

Oedipus without Freud

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The Athenian audience that came together at the Festival of Dionysius in 431 B.C. to see Sophocles' Oedipus trilogy would have been very familiar with the ancient myths about the Theban House of Labdacus. Some might even have remembered that the playwright had presented another trilogy of plays a decade previously, based on the same myths.

That Athenian audience of 431 B.C. would have been at a singular disadvantage, however, for they would have known nothing, not a single word, about the Oedipus Complex, for Sigmund Freud did not introduce that theory until 1899, in his *Interpretation of Dreams*.

"Oedipus' fate moves us," Freud argued, "only because it might have been our own, because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother, and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so."

That, in brief, is what Freud said. But what would the play say to us, if we, like the Athenians of the 5th century B.C., had never heard of the Oedipus Complex?

That is the question I will address in this paper.

It was the height of the glory of Periclean Athens, when Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* was first performed, and in that exhilarating atmosphere of triumph there were also swirling controversies. The questions raised by the thinkers we would today identify as philosophers and scientists had a most disturbing impact on religion, casting doubt on the very existence of the Olympian deities. A surviving fragment of Protagoras suggests the skepticism of the day: "Concerning the gods," Protagoras wrote, "I do not know whether they exist or do not exist."

There were still contemporaries of Sophocles, of course, who believed that sickness could only be healed by propitiating Apollo. But there were also those who argued, like Hippocrates and his disciples, that disease could be cured only by observing symptoms and attempting diagnoses.

This challenge to the gods could even be observed in sculpture, where humans were presented with such an exalted, idealized dignity that it seemed to put man on a level with the gods. The whole fabric of religion, in fact, was called in question by philosophers, and Protagoras had boldly led the way by asserting that man is the measure of all things.

That skepticism also cast doubts on the validity of oracles. Thucydides, for example, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* observed that during the great plague of Athens (430-429 B.C.), the advice of soothsayers and oracles were wildly contradictory. "Supplication in temples, enquiries of oracles," Thucydides wrote, "were utterly useless."

It is into this very atmosphere of skepticism, that Sophocles offers up the familiar myth of Oedipus, where oracles are central to the action of the play. Sophocles presents

the story of Oedipus in a new light, as a commentary, perhaps, on the burning questions of his day.

What every Athenian knew about Oedipus, before the play began, was this: he was the child of King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes, but because an oracle had warned the royal couple that any son born to them would kill his father, they decided to pierce the child's ankles (hence his name, Oedipus, which means "swollen foot") and expose him to die on the mountain side. A servant, a shepherd, assigned this task, took pity on the child, however, and gave him to a shepherd from Corinth, on the other side of Mount Cithaeron. Polybus and Merope, the childless king and queen of Corinth, adopt, and raise this child as their own. At a banquet, a drunken man declares that Oedipus is not the child of Polybus and Merope. Oedipus then confronts the king and queen and asks if he is truly their son. They respond that he is their son, but Oedipus is not satisfied, and makes the arduous pilgrimage to Delphi to seek the truth from Apollo's oracle.

He asks the oracle, "Are Polybus and Merope my true parents?"

The oracle, noted for its riddling ambiguity, does not answer his question directly, but terrifies him by stating that Oedipus will murder his father and commit incest with his mother.

Oedipus is so distraught that he vows that he will never return to Corinth. On his wanderings, he has two significant encounters. At a place where three roads meet, an arrogant man, traveling with several servants, attempts to force Oedipus off the path.

Oedipus, enraged, kills them all (or thinks he does).

He next encounters a sphinx (head of a woman, body of a lion, wings of an eagle, literally meaning "strangler"), who has been playing a deadly game with travelers. She

poses a riddle, and if the traveler cannot answer it, she devours him or her on the spot. By the time Oedipus confronts the sphinx, she has had a very long winning streak.

The sphinx puts her question to Oedipus: “What walks on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening?”

Oedipus, apparently a master of metaphors, promptly answers, “Man.”

The sphinx, so furious at this abrupt end to her winning streak, leaps off of a cliff to her death.

These encounters establish two important characteristics of Oedipus: his towering physical strength, and his superior intellect. No other human, remember, had been able to solve the riddle of the sphinx.

Oedipus travels on to Thebes, where the citizens are so gratified to be freed from the curse of the sphinx that the crown is offered to him, for their king, Laius, had been murdered, so the story goes, by a band of highway robbers. Oedipus accepts the kingship, and, perhaps in a move to forestall factional opposition, marries Jocasta, the widow of the former king.

It is at this point in the myth where Sophocles begins his play, *Oedipus the King*. (Two other plays about the myth would also have been performed that day, but they are lost. What ordinarily passes today as *The Oedipus Cycle* is one play each from three different trilogies, written over a period of almost four decades.)

Almost immediately in this 431 B.C. production, there is a tension between what the audience knows and Oedipus does not, and the irony is almost suffocating.

In the opening scene, Oedipus addresses a group of priests and suppliants, who are bringing offerings for Apollo’s altar. His language is majestic, as befits a king, but it

is also condescending, as he speaks of the suppliants as “my children,” and even of “my altar.”

Some time has passed since Oedipus had become king of Thebes, for his wife Jocasta, has borne him four children, but the Thebans are once again suffering from a plague, and they do not know the cause, which is why they are supplicating Apollo. The priest also calls on Oedipus to do something, to save their city once again.

Oedipus, always ten steps ahead of everyone else, has already sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to the Oracle at Delphi to seek the advice of Apollo. In the course of some 30 lines, Oedipus, like a prosecuting attorney or a detective, fires fifteen questions at the returning Creon.

“What’s the source of the trouble?”

“How can we cleanse ourselves—what rites?”

He (and the audience) learns that the source of the new plague on Thebes is because of city's failure to find and punish, with death or exile, the killers of Laius.

Oedipus immediately takes on the search for the killers. “I’ll bring it all to light myself,” he declares, in the first many images about seeing and knowing, blindness and ignorance.

He also does something, which might be passed over lightly by post-Freudian audiences, but would have been fraught with peril to the Athenians of the 5th century B.C. He asks the priests and suppliants to take up their offerings at the altar of Apollo, a shocking request, for religious protocol required that offerings to Apollo must remain on the altar until the prayers were answered. It is shocking also because it seems to signal that Oedipus believes that his powerful mind is sufficient to solve this murder mystery,

this cold case. This great and powerful man, then, is one of those skeptics, who disdains the gods, and seems to embrace the idea that man is the measure of all things. It is worth remembering, too, that the root of his name means, not only "swollen foot," but also "to know."

A chorus, representing the citizens of Thebes, comes forward and, not knowing of the news from Delphi, offer prayers to Zeus, Athena, Artemis, and Dionysius for the relief of the city.

Oedipus offers them words that are both encouraging—and terrifying: "You pray to the gods? Let *me* grant your prayers."

Tiresias, the blind seer, is asked to offer his insights, and Oedipus, initially, follows the lead of the chorus in humbly asking for his assistance in finding the killers of Laius. But when Tiresias is uncooperative, Oedipus loses his temper, calling the seer "the scum of the earth, who'd enrage a heart of stone."

In the confrontation with Tiresias, we see one other trait of Oedipus, and it is not a pretty one. That very great mind, which is so extraordinary, can also be impulsive and, worse yet, he will believe whatever idea to which his mind has leaped.

"Now I see it all," he shouts at Tiresias, "You helped hatch the plot, you did the work, yes, short of killing him with your own hands—and given eyes I'd say you did the killing single-handed!"

This goads Tiresias to reveal what he has not wanted to bring to light: "You are the curse, the corruption of the land! I say you are the murderer you hunt."

That is plain enough to the audience, but Oedipus finds this incredulous, outrageous, for he knows that he never met Laius. His quick mind takes another leap, now accusing his brother-in-law, Creon, of conspiring with Tiresias to overthrow him.

Creon defends himself by arguing that he much prefers his present position, as an advisor to the king, with plenty of power and not any of the responsibilities. This only enrages Oedipus further, who sees this defense as only a feeble attempt to cover up his plot. The argument turns bitter and, in one of those wonderful touches of Sophoclean irony, Jocasta confronts them, like a mother using her authority to scold and separate two squabbling children.

To temper the rage Oedipus still feels about Tiresias' prophecy, Jocasta then tells Oedipus a story that demonstrates that oracles are often untrue. The tale she tells is of the false prophecy that Laius, if he had a son, would be slain by that child.

"There, you see," she says, "Apollo brought neither thing to pass."

Oedipus' discerning intelligence does not connect her tale with the prophecy that the Oracle of Delphi uttered about his future, for he knows that Polybus and Merope, of Corinth, are his parents. He is struck, however, by another odd coincidence: Laius was killed at a place where three roads meet, and Oedipus recalls having killed a man, several men, who tried to force him off the path at that very place. He is horrified, at this point, only at the possibility that he may have committed the terrible crime of regicide, the killing of a king.

He resumes his prosecutor/detective mode, and badgers Jocasta with questions until he gathers all the evidence that she can provide. He even asks what Laius looked

like, and in that chilling irony for which the play is so universally admired, Jocasta replies, “He was featured like you.”

There is one survivor of that attack on Laius, a servant who said they were assaulted by a band of highway robbers. If the servant's story is true, then Oedipus could not have been the murderer of Laius, for he was traveling alone. That servant holds the key, Oedipus believes, and he is sent for forthwith. Oedipus is seeking, above all, the truth, but he is still hoping that the man he killed at the place where three roads meet was not Laius.

A very brief scene follows where Jocasta, on her own, furtively brings offerings to the altar of Apollo, seeking the intervention of the very god she had skeptically dismissed as irrelevant.

A messenger arrives from Corinth, with news, Polybus has died, and the Corinthians are inviting Oedipus to be their king. Jocasta immediately recognizes the significance of this: if Polybus has died in Corinth, while Oedipus was in Thebes, it is proof, once again, that oracles are of no consequence.

Jocasta, thrilled by this message from across the mountain, proclaims, “You prophecies of the gods, where are you now? This is the man Oedipus feared for years, he fled him, not to kill him—and now he’s dead, quite by chance, a normal, natural death, not murdered by his son.”

Oedipus is also rapturous: “Jocasta, why look to the prophet’s hearth, the fires of the future? Why scan the birds that scream above our heads? They winged me on to the murder of my father, did they? That was my doom? Well, look, he’s dead and buried, hidden under the earth. And here I am in Thebes, I never put hand to sword—unless some

longing for me wasted him away, then in a sense you'd say I caused his death. But now, all those prophecies I feared—Polybus packs them off to sleep with him in hell! They're nothing, worthless.”

The Greek audience, no doubt, would tremble with the knowledge it had, that Oedipus and Jocasta could not yet see.

But the joy that Oedipus feels is only momentary, for he reflects that the other part of the oracle, that he would sleep with his mother, could still come about.

Once again, Jocasta offers comforting assurances: “What should a man fear? It's all chance, chance rules our lives. Not a man on earth can see a day ahead, groping through the dark. Better to live at random, best we can.”

Jocasta, we see, can also think like a skeptical philosopher of the 5th century B.C. She continues consoling Oedipus, however, sounding now like a 21st century psychiatrist: “And as for marriage with your mother—have no fear. Many a man before you, in his dreams, has shared his mother's bed. Take such things for shadows, nothing at all—Live, Oedipus, as if there's no tomorrow.”

The Corinthian messenger, who has heard these expressions of joy and foreboding, can contain himself no longer. “You've really nothing to fear,” he says, “Polybus was nothing to you.”

Oedipus demands to know what he means, how he knows this.

The messenger, certain that his words will relieve Oedipus' fears, responds that he was that very shepherd who was given the ankle-bound boy on Mt. Cithaeron, and presented that child to Polybus and Merope.

Oedipus, the man who thought his mind could solve any problem, be the measure of all things, does not even know who he is.

The shocks to his psyche, to his intellect, are not yet at an end.

The servant sent for earlier, the one who witnessed the murder of Laius, now arrives, and he (conveniently) is also the shepherd who took that infant boy from the hands of Laius to expose him on the mountainside.

The servant does not speak willingly, for he fears that there will be terrible consequences if he does. Oedipus, that man of great physical prowess, orders his guards to twist the arms of the shepherd, and threatens further torture, even death, if he does not answer honestly.

Jocasta, who has put all the pieces of the puzzle together and realizes that this Oedipus is the very child she and Laius vainly sought to have killed, makes several attempts to dissuade Oedipus from continuing this interrogation. Oedipus, intent on finding out the truth, ignores her pleas. Jocasta turns away, and silently goes in to the palace.

The rapid-fire questions, about a dozen in less than thirty lines, brings Oedipus to a level of understanding with the audience. He now knows all: even though he made heroic efforts to avoid evil deeds, he is guilty of parricide, regicide, and incest, much as the oracle had predicted.

Some modern scholars, and many modern theatergoers, argue that all of this came about because Oedipus was fated to do so, and that Sophocles wrote the play to demonstrate that we cannot escape our fate.

This, it seems to me, is running away from the central issues of the play, much the way some people choose to simplify the complexities of life by saying that such and such an event was "bound to happen," or "that it was meant to be."

The final harrowing moments of the play suggest that Sophocles was looking beyond the issue of fate.

"O god," Oedipus declares before rushing into the palace, "all come true, all burst to light! O light—now let me look my last on you!"

The chorus, in a variation on a theme that appears in many Greek tragedies, now views Oedipus as "a great example" of the uncertainties of human existence, and laments that no man can be considered blessed who still has breath, which is a very different thing from saying that man cannot escape his fate.

This pessimistic view of life is interrupted by the arrival of a messenger from within the palace who can, and does, give a vivid blow-by-blow account of the violence that, because of a religious prohibition, could not be acted out on the stage sacred to Dionysius.

Oedipus, the messenger reports, burst in to the palace, screaming, calling for a sword, seeking Jocasta, perhaps to kill her (a point that Freud apparently disregarded), only to find that she has hanged herself. Oedipus takes her body down, and rips off the golden pins fastening her robe, and plunges the pins into his eyes.

The symbolic nature of this act is obvious: the blind seer, Tiresias, whom Oedipus jeered, could see very clearly, while the sighted Oedipus was blind. But there is more.

The blind Oedipus, led by a small boy, comes out from the palace. The chorus pities him, and asks: “What god, what dark power leapt beyond all bounds, beyond belief, to crush your wretched life? —godforsaken, cursed by the gods!”

Oedipus responds, “Apollo, friends, Apollo, he ordained my agonies—these, my pains on pains!” Such a response would seem to merely confirm that he has accepted the fate that the gods have decreed for him. He does not say, however, as Agamemnon did, in Homer’s *The Iliad* (19, 86-90): “I am not responsible [for killing] but Zeus is, and Destiny.”

But Oedipus adds, “But the hand that struck my eyes was mine, mine alone—no one else—I did it all myself!”

Yes, he seems to say, I am guilty of regicide, parricide, and incest and, fate or not, I am responsible for these terrible deeds, and I accept the punishment of banishment.

Perhaps Sophocles was presenting fate, not as something the gods inflict on mortals, but what mortals inflict on themselves. “Man's character is his fate,” Heraclitus had proclaimed, and surely the character of Oedipus had much to do with course of action he chose to follow. “Fate,” Jawaharlal Nehru said, “is the cards you are dealt; free will is how you play your hand.” There were other cards that Oedipus might have played, but he did not do so.

The chorus, as in so many Greek tragedies, has the final words, and they reiterate the pious pessimism, attributed to Solon, and repeated in many plays: “Count no mortal happy till he passed the final limit of his life secure from pain.”

The myth of Oedipus, in Sophocles' hands, seems to go beyond another somber warning about the uncertainties of human life. It is also a cautionary tale about the limits

and uncertainties of human intelligence, addressed alike to those who would put their faith in every utterance of the oracles, but also to those skeptical thinkers who were eager to embrace the idea that man is the measure of all things.

Sophocles seems to be calling for a wider view of the universe, and I would like to conclude by borrowing from Shakespeare's Hamlet, who chides Horatio in much the manner which I believe Sophocles might have addressed believers and skeptics of his day: There are more things in heaven and earth, you Greeks, than are dreamt of in your philosophies.

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