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978-0-521-49782-4 - Sophocles: *Oedipus Tyrannus*

Fiona Macintosh

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

## OEDIPUS IN ATHENS

[T]ragedy is a blessed art in every way, since its plots are well known to the audience before anyone begins to speak. A poet need only remind. I have just to say 'Oedipus', and they know all the rest: father, Laius; mother, Jocasta; their sons and daughters; what he will suffer; what he has done.<sup>1</sup>

For the comic playwright Antiphanes, commenting some hundred years after the composition of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the task of the tragedian is simply the art of fine-tuning. Sophocles and his fellow tragic playwrights, avers the envious Antiphanes, effortlessly tap into the common source of myth, extract what they need, and then, with some minor prompting, let the tragic characters speak for themselves. Meanwhile Antiphanes and his colleagues, we infer, are forced to embark upon a laborious search for the raw material itself, dredging it up from their own imaginations before they hack and hew it into some kind of dramatic shape.

Notwithstanding the obvious comic exaggeration underlining Antiphanes' words, we can, I think, glean more from this slender fragment of the fourth century BC than just an insight into perceived differences between the ancient comic and tragic playwrights' art. First, we can see evidence from the fourth century BC of Oedipus' increasing emergence as archetypal tragic figure. Indeed, when we look at the *Poetics*, written in the 330s, we find a similarly privileged status accorded to the figure of Oedipus. Aristotle recommends that the would-be tragedian turn to the Oedipus myth in general, and to Sophocles' reshaping of it in *Oedipus Tyrannus* in particular, to learn and test the tools of his trade.<sup>2</sup> For Aristotle (Chapter 13), Oedipus is

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an exemplary tragic figure whose fall is consequent on an intellectual error (*hamartia*) rather than any morally dubious action.

As we can see from the Antiphanean fragment, Aristotle was not alone in his privileging of the character of Oedipus in the fourth century. But the lionising of Sophocles' play in the *Poetics* was undoubtedly a significant factor in determining Oedipus' subsequent renown. As the solver of the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus can be hailed – just as he is by the Thebans in Sophocles' play – as a model for all human intellectual endeavour, and he can serve as living confirmation that brainpower can overcome brute force. Although the Sphinx's riddle is never clearly stated in Sophocles' play, we know from other sources that it asked what goes on four legs, two legs and then three.<sup>3</sup> Oedipus alone can provide the solution (a person: first as baby, second as an adult and finally in old age with a stick), both on account of his intellect and because he turns out to be its hidden subject. As Oedipus enters the stage at the end of Sophocles' play with the staff of a blind man in hand, he is the unwitting embodiment of the final phase of the Sphinx's riddle, and, as such, a stark reminder of the limits of the human mind. Everything about Oedipus turns out to have prefigured his fate: his name alludes to his 'swollen foot' (*oideo* means 'swell' and *pous* 'foot'), his prescience and his blindness (*oida* means 'I know'; but literally translated it means 'I have seen').<sup>4</sup> Even the sharpest human mind had been unable to discern that meanings are multiform rather than uniform, that coincidence and irony are in reality the divine imprint on a seemingly secular world.

Oedipus, then, has readily been construed as the symbol of human intelligence, confident of everything but in reality ignorant of all. But he is also a saviour who is really the pollutant, the stranger who is in reality too closely related to the palace of Thebes. The over-confident Athenians may well have been receiving an object lesson from Sophocles. The fifth-century Greek philosopher Protagoras had confidently argued that 'man is the measure of all things'; Oedipus' example reveals how erroneous the Protagorean dictum really is. For the absent, mysterious gods in the Sophoclean cosmology are shown

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in the end to have the measure of all. Over the centuries the terms of reference may have been drastically altered, but it is rare for any subsequent generation not to have shared fifth-century Athenian anxieties about their own over-confident predictions concerning themselves and their fortunes. Playwrights through the ages have therefore readily grasped that to reflect upon the fate of Oedipus can teach something of value to each generation.

If Antiphanes' fragment draws our attention to the paradigmatic status of Oedipus by the fourth century, it also raises the important consideration of whether the act of creating from 'amorphous' life is in any sense more demanding than re-creating or adapting what has already been given some kind of life and shape by another, collective source. Many of those who have looked to the Oedipus myth as a starting point for their own compositions may well have cherished hopes that the Antiphanean claim were true. But some have undoubtedly found to their cost that inherited, or appropriated, property turns out very often to be the most intractable material of all, since audiences' expectations and preconceptions can provide a curb to, not a cue for, further creative endeavour. For as Antiphanes also reminds us, audiences receive refashioned material in ways that differ greatly from their responses to the new.

Yet for any playwright, the reworking of a myth yields considerable advantages beyond those of the economy of effort that Antiphanes comically outlines. The very existence of other versions of the story can work to the dramatist's own advantage, providing ample opportunity for expectations and preconceptions to be manipulated accordingly, and for meanings to be generated by omission and elision. Any modern stage adaptation of the Oedipus myth is being played primarily if not exclusively *against* its Sophoclean progenitor, with the interplay between the 'new' and the 'inherited' material providing both resonance and dissonance in the audience's minds.

Indeed, when we think of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* we would be mistaken to think of it as some kind of 'original', for in reality Sophocles was no different from any other (ancient or modern) adapter of the Oedipus myth, working on the common material

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with other versions in mind. In the fifth century BC alone there were at least six plays entitled *Oedipus*, including lost plays by Aeschylus and Euripides.<sup>5</sup> So when Antiphanes says, 'I have just to say "Oedipus", and they know all the rest', he is guilty, perhaps, of more than a little comic licence. But he is commenting some hundred years after the first production of Sophocles' tragedy; and from 386 BC onwards, revivals of classic plays from the fifth century became part of the City Dionysia, the main Athenian drama festival. By Antiphanes' time, a repertoire of Greek tragedies was well established, and a mention of Oedipus may well have meant primarily (as it does to us) Sophocles' version of that myth. However, for the earlier fifth-century audience, sitting down to watch Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* sometime in the early 420s, the question 'What will happen to *Sophocles' Oedipus*?' must have been uppermost in their minds.

THE POLITICS OF *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS*

The intertextuality that is taken for granted in relation to modern adaptations of Greek myths, therefore, should also be borne in mind when considering tragedies of the fifth century BC, and with Sophocles' tragedy no less than with others. It has often been the practice in the past to attribute the obvious interconnections between, say, Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, Sophocles' *Electra* and Euripides' *Electra*, to an alleged, steady decline of tragedy towards the end of the century. But it is important to remember that were our sample of extant tragedies larger, these allusive elements in the plays based on the Orestes myth would in all likelihood turn out to be a common feature of many tragedies. For this reason, the *Libation Bearers*, and the *Electra* tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, must be understood to be paradigmatic of Greek tragedy in general; and when we think of the Oedipus myth in relation to the fifth century BC, we must think of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* as simply one version 'supplementing, challenging, displacing, but never simply replacing all the rest'.<sup>6</sup>

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Very few members of the audience who sat down to watch Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* in the 420s would have seen the original production of Aeschylus' *Oedipus*, which won first prize at the City Dionysia in 467 BC, when it was performed as part of a connected tetralogy with *Laius*, *Seven against Thebes* and the satyr play *Sphinx*. But many within the audience may well have seen a revival of Aeschylus' version, where Oedipus' fate is but one stage in a family history of sexual transgression and internecine strife.<sup>7</sup> The only surviving play of the tetralogy is *Seven against Thebes*, but a Byzantine hypothesis to the play suggests that the first tragedy, *Laius*, included Laius' homosexual rape of Pelops' son, Chrysippus, for which he incurred the curse of Pelops, and Sophocles' decision to omit reference to this version of the myth is no doubt significant.

In other accounts of the myth, the Delphic oracle demands sexual abstinence of Laius, which he is unable to maintain.<sup>8</sup> In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, by contrast, Apollo appears to have given an unconditional prediction of Laius' death at the hands of his son (line 784), and his only 'crime' is to have fathered that fated son, and to have subsequently attempted to destroy him. As with the relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta, which Sophocles makes highly formal to avoid implying any erotic attachment between mother and son, Sophocles' version makes sexual transgression an important, but by no means the predominant, motif in his handling of the myth. The scene in which Oedipus realises that he himself is Laius' murderer is unusual in its inclusion of the potent and chilling reminder of the actuality (as opposed to the consequences) of incest. When Oedipus explains to Jocasta his horrific realisation that it is his hands, polluted with the blood from Laius' murder, that have been unwittingly defiling the living body of the dead king's wife, the audience recoils in horrified sympathy as they view both those hands and that body in front of them, in the light of the (now unacknowledged) crime of incest (908 ff.).

The most significant consequence, however, of making the prophecy to Laius unconditional is to make the Sophoclean world

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that much harsher than the Aeschylean counterpart. In *Oedipus Tyrannus* Sophocles presents us with a far more inscrutable world, in which oracles offer seemingly cautionary advice, but in reality predict unavoidable disaster.

Some members of the first audience who watched *Oedipus Tyrannus* would also have seen Sophocles' earlier tragedy *Antigone* (442 BC), where the dead Oedipus' curse extends beyond the death of his sons to include Antigone, Haemon and Eurydice amongst its victims. Antigone's commitment to her brother and the gods of the underworld, which leads her to bury her brother in defiance of Creon's edict, is initially construed by the Chorus as blind intransigence similar, in kind and degree, to that of her father: 'Like father like daughter, passionate, wild ... / she hasn't learned to bend before adversity' (lines 525–7). The mould from which Antigone is cast, and the one from which Oedipus too will emerge in the 420s and in the much later *Oedipus at Colonus* (posthumously produced 402–401 BC), is really that of the typical Sophoclean hero(ine), with Antigone's intransigence being the hallmark of what Bernard Knox has aptly termed the 'heroic temper'. Antigone's defiant refusal to compromise even to the point of her own destruction will be a pattern that the Sophoclean Oedipus will repeat in both *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.<sup>9</sup>

As the first audience sat down to watch *Oedipus Tyrannus*, then, they may well have had certain preconceptions about the personality of the protagonist derived from their knowledge of other Sophoclean heroes in general, and from the Sophoclean portrait of his daughter, Antigone, in particular. But any expectations they may have had stemming from the Aeschylean shaping of the material – especially regarding the prominence of sexual transgressions in the myth of the Labdacid dynasty – would have been clearly dashed. By abandoning the Aeschylean connected trilogy, Sophocles has reorientated the focus of his play and established a new centrality for the character of Oedipus, and guaranteed the interrogatory nature of his drama. The Sophoclean Oedipus is like a detective, pursuing his investigation in successive episodes with Tiresias, Creon, Jocasta, the Corinthian

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Messenger and finally the Theban Shepherd. Oedipus is no longer the victim of an inherited curse, but a tireless searcher after truth; and the audience – albeit armed with the ‘truth’ that Oedipus is so urgently pursuing – join him on the quest for his identity, as they piece together the snippets of information from Jocasta about Apollo’s oracle to Laius and the details of the baby’s exposure (lines 784 ff.), and match them *against* the knowledge they already have from other sources. In other words, already knowing, in Antiphanes’ terms, what Oedipus ‘will suffer; what he has done’ only enhances the complicated nature of the audience’s response; it can never simplify.

The new centrality of Oedipus in the Sophoclean version would undoubtedly have prompted responses shaped by recent political events as well. We do not know the precise date of the play’s first production, although attempts have been made to date it to 425, after the city of Athens had endured a series of plagues following the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431.<sup>10</sup> Another attempt to highlight its influence on Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (428 BC) would indicate a slightly earlier date, around 429.<sup>11</sup> Although any precise dating is clearly impossible, the play undoubtedly reflects upon (even if it does not itself directly reflect) ideas and events that dominated Athenian life at the beginning of the 420s.

Athens was an imperial power which had wielded considerable, and, some might say, overbearing influence over the Greek world throughout the middle years of the fifth century BC. The Athenians had only very recently entered into the war against Sparta and her allies, which was to last nearly thirty years and would eventually lead to the collapse of the Athenian empire. The early years of the war were overshadowed by plagues in Athens, when one quarter of the population was wiped out by the epidemic, including the great Athenian statesman Pericles, who had led the city state through the heyday of its expansionism. The misery and desperation of the Thebans in the opening scene of the play are paralleled in contemporary accounts of the plague at Athens,<sup>12</sup> and the criticism of seers and oracles that runs throughout the text was also symptomatic of the prevailing sense of despair.

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The domestic crises at the start of the Peloponnesian War, then, may well have been reflected in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Moreover, many of the issues under debate in Sophocles' play would have had a decidedly contemporary ring. Oedipus' and Jocasta's responses to Tiresias and the Delphic oracle respectively mirror current debates about the position of religious institutions in the democratic state. The choice of a Theban myth at this time, when, as Sparta's chief ally, Thebes had only relatively recently become the official enemy of Athens, may well also have been significant. Although Sophocles was by no means the only tragedian to represent Thebes as the site and source of disorder during this period, the requisite distancing and the consequent resonance attendant on such a choice of vehicle must have facilitated the playwright's exploration of urgent domestic concerns.<sup>13</sup>

Although the dating of the play with reference to the plagues in Athens has been widely contested, the evident similarities between the Sophoclean Oedipus and Pericles make it hard to imagine that an audience made no connection between their city and the dramatised city of Thebes. As Thucydides explains in his history, the nominally democratic Athens before the outbreak of the war was really under the control of its first citizen, Pericles. It could be argued, for example, that the first part of *Oedipus Tyrannus* is really an exploration of the role of the leader in a democracy: both in the opening scene when Oedipus emerges from the palace to answer the importunings of his grief-stricken people, and especially in the scene of confrontation between Creon and Oedipus.

Furthermore, Pericles' citizenship law of 451 BC, which limited citizenship to the offspring of two Athenian parents, is central to any consideration of the play's preoccupation with biological, as opposed to 'given' or assumed, identity. Indeed, it has been suggested that it was the Periclean legislation above all that determined Sophocles' emphasis on blood relationships (as opposed to incest or parricide) in his handling of the mythical material.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the later play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, deals with Oedipus' past in terms of guilt and pollution, rather than biological identity, would seem to give further

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credence to the claim that *Oedipus Tyrannus* was reflecting current anxieties over familial relations attendant on the citizenship law.<sup>15</sup> The multiple deaths in families on account of the plague undoubtedly made the effects of the legislation all the more keenly felt. In 429 Pericles was forced to endure the death of his last surviving legitimate son, and the Athenians were apparently so moved by his forbearance at the funeral that they allowed him to waive the legislation and his son by his non-Athenian mistress, Aspasia, became an Athenian citizen. Pericles' citizenship legislation, like Oedipus' curse at the start of the play on whomsoever caused the plague in Thebes, turns out to have a similarly disastrous effect; and yet as Oedipus and Pericles are both hoist by their own petard, so to speak, they display their finest qualities.<sup>16</sup>

That Oedipus himself turns out to be the source of the pollution in Thebes may have called to the first audience's mind the Spartan attempt to intervene in Athenian politics in 432, when they demanded Pericles' expulsion from the city on the grounds of an alleged inherited family curse stemming from a sacriligious murder committed by one of his ancestors.<sup>17</sup> But even if the evident similarities between Oedipus and Pericles are rejected, the connections between the dramatised Thebes and the city of Athens in the last third of the fifth century are plentiful. As Bernard Knox has convincingly argued, Oedipus and his fortunes reflect 'Athens itself, in all its greatness, its power, its intelligence, and also its serious defects. The audience which watched Oedipus in the theatre of Dionysus was watching itself.'<sup>18</sup>

#### OEDIPUS TYRANNUS IN PERFORMANCE

Sophocles was already over sixty years of age when he wrote *Oedipus Tyrannus*, having led an active public life as well as having thirty years' playwrighting experience behind him. He entered *Oedipus Tyrannus*, together with two other (lost) tragedies and a (lost) satyr play, in the

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dramatic contest at the City Dionysia in competition with two other tragedians. The festival held in honour of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, vegetation and drama, was a major religious as well as political event, which all Athenian citizens were able to attend (on account of financial assistance made available by the state), and to which important foreign visitors were invited. Since women did not qualify for citizenship, it is unlikely that Athenian women formed any part of the crowd of between six thousand and seven thousand who watched the plays, but non-Athenian women may well have attended.<sup>19</sup>

The majority of audience members would have participated in some way in the festival's events, making the distinction between audience and participants hard to sustain. Prior to the twelve plays that were to be performed over the three-day period, the audience would have watched, and in many cases participated in, the procession which brought the statue of the patron god, Dionysus, into the theatre to occupy the place of honour in the front row. They would also have seen the sacrifices, and the display of the tribute money paid to the imperial power by the subject states of Athens; and they would have watched the parade of the sons of the war-dead taking a public oath to fight and die for their city. They may also have joined in the dithyrambic contests, which provided narrative through choral song and dance. The eleven (and later fifteen) members of the Chorus were ordinary citizens and so known to many of the audience. The City Dionysia was about putting Athens on display; and by being the centrepiece in this major civic event in the Athenian calendar, Greek tragedy could be said to have played an important part in Athenian democratic life.<sup>20</sup>

It has been suggested that tragedy was born at the time when the mythical mode of thought was giving way to a philosophical mode of analysis; and that it emerged at the same time as political democracy was by no means merely fortuitous.<sup>21</sup> The fifth-century BC theatre itself, with its raked seating and vast circular *orchestra* as focus of the performance area, uniquely empowers the (majority) audience over the (individual) actor.<sup>22</sup> Both Greek tragedy's form and content – its