

Still Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Tyrannos*

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Abstract

In modern literary analysis of Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannos, many scholars apply theories upon the play without noting or including textual scholarship or authorial intention into their criticism, resulting in anachronism and misinterpretation of the Greek tragedy. In providing criticism of the Oedipus that displays importance for historical contexts, I assert each scholar's duty to ensure the proper continuation of the Oedipus in literary criticism so that this valuable work of art may live on respectably. Despite critics such as E.R. Dodds, who have reminded scholars of our intended focus on the tragedy, many scholars still loosely apply modern ideological theories, misinterpreting the play and ignoring key elements and conventions that compose the intentions of the tragedy. Using Aristotelian support in my argument, I provide readers and viewers of the Oedipus Tyrannos with a perspective that will consider Sophocles' intentions for the tragedy within the context of the fifth century B.C., so we can limit misinterpretations and anachronisms in modern criticism as we encounter this work of art.

Since the fifth century B.C., a large discussion of Sophocles' objective in the *Oedipus Tyrannos* has accumulated in written criticism, debating the character of Oedipus and how responsible he is for his actions. However, if we are to attempt to understand Sophocles' objective, or at the very least intelligibly discuss it in any manner, we must look at *Oedipus Tyrannos* from the perspective of the Greeks in that era. It is utterly useless to attempt to apply any ideological or modern theory or principle to the play in an attempt to address these concerns. If justice is to be done in discussion and analysis, we must adapt the mindset of the culture of that time and view the tragedy in terms of its emotional effects on the Greek audience as Sophocles' contemporaries, such as Aristotle, would have. Without doing so, the results of our own cultural views upon the play are hazardous, since that would imply Sophocles' culture and ideas are synonymous with those in this era, which would result in an anachronistic crime. In light of addressing modern critics' views of free will or determinism, E.R. Dodds said, "we are examining the intentions of a dramatist, and we are not entitled to ask questions that the dramatist did not intend us to ask" (40), and "we [Dodds's emphasis] think of two clear-cut alternative views [. . .]. But fifth century Greeks did not think in these terms [. . .]" (42). Agreeing with Dodds, I confront the current interpretations that seem to ignore Dodds's warnings and advice of relying on Greek culture, history, and tragic conventions as the basis for our analysis and what we should address when viewing, reading, and studying the tragedy. Examples of these interpretations are evident in some critics such as Simon O. Lesser, who views the play from a psychoanalytic perspective. To understand *Oedipus Tyrannos* we must examine Sophocles' intentions for both the nature of Oedipus and the nature of the gods as though we were the Greek audience. Confronting many modern views of the *Oedipus*, we must affirm textual scholarship, cultural studies, historical scholarship, and authorial intention. If any of my ideas or notions presented throughout my analysis seem redundant and pre-established to any classical scholars, I must sympathize with Dodds on the continual "flogging a dead horse" of these "ancient confusions" – apparently, the animal of misinterpretation that Dodds attempted to thwart is *still* alive (38).

I will begin by addressing the issue of Sophocles' intentions for Oedipus. More specifically, I wish to clarify and establish how we should look at the character of Oedipus in the context of the Greek tragic plot. Many critics are guilty of far too much analysis into the character of Oedipus. For example, Simon Lesser argues the importance of the concept of "two" while discussing the play. Though he initially draws upon brief historical context, Lesser also continues to draw attention to the two levels of drama – what he terms as "foreground drama" and "background drama," or expressed drama and implied drama, which are informed by ideological theory. He uses aspects of this point throughout his lengthy analysis of Oedipus with psychoanalytic views of his mental processes, which is what he believes has been slightly addressed by other critics but not substantially enough for a proper reading of the *Oedipus*. Lesser's focus upon "background drama" (Lesser's inferred psychology) completely ignores what Dodds establishes as "an essential critical principle" that "*what is not mentioned in the play does not exist* [Dodds's emphasis]" (40). That is, since

Sophocles does not mention Oedipus's thought processes directly or indirectly in the tragedy, we ought not to impose them into it and ask questions that lie outside of his objectives. In Lesser's psychoanalytic interpretation, he intends to explicate the *Oedipus* as displaying the emergence of two levels of drama, relying on ironic structures evident in the play. In doing so, he attempts to assert Oedipus's guilt for not avoiding his killing of the travelers and his marriage to someone old enough to be his mother. Thus, Lesser infers that his oedipal mentality shows that there is "no chance [. . .] that this [marriage to someone as old as his mother] could have passed unnoticed" (192). Through oedipal, Freudian psychology, this seems acceptable. Nevertheless, I urge that we analyze the tragedy as Greek drama and not analyze it as though a modern perspective can be superimposed upon the play's structure and worldview. My primary goal is to address what is present in the play and not add to it as we examine Oedipus's character. We must take Oedipus for what he *does* and not for what he *could* or *should* do. Hence, my notion that we should be mindful of Sophocles' intentions in regards to Oedipus' innate psychology, so that we can avoid the pitfall of anachronism.

Continuing with another misinterpretation of the character of Oedipus, a further criticism made to Oedipus is that he is completely guilty of his crimes. If Oedipus is guilty or has no complete control of his decisions, I would have to say that this tragedy is a complete failure with entirely different effects on the Greek audience. This criticism results in a new plot of the *Oedipus*. The primary aspect of the Greek tragedy is the emotional affect it has on the audience through formal and affective conventions, as Aristotle postulated. Since the primary emotions transferred in a Greek tragedy are fear and pity, the protagonist should invoke these emotions by his reactions to his environment and setting both in act and word. If Oedipus is fully guilty of his crimes due to *hubris*, I, as an advocate of Greek historical and cultural contexts, have neither pity nor fear to see someone receive just what he deserves for his actions – by watching a criminal receive justice. Conversely, I have pity and fear for the character of Oedipus if he is fully innocent; however, in this type of criticism, Sophocles' formal conventions are lost, as no *hubris* would exist for *hamartia* to stem the reversal, or *peripeteia*. For historical and contemporary support, especially concerning the affective conventions of Greek tragedy, we should rely on a Greek contemporary, Aristotle in the *Poetics* (currently believed to be one of his student's lecture notes), to shed some light on how the plot and protagonist can achieve the ideal emotional intentions, especially since Aristotle believed that the *Oedipus* was the exemplum of Greek tragedy in this way.

Since I support the interpretation presented by Aristotle and Dodds, I will disagree with R. Drew Griffith in his unsourced comment, "Texts contemporary with Sophocles suggest that, while feeling about the play much as we do, many members of its original audience would have questioned Dodds's analysis" (194). In chapter 13 of the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines the ideal plot structure for a Greek tragedy. He establishes that the plot must have the protagonist falling in action not due to evil, but to *hamartia*. *Hamartia* is either "a definite action or failure to act" where "the fortunes of the hero of a tragedy are reversed" ("*Hamartia*"). More accurately, *hamartia* is an archery term defined as "to miss a mark" ("*ἁμαρτάνω*"). But I stress that *hamartia* is an action taken without complete awareness of

the consequences. Thus, Oedipus's deed, which begins his downfall, makes him somewhat innocent in his parricide and incest that he commits. In fact, we should additionally note that Oedipus, while running from his *moira* that Apollo had prophesied, unknowingly falls into that which he assumes he has escaped. I would further argue against Griffith's inclusion of *hubris* into the analysis of Oedipus's guilt. "He killed Laius by free choice, thereby abdicating any claim to essential moral innocence," says Griffith, as he expounds on fifth century Greek legal proceedings and announces Oedipus not morally innocent (204), but I believe this is far from the intentions of Sophocles and the Greeks' reception of the tragedy.

Even though *hubris* is "overweening insolence" to the extent of violence and a flaw in Oedipus, it is merely the character's motivation in the plot for the *hamartia* ("*Hubris*"). I trust that I can interpret Oedipus's violent pride as such by comparing the crossroads scene to how the character later treats Teiresias in lines 340-526 and Creon in lines 594-750, and the Chorus echoes this trait in line 963 as "Pride breeds the tyrant." Considering Oedipus' *hubris* and his *hamartia*, I do not wish to prove Oedipus not guilty, but I do not wish to prove his innocence. My discussion of *hubris* and *hamartia* extend as far as an argument might go that respects the integrity of the Greek tragic drama. To return to Aristotle's *Poetics*, I conclude that the Greeks were not primarily concerned with the specific morality of the tragic protagonist at all, especially because he "is one who is not preeminent in virtue and justice, and one who falls into affliction not because of evil and wickedness [. . .]" (44). The resulting fear and pity from tragedy originates from our reaction to the plot structure and construction and development of the protagonist - "towards one who is like ourselves," says Aristotle in the *Poetics* (163). How can Oedipus be either fully guilty or innocent, and we still have this emotional effect from they play? The answer is we do not; he is as innocent as he is guilty. Therefore, in response to those who wish to assign guilt to Oedipus or otherwise vindicate him, I respond, as I believe the Greeks would: If you wish to say so, he is only as guilty and fated as we are.

In addition to analyzing what I believe to be Sophocles' intentions with Oedipus' character, an effective study also needs to address Sophocles' intention with the nature of the gods. It is necessary to quote Dodds again in his observation concerning Apollo's oracle, "The oracle was *unconditional* [Dodds's emphasis] [. . .]. Equally unconditional was the original oracle given to Laius: Apollo said that he *must* [Dodds's emphasis] die at the hands of Jocasta's child; there is no saving clause" (41). But in Dodds's research, he does encounter in Aeschylus' *Septem* that Laius's oracle was conditional, saying "Do not beget a child; for if you do, that child will kill you" (41). It is important to ask ourselves Sophocles' intentions for altering the oracle from conditional to unconditional and notice how that might change the tragedy. In fact, the *Oedipus* would not be much of a Greek tragedy at all if the conditional oracle cursed Laius and his family for not heeding its advice. Rather, it would be the fulfillment of Apollo's curse upon the House of Thebes and would not give us necessary elements customary of a Greek tragedy, chiefly the emotional effect. Not only does the change of nature lend itself to tragedy, but it also lends itself unfortunately to the popular debate

of interpretation between Oedipus' free will or his predetermined fate, or *moira*, through the tendency to apply modern views. This issue is probably the hardest to discuss continuously and accurately in the eyes of the Greeks. Thus, most interpretations are skeptical due to inconsistencies, such as Lauren Silberman, who writes, "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" (295). But as we have seen, Apollo did not curse Oedipus at all due to Sophocles actually changing the nature of the oracle. Silberman also relies heavily on determinism so that her only notion of free will lies in her (as Dodds would say) "two clear-cut alternative views" (Dodds 42). Silberman continues, "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 [. . .]. On the other, Oedipus's fate is shown to be the direct result of his actions" (296). So according to Silberman, free will only exists in disbelief. But according to her theory, would not a disbelieving Greek also be predetermined to disbelieve? Moreover, would the actions from that Greek assumed to be, but really not, free? Does a Greek's disbelief abolish forever his need to rely on a deity, even by her interpretation that divine power is itself the product of human mortal desire for securities in an ordered universe? As we can see by forcing modern interpretations upon the *Oedipus*, we raise more questions external of the play than we answer concerning the play and the nature of the gods and of Oedipus.

I will clarify. Our focus should not be between free will and predetermined *moira*, especially since many inconsistencies and contradictions are frequent in the Greeks' belief system and mythology. By altering the nature of the oracle, Sophocles was able to present the gods in conjunction with *moira* – not necessarily in full control of it. That is, through allowing Apollo's oracle to state fact of future events, enacting his prophetic nature, rather than curse the House of Laius, Sophocles prepared the character of Oedipus to act of his own free will throughout events in the play. Though it appears as though I have modernly "taken a side," I will add that Sophocles also wishes for the Greeks to worship the gods reverently. Therefore, our answer lies in Griffith's research, even though I do not advocate his argument: "fate [*moira*] is an impersonal force, not an Olympian deity or even a lackey of the gods like the Furies, and it is as binding upon gods as upon mortals" (Griffith 204-205). (An example of his research can be found in Hesiod's *Theogony* with Fate as the child of Night in line 211.) Again, we see that the oracle merely stated a fact of Oedipus' life, since Phoebus Apollo was a god known for his truthful responses and prophetic abilities, and this fact was Oedipus' *moira*. *Moira*, which appears to reveal time, has acted on Oedipus' life as a metaphysical force solely letting events unfold, allowing Sophocles' cosmic irony to create Oedipus's circumstance. Apollo and his priestess merely played the role of prophetic mediator, since he possesses the power to know the future and to expect certain events in *moira*.

However, this does not reduce the power of the gods. The gods have the power to act, and discussion tends to arise on whether the gods are just by their action or occasional lack of action in the play. Though Sophocles clearly establishes that he did not think "the gods

are in any human sense just [,] he nevertheless held that they are entitled to our worship,” as evident in his style and treatment of the gods (Dodds 47). For the Greeks, the gods were just as much under rule of *moira* as they, but that still did not place the gods’ actions within the grasp of human understanding. I agree with Dodds as he compares the theology of Heraclitus with Sophocles: “there is an objective world-order which man must respect, but which he cannot hope to fully understand” (47). Greeks might have seen some actions in the play to be unjust because the gods did not intervene and might have seen other actions to be just in ways because they did intervene, and vice-versa, complying with the contradictory nature of Greek myth. Either way, the oracle did have intentions by its answers to concerns brought to it; however, those answers were never truly made clear to the audience, revealing Sophocles’ intentions with the mysterious nature of the gods, namely Apollo, as revered deities that cannot be fully comprehended.

Not only are misinterpretations of the *Oedipus* useless and unproductive, but they also lead to a decline in the skillful study of pedagogical works of literary art. Misinterpretations, as I have attempted to display, only raise more confusing questions rather than answer any questions or raise the right questions. That is, the study of literature should propose to advance and cultivate the art of literature as a whole. Therefore, by relying on historical scholarship, authorial intention, textual scholarship, and cultural studies, the integrity of the art will remain intact by allowing the correct and appropriate context – that is, as close as we may possibly come to that cultural context. If we do not abide by these contexts to extrapolate the messages in the *Oedipus* and other great works of Literature, we are asserting that the works’ origins have no great importance, the works’ contexts to be irrelevant, and the authors to be servants to our own intellect, rather than allow our intellect to be expanded by the authors’ geniuses. By ignoring my proposition for correct scholarship, critics, teachers, and students of Literature run the risk of misinterpretation and anachronism by selfishly placing themselves above these works of art and their authors, neglecting the importance of artistic integrity of the *Oedipus* and, furthermore, disrespecting the artistic nature of Literature as a whole.

To examine and discuss the *Oedipus Tyrannos*, we should look at Sophocles’ intentions from the perspective of the contemporary Greeks. Otherwise, we risk inferring modern ideological interpretations from what is not stated or established during the play. Dodds accurately comments, “we are examining the intentions of a dramatist, and we are not entitled to ask questions that the dramatist did not intend us to ask” (40). I believe that in any manner, we should address and ask what Sophocles’ intentions were with the nature of Oedipus and with the nature of the gods. Aristotle’s *Poetics* addresses and defends against clumsy attempts at forcing current Western culture upon the reading and performance of the *Oedipus* by allowing scholars to view the play as if they were a contemporary of Sophocles. I hope that my re-clarification of the *Oedipus* will move critical discussion on the play to new levels and do away with old misinterpretations. I will also add that any critical view will affect future pedagogical literature; thus, we all need to be careful and wise in how we address and treat literature, as it will certainly have its effect on the next generation. Literature is art

and needs extreme care and respect. Even though some notable life questions result from interesting theories of analysis (such as Lesser, Silberman, and Griffith) of great literature as the *Oedipus*, I still urge that we view and teach Sophocles' conventions and intentions with this play as enhanced by textual and historical scholarship. I am not attempting to overthrow theories as a whole, as they can be regarded to reflect authorial intentions. For example, a sociological criticism informed by the New Criticism movement aligns with the *Oedipus's* affective conventions and cultural context. Kenneth Burke in "Literature As Equipment for Living" posits, "Art forms like 'tragedy,' 'comedy,' or 'satire' would be treated as *equipments for living* [Burke's emphasis], that size up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes" (304). He is exactly right, as the *Oedipus's* form holds "sociological" value by invoking fear and pity and supplying us with a *katharsis* of them (a purge, purification, or even understanding of these emotions) (Golden 114-120, 133-137). Sophocles' metaphysical and ethical thematic conventions, plot structure in formal conventions, and intended emotional responses in affective conventions all must focus our discussion. By focusing on these aspects, we might define that the *Oedipus* has a place in literature due to its content, structure, design, and *katharsis*. Observing the tragedy's literary value and even its rich history and culture, particularly the deletion of the tragedy's *exodus* and reinstatement while being preserved in monasteries, I urge the continuation of the *Oedipus Tyrannos* in the literary canon if we call attention to the art forms evident in it respectably and without illogical misinterpretations of Classical Antiquity. After all, this is our duty as a literary community.

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