is the mythic, historical and dramatic significance of the plague? How does the prologue introduce the setting, background, main characters, themes & images of the play?

PARODOS (152-215) - the entrance song of the chorus, the elders of Thebes. Who are the gods mentioned and why are they emphasized? Notice how the chorus repeat some material but with greater emotional depth and lyrical optimism.

EPISODE I (216-461) - iambic dialogue between Oedipus and Teiresias. Note how the prophet evokes the world of Apollo and Delphi. Who is Apollo and what roles does he play? What kinds of knowledge are compared, contrasted, and explored in the course of the play? How do the several references to light/dark and sight/blindness underline the central themes and reversals of the play?

CHORAL ODE (461-512) - Note the foreboding tone and analyze the references to feet, the hunt, the gods, wisdom and the Sphinx: how do they relate to what has preceded? With what reservations does the chorus continue confidence in Oedipus?

EPISODE II and KOMMOS and EPISODE III (513-861) - dialogue between Oedipus, Creon, and Jocasta. How are both Creon and Jocasta foils to Oedipus? Note the complications of this scene in terms of dialogue, emotions, number of actors, and ironies. Analyze the play against a legal background and note the several legalistic/judicial roles Oedipus plays. What stereotypic "feminine" traits does Jocasta display?

CHORAL ODE (862-910) - How does *hybris*, usually translated "insolence, arrogance, pride," relate to the *tyrannos*/tyrant, a word ambiguously defining Oedipus' position? What is the chorus' position on *tyche*/chance, the gods, and human religious practices? How does the chorus comment on the preceding scene and yet "freeze" the action so that we may dwell on the religious and philosophical issues at stake?

EPISODE IV (911-1086) - dialogue between Oedipus, Jocasta, and the Corinthian Messenger. What does this unannounced, well-intentioned, and initially jovial character contribute besides information? Note Jocasta's silence, change in position, emotion and ominous departure, and the "cross rhythms" of the scene. What is dramatic irony?

CHORAL ODE (1087-1109) - What mythic and symbolic significance has the mountain Cithaeron? How does the chorus' optimism provide a needed relaxation of tension between the two scenes of interrogation? Where does their self-confidence/optimism come from?

EPISODE V (1110-1185) - dialogue between Oedipus, Corinthian Messenger & Herdsman. Why does Sophocles devote so many scenes and lines to the proof of Oedipus' guilt and identity? How is the Theban herdsman really two characters rolled into one? What familiar role does he play in courtroom drama?

CHORAL ODE (1186-1223) - How is Oedipus a *paradeigma*, an example or paradigm for all mankind? Note the shock, pessimism and human sympathy, expressed directly and in human terms. How does the chorus both reflect and deflect our pity and fear?

EPISODE VI (1224-1296) - The Messenger emerges from the palace and narrates the offstage horrors? How is this character both realistic and conventional? What are the strategies of his storytelling? How does he both distance and "editorialize" the suicide of Jocasta and Oedipus' self-blinding? Do we need this "set speech" now?

KOMMOS (LYRICAL LAMENT) and EXODOS (FINAL SCENE) (1297-1530) - Why do the Chorus and Oedipus dwell at length on his act of self-blinding and review the key moments of his life? What effect does his abrupt reversal have on the chorus? How has Oedipus changed and how has he remained the same? Why is the last scene vital for the play's integrity and structure? What new attitude does Creon show and how does Oedipus react? What is the dramatic point of introducing Oedipus' daughters? Where does Oedipus exit? Are the chorus' final comments functional, formulaic or spurious?

III. THE CHARACTER OF OEDIPUS:

"Moving from king to pollution, from seeing to blind, from rich house to the savage mountain of the monstrous birth and rejected outcast, Oedipus becomes, even more deeply than Teiresias, a constellation of contradictions and opposites. He realizes his identity not as a stable unity, but as a juncture of polarities. Replacing the blind seer as the paradigm of man's tragic knowledge, he joins these oppositions in conscious and agonized union rather than unconscious coincidence. Oedipus seeks the murderer of Laius, whom he fears as his own, and finds himself. His sufferings in the play constitute a far more significant 'answer' to the Sphinx's riddle than the one which he so confidently gave outside Thebes in his youth. By living out his answer, he becomes a more authentic civilizing hero, the bearer of the tragic meaning of civilization for men. Prometheus, the archetypal culture-hero, gave men 'blind hopes' so that they could not foresee their death. Oedipus tears away the veil and by his self-chosen blindness gives men sight." Charles Segal

"The resemblances between the Athenian supremacy in Greece and Oedipus' peculiar power in Thebes suggest that the word *tyrannos* (tyrant) as applied to Oedipus is part of a larger pattern, a comparison of Oedipus to Athens herself. The character of Oedipus is the character of the Athenian people. Oedipus, in his capacities and failings, his virtues and his defects, is a microcosm of the people of Periklean Athens. The character of Oedipus, one of the most many-sided and fully developed in all of Greek tragedy, bears a striking resemblance to the Athenian character as we find it portrayed in the historians, dramatists, and orators in the last years of the fifth century. The audience which watched Oedipus in the theater was watching itself." B. Knox

IV. CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PLAY:

"The *Oedipus Rex* is a tragedy of fate: its tragic effect depends on the conflict between the all-powerful will of the gods and the vain efforts of human beings threatened with disaster; resignation to the divine will and the perception of one's own impotence is the lesson which the deeply moved spectator is supposed to learn from the tragedy.... Oedipus' fate moves us only because it might have been our own, because the oracle laid on us before our birth the very curse which rested upon him. It may be that we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses towards our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence towards our fathers; our dreams convince us that we were." Sigmund Freud

"In the *Oedipus Rex* both Apollo and his ministers are justified and the skepticism of Jocasta and Oedipus condemned. Sophocles is supporting the religion against contemporary attacks, and criticism of traditional religion and oracles was particularly common at the time of the Peloponnesian War. False oracles were produced in large quantities, and the oracle monger became a figure of fun on the comic stage. In this atmosphere Sophocles wrote the *Oedipus* to defend what was for him, as for Socrates, one of the basic facts of religion." T.B.L. Webster

"Could Sophocles himself have believed that Oedipus was an innocent victim through and through? How could a man remain religious who had a vision like that? But it turns out that there are innumerable religious myths that depend on that very point-guiltless suffering. Some medieval Jews are said to have believed that God has given each generation one just man, one man who suffered terribly through no fault of his own, but knew that his suffering was not just. The misery of this blameless man was thought somehow to lighten the burden of the rest of mankind. The power of *The Book of Job*, *Prometheus Bound*, *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Hamlet*, *The Idiot* and *The Trial*, and many other myths require a similar consciousness of innocence on the part of the sufferer." T. Gould

"But we are not entitled to blame Oedipus for carelessness in failing to compile a hand list or for lack of self-control in failing to obey its injunctions. For no such possibilities are mentioned in the play, or even hinted at; and it is an essential critical principle that what is not mentioned in the play does not exist. These considerations would be in place if we were examining the conduct of a real person. But we are not; we are examining the intentions of a dramatist, and we are not entitled to ask questions that the dramatist did not intend to ask. There is only one branch of literature where we are entitled to ask such questions about "outside the drama," namely the modern detective story. And despite certain similarities the *Oedipus Rex* is not a detective story but a dramatized folktale. If we insist on reading it as if it were a law report, we must expect to miss the point."

E. R. Dodds

"No play is more about language than the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. An expert in decoding difficult messages, the hero cannot decode the meaning of his own name. Human communication here parallels the communication by ritual and oracle between man and God. Continually breaking down, this communication either ceases prematurely because of fears or knowledge that cannot be spoken or runs to excess because of passion and anger. Apollo's oracles from above and the Sphinx's riddle from below provide models for human discourse, but both also short-circuit the significant function of language."

Charles Segal

"The *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles combines two apparently irreconcilable themes, the greatness of the gods and the greatness of man, and the combination of these themes is inevitably tragic, for the greatness of the gods is most greatly and clearly manifest in man's defeat. 'The god is great in his laws and he does not grow old.' But man does, and he dies. Unlike the gods he exists in time. The beauty and power of his physical frame is subject to sickness, decay, and death; the beauty and power of his intellectual, artistic, and social achievement to decline, overthrow, and oblivion. Oedipus is symbolic of all human achievements: his hard-won magnificence, unlike the eternal magnificence of the divine, cannot last, and while it lives, shines all the more brilliant against the somber impermanence of mortality. Sophocles' tragedy presents us with a terrible affirmation of man's subordinate position in the universe, and at the same time with a heroic vision of man's victory in defeat. Man is not equated with the gods, but man at his greatest, as in Oedipus, is capable of something which the gods, by definition, cannot experience; the proud tragic view of Sophocles sees in the fragility and inevitable defeat of human greatness the possibility of human heroism to which the gods can never attain, for the condition of their existence is everlasting victory."

Bernard Knox

V. STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Why does Aristotle see *Oedipus the King* as the ideal tragedy? How does it fit his preferences for causality and the primacy of plot, for magnitude and unity, and for the use of recognition and reversal?
2. Does Sophocles take a position on the classical problem of fate and man's free will?
3. Does the play exhibit a religious position and, if so, how would you characterize it?
4. Note the importance of mathematics and the scientific/inductive method throughout the play, reflecting the new scientific climate in Athens at this time.
5. Several patterns of imagery (nautical, hunting, agricultural, legal, medical) permeate the play; how do they function and how do they produce irony?
6. The chorus, an important collective or mini-community of Theban elders, contributes information, emotion, sympathy, and a varying point of view crucial to our experience of the play. Analyze their responses to particular scenes, final statement and overall functions.
7. Discuss the "minor" roles of the antagonists who both assist and attempt to divert the quest of Oedipus. Note how, at the climax of the play, relatively "ignoble" characters become crucial to the action.
8. Why doesn't the play end with Oedipus' self-blinding? What are the multiple dramatic effects of the final movement? How does the play actually end?