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GOD AND MAN IN *OEDIPUS REX*

by *Lauren Silberman*

“In what sense, if in any, does the *Oedipus Rex* attempt to justify the ways of God to man?” In his essay “On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*,” E. R. Dodds admits to having asked that question of undergraduates being examined in Honour Moderations at Oxford and to having thereby occasioned wholesale, but consistent, misinterpretation of one of the masterworks of Western literature. Dodds reports that ninety per cent of the candidates’ responses fell into three distinguishable groups. Most students asserted that the play justifies the gods by showing “that we get what we deserve.”¹ A substantial minority read *Oedipus Rex* as the affirmation of divinely determined fate over free will. The smallest group concluded that it was not Sophocles’ intention to justify the gods at all. Dodds goes on to argue eloquently that *Oedipus Rex* affirms human greatness as the capacity to pursue and endure the truth of man’s own nothingness—“if he could see human life as time and the gods see it” (17-29).

With the benefit of such critics as Dodds, I began teaching *Oedipus Rex* to undergraduates as one of the most powerful statements in Western culture of what it is like to confront the Deity, a play that shows mortal man experiencing his own helplessness and insignificance in the face of divine power, but yet manifesting the greatness to pursue and bear the knowledge of his wretched place in the universe.² Nevertheless, what emerged through several years of giving classes on *Oedipus Rex* were suggestions of an anti-theological interpretation, in which divine power itself was the product of the human pursuit of knowledge and the mortal desire for the security of an ordered universe.

When analyzing the relationship of the divine to human in *Oedipus Rex*,

I have found the linguistic terms synchronic and diachronic immediately useful.³ As Oedipus' human experience unfolds diachronically, the synchronic pattern of the god's curse is gradually revealed. What seems contingent, accidental, and chaotic from the human perspective is the perfect consummation of divine will. In human terms, Oedipus suffers the most grotesquely perverted family relationships imaginable. As Teiresias declares—

He shall be proved father and brother both
to his own children in his house; to her
that gave him birth, a son and husband both;
a fellow sower in his father's bed (455-60)⁴

Nothing could be more tragically convoluted than the pattern of his origin, his destiny, and his issue. To the gods, however, Oedipus' destiny was implicit in his birth. Nothing could be more congruent.

Consider how Oedipus describes the duty he owes Laius to avenge his murder:

Since I am now the holder of his office,
and have his bed and wife that once was his,
and had his line not been unfortunate
we would have common children—(fortune leaped
upon his head)—because of all these things,
I fight in his defence as for my father (255-265)

There is more than simple dramatic irony in the contrast between Oedipus' limited understanding of his situation and the full truth. What Oedipus understands as a simile—he fights as for his father—is literally true because, contrary to what Oedipus asserts, Laius has not died without issue. Laius had a son whom he tried unsuccessfully to kill. What seems figurative to human understanding is literal truth when seen from divine perspective. The kingship Oedipus thinks he holds by institutional choice is really his by natural succession because of the murderous struggle of father against son, son against father.

Coincidence, itself, appears in both human and divine modes. On two occasions, Oedipus is urged to an action he has already taken. At the opening of the play, the Priest begs Oedipus to seek advice from God or man about relieving the plague that afflicts Thebes, only to be told that Oedipus has already dispatched Creon to the oracle of Apollo. When the chorus advises Oedipus to have the prophet Teiresias elucidate the message brought by Creon, Oedipus replies:

Even in this my actions have not been sluggish.
On Creon's word I have sent two messengers

and why the prophet is not here already
I have been wondering. (285-290)

Both these examples suggest the possibility of human consensus. Faced with a given problem, Oedipus, Creon and the chorus find identical solutions. When the pattern is repeated for the third and final time, however, the coincidence manifestly does not attest to the capacity of human reason to anticipate reasonable judgment, but rather to the absolute priority of divine will. When Oedipus asks about the nameless herdsman from whom the messenger received him as an infant, the chorus tells him that the herdsman is one already sent for: he was the lone witness to Laius' murder. Neither Oedipus nor the chorus can have foreseen that this herdsman would disclose the secret of Oedipus' parentage and reveal the fulfillment of the gods' curse.

Although in *Oedipus Rex*, the gods are the ultimate guarantors of retribution, the divine order has no room for the moral sentiments of human beings. Consider that the herdsman acted from the noblest motive of pity for an innocent baby when he saved Oedipus from an early death and delivered him to a far crueller fate. In a sense, *Oedipus Rex* illustrates what Original Sin would be like without the apple: Oedipus merits his fate simply by being born.

The analogy to *Genesis* is instructive, as well as being the inevitable consequence of teaching *Oedipus Rex* in a great books course. Both texts explore human suffering in the context of a divine order; both show understanding of the human condition by inquiry into origins. *Genesis* explains ever-present human wretchedness and mortality through the myth of an antecedent Paradise and an Original Sin. Nonetheless, since eating of the tree of knowledge epitomizes that impulse to understand which generates the story, the explanation that *Genesis* gives for the human condition is as much the act of explaining as the particular transgression against divine order nominally identified as the cause of all our woe.

In *Oedipus Rex*, the search for the origin of suffering is not initially motivated by a pure desire for explanation and understanding, but by Oedipus' wish to relieve the distress of his people. His recourse to the oracle reflects ancient Greek religious practice. As Gilbert Murray points out in *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, since primitive Greeks explained natural disasters—such as plague—as a breach of *tabu*, it was crucial for them to know what constitutes *Themis*, the right way of proceeding, the good old way of their ancestors. In case of emergency, they would consult their Old Men for precedents; if the Old Men failed, they would seek advice from the older still—the Chthonian people, spirits of the departed. Murray observes that

the “normal reason for consulting an oracle was not to ask questions of fact” but to learn how one ought to behave in an emergency.⁵ Accordingly, Oedipus sends Creon to the oracle at Delphi, “that he might learn there by what act of word / [Oedipus] could save this city” (70-75). Instead of disclosing the course of action that will remedy Thebes’ suffering, the oracle impels Oedipus to an inquiry into his own past, which will reveal how the course of his entire life has been the working-out of the gods’ curse. Instead of learning a time-honored pattern for subsequent behavior, Oedipus finds the absolute origin of his own unprecedented misery.⁶

Nevertheless, *Oedipus Rex* is not a play of simple determinism, even determinism of a particularly fascinating kind.⁷ As H.D.F. Kitto points out:

A man of poor spirit would have swallowed the insult and remained in Corinth, but Oedipus was resolute; not content with Polybus’ assurance he went to Delphi and asked the god about it, and when the god, not answering his question, repeated the warning given originally to Laius, Oedipus, being a man of determination, never went back to Corinth. . . . [Oedipus and Laius] met at the cross-road, and as father and son were of similar temper the disaster occurred What happens is the natural result of the weaknesses and the virtues of his character, in combination with other people’s.⁸

Dodds adds to Kitto’s analysis the observation that “no oracle said that [Oedipus] must discover the truth” (23). It is precisely in the character of puzzle solver that we see Oedipus pursue his destiny to the catastrophe of full knowledge.

Although the final object of Oedipus’ inquiry is the knowledge of his own wretchedness, the play attests to the value of that knowledge by the price it has exacted. When Oedipus tells the chorus that he has sent Creon to Delphi to learn “by what act or word” he could save the city, he presupposes that knowledge is the logical precondition of action or speech, that knowing is prior to and distinct from doing or saying, and that knowledge will give him the power to relieve suffering.⁹ The play reveals the error of this view. In the end, knowledge is itself action and that action is not the relief of suffering but the near destruction of the knower.

Because knowledge and action are not absolutely separable, Oedipus is caught in the double bind that he cannot know enough to refrain from questioning until he already possesses the fatal knowledge. Both Teiresias and Jocasta urge Oedipus to cease his quest, but he has no cognition of the danger until it is already upon him. When Oedipus insists that the herdsman tell him the parentage of the child exposed on the hillside—the infant Oedipus—he invites what he knows will be frightful speech and frightful hearing in an act of tragic heroism.

Part of Oedipus' initial mistake about the relationship of knowing to doing results from the limitation of his human perspective. He seeks knowledge by inquiring into origins and expects the knowledge he has gained to motivate his future actions, unaware of how his origins and his future destiny are part of the same tragic fate. When the oracle at Corinth responds to a question about his parentage with the prophecy that he will murder his father and marry his mother, Oedipus cannot possibly understand how the prophecy explains the mystery of his birth. Consequently, he flees his foster parents, kills Laius on the journey away from Corinth, and marries Laius' widow. He seeks the source of the plague that afflicts Thebes in the city's past, unaware that the plague is not just the punishment of past sin but his present *agon*.

Nevertheless, within the double structure of Sophocles' plot, which sets the human perspective, unfolding in time, against divine synchronicity, there are curious inconsistencies. Apollo appears only through the medium of diachronically unfolding plot; the only evidence of his existence is the retrospective coincidence of the story of Oedipus' life and the prophecy given at Oedipus' birth. Moreover, what was foretold by Apollo's oracle comes to pass precisely because those who hear the prophecy neither wholly believe it nor wholly disbelieve it. If they wholly believed the prophecy, no action to evade it would be possible; if they wholly disbelieved it, none would be necessary. On the one hand, the catastrophe reveals that there was nothing Oedipus could have done; his fate prevailed despite all his actions. On the other, Oedipus' fate is shown to be the direct result of his actions. This is not to say that Laius and Jocasta "should" have remained in Corinth, but that the deferral of what is unbearably horrifying seems to open up the space in which *Oedipus Rex* exists.

Even more problematic is the choral ode at the very center of *Oedipus Rex*, which seems to contravene the relationship between man and God which is established in the rest of the play. Whereas the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex* demonstrates the supremacy of divine will over human action, the ode shows the chorus threatening to withhold its worship if Zeus fails to comply with its wishes:

No longer to the holy place,
to the navel of earth I'll go
to worship, nor to Abae
nor to Olympia,
unless the oracles are proved to fit,
for all men's hands to point at. (895-905)

This extraordinary threat occurs in the context of an interpretation of the play. The chorus begins the ode by affirming its piety and then contrasts its humility to the insolence of the tyrant, tacitly interpreting the *Oedipus Rex* as a *de casibus* tragedy, in which the hero's pride brings about his fall from greatness:

Insolence breeds the tyrant, insolence
if it is glutted with a surfeit, unseasonable,
unprofitable,
climbs to the roof-top and plunges
sheer down to the ruin that must be,
and there its feet are no service.
But I pray that the God may never
abolish the eager ambition that profits the state.
For I shall never cease to hold the God as our
protector. (875-885)

The chorus misrepresents Oedipus' tragedy by rationalizing and oversimplifying the relationship of Oedipus' character to his fate. The misreading seems motivated by the chorus' own fear. If disaster strikes the tyrant because of his insolence, then others can find safety in walking humbly. The cause attributed to Oedipus' fall is equally a cause for exempting others from his fate. If one looks at the chorus' bargain with Zeus—their belief in exchange for a pattern of intelligibility—the chorus seems almost to be creating God out of its own need for security. At the center of a play whose theme is the suffering endured by the individual in the pursuit of knowledge, we see the antithetical demand that suffering be made intelligible in the interest of collective security.

From this perspective, the dramatic irony of Oedipus' early speech, in which he promises to relieve the suffering of his people, has a further ironic twist:

I pity you children. You have come full of longing,
but I have known the story before you told it
only too well. I know you are all sick,
yet there is not one of you, sick though you are,
that is as sick as I myself.
Your several sorrows each have single scope
and touch but one of you. My spirit groans
for the city and myself and you at once. (55-65)

Knowing Oedipus' preordained fate, we see how ironic is Oedipus' declaration of altruistic concern. He is the source of Thebes' pollution and is destined to be the greatest sufferer. However, there is yet another way in which

Oedipus unwittingly speaks the truth. Oedipus takes Thebes' sickness upon himself as a kind of scapegoat or sacrificial victim. The ultimate price for intelligibility is paid by the famous solver of riddles.

NOTES

- 1 E. R. Dodds. "On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*." *The Ancient Concept of Progress and Other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1973: 17.
- 2 See Michael J. O'Brien, ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Oedipus Rex: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968: 10-12.
- 3 According to R. P. Winnington-Ingram in "The *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Greek Archaic Thought." *Twentieth Century Views*: 81-89, Sophocles' concern with the split between divine and human planes of existence reflects the influence of Greek Archaic thought.
- 4 David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. Ed. *Greek Tragedies*. Vol. I. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1960.
In their edition of *Oedipus Rex*, Grene and Lattimore have followed standard editorial practice in using traditional line numbers although their own line divisions do not always tally with these numbers. To minimize confusion, I have cited the traditional line numbers printed in the text within which the quoted passage falls.
- 5 Gilbert Murray. *Five Stages of Greek Religion*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955.
- 6 One might consider the Platonic doctrine of recollection, propounded in the *Meno* and *Phaedo* as an alternative development of the religious practice Murray describes. Whereas Plato finds in the notion of origin a source of stability in an unstable world, Sophocles, writing slightly earlier, shows the quest for security and the search for origins leading to unforeseeable disaster. See Eric Havelock. *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics*. 1957; rpt. New Haven: Yale UP, 1964: 25-35.
- 7 In *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Joan Riviere. New York: Livright, 1935, Sigmund Freud writes, "It is a surprising thing that the tragedy of Sophocles does not call up indignant repudiation in his audience. . . . For fundamentally it is an amoral work: it absolves men from moral responsibility, exhibits the gods as promoters of crime and shows the impotence of the moral impulses of men which struggle against crime. It might easily be supposed that the material of the legend had in view an indictment of the gods and of fate; and in the hands of Euripides, the critic and enemy of the gods, it would probably have become such an indictment. But with the devout Sophocles there is no question of an application of that kind. The difficulty is overcome by the pious

sophistry that to bow to the will of the gods is the highest morality even when it promotes crime. I cannot think that this morality is a strong point of the play, but it has no influence on its effect. It is not to it that the auditor reacts but to the secret sense and content of the legend. He reacts as though by self-analysis he had recognized the Oedipus complex in himself and had unveiled the will of the gods and the oracle as exalted disguises of his own unconscious. It is as though he was obliged to remember the two wishes—to do away with his father and in place of him to take his mother to wife—and to be horrified at them” (331).

- 8 H. D. F. Kitto. *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study*. 1952; rpt. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954: 143-144.
- 9 For a sensitive discussion of how contemporary debates about the nature of science and knowledge are echoed in the language of *Oedipus Rex*, see Bernard M. W. Knox. *Oedipus at Thebes*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1957: 107-158.