

Oedipus-- A Victim of Human Free Will

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Abstract: The paper analyzes Sophocles' play, *Oedipus the King*. The major character, Oedipus, becomes a victim of human free will instead of a victim of fate. Certain kinds of behavior, certain choices, lead to certain consequences and the ends of the tragedies give meaning to all that preceded them. This character's errors and weaknesses, such as, his rash flee from Corinth, his ambition to be equal to the god, his hot temper to attack an old man, his pursuit of power and honor, his lack of careful thinking, lead him into misfortune. Our modern conception of tragedy and the 'tragic flaw' of the hero usually involves the concept of hubris, or overweening pride, that leads to disaster.

1 Introduction

In *Poetics*, Aristotle proposes that 'Tragedy is the imitation of an action; and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought; for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves, and these—thought and character—are the two natural causes from which actions spring, and on actions again all success or failure depends.[. . .] Character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse' (Chap.6). If I make it vividly, the connection can be illustrated like this: thought /character → action → success/failure. Then he goes on to say, 'Tragedy serves to arouse the emotions of pity and fear and to effect a catharsis of these emotions. The first essential factor to create a good tragedy is plot. A plot should consist of a hero going from happiness to misery. The misery should be the result of some hamartia, or error, on the part of the hero. A tragic plot must always involve some sort of tragic deed, which can be done or left undone, and this deed can be approached either with full knowledge or in ignorance' (Chap.6). And in Chapter 14 he emphasizes it again: 'The deed of horror may be done, but done in ignorance, and the tie of kinship or friendship be discovered afterwards. The Oedipus of Sophocles is an example. Here, indeed, the incident is outside the drama proper; but cases occur where it falls within the action of the play'. This chart may be illustrated like this: hamartia [in hero's character] → tragic plot [from happiness to misery] → tragic deed [with knowledge or in ignorance] → catharsis [pity and fear]. If we combine these two charts together, it will be like this: hamartia → action → catharsis. We can see clearly that Aristotle points out that errors in hero's character lead to his action, and this action determines his tragedy. The tragedy causes people's pity and fear. In my opinion the action is of human free will.

In this paper, I'd like to analyze *Oedipus the King*. The major character, *Oedipus*, becomes a victim of human free will instead of a victim of fate. We learn that certain kinds of behavior, certain choices, lead to certain consequences. The ends of the tragedies give meaning to all that preceded them, as if to say, these sorts of situations, these sorts of characters, these sorts of decisions, tend to result in this kind of a conclusion. 'The characters' errors and weaknesses lead them into

misfortune' (Bellinger). Tragedy is less a matter of showing how bad people are punished for their crimes, but is more a matter of showing how ignorance and error can have disastrous effects. Our modern conception of tragedy and the 'tragic flaw' of the hero usually involve the concept of hubris, or overweening pride, that leads to disaster.

Religiously Sophocles thought that man must accept the responsibility for his act and their consequences. Regardless of his original motives and inability to control or understand the forces or no matter whether he is conscious about what he means or not, he must be responsible for his act. There was something beyond human being's comprehension. In *Cliff Notes*, we can get a better understanding of Sophocles' viewpoint. 'Sophocles shows that underlying relationships of all things are within the cosmic order. These circumstances set for human beings seem determined by fate, but man always chooses his own deeds, no matter good or bad. And each choice of man predetermined the one that follows' (37). Sophocles thinks living is suffering and people have to strike for happiness in the future. He also believes that life is often cruel, but not in a mess. Thus Oedipus' innocence is not enough for justified explanation. It is Oedipus himself who made his every choice. The first choice predetermined the second one that follows. For example, when he was on his way to Thebes, he met a group of men which he thought may have challenged him. Just because of hot temper, he killed all of them. If he were not that hot-tempered, he would not have happened to kill his father who was among the group. And that road led the hero to Sphinx, his answer to the riddle simply made him the king of the country, and consequently he married the queen of the country who happened to be his blood mother. So *Cliff Notes* comes to this conclusion that 'the first choice predetermined the second one, the second predetermined the third. All these were caused by *harmartia*' (38). Although Oedipus is innocent in motives, this is not enough to absolve him. If he had thought more fully the deep meaning of the oracle and had been more cautious, if he had more thoroughly thought about the rumor about his birth and investigated the implicit death of his predecessor, what might his destiny have been like? Simply because there is a flaw in his personality that is his rashness and overwhelming pride, a man like Oedipus could do such kind of thing. So Oedipus' fall is caused first by his personality, and second by *hamartia*. The fact of the oracle does not remove responsibility from Oedipus. Knox states that Oedipus' acts are not predestined, only predicted. There is essential distinction. There are many such kinds of examples like this. They'll be discussed in details later.

2 Analysis of Oedipus' Free Will and the Consequences

Oedipus is the major role in this play. A lot of critics have written a large number of articles commenting on his character, his destiny and his tragic flaws etc. The humanistic view, eloquently represented by Cedric Whitman, considers Oedipus as 'an individual of heroic grandeur and remarkable energy and courage'. Although life and the gods play the cruel trick on him, he has 'an unflinching determination to learn the truth about himself and has the strength to live with that terrible truth even when its horror is revealed' (Segal 2:168). He maintains that 'the action of the play itself [. . .] is motivated by the free will of the hero' (Rudnytsky 273). Bernard Knox develops a darker version in the humanistic view. The focus is still the hero, but the hero's 'integrity and unyielding devotion to ideals of honor and dignity have another side in stubborn self-centeredness, transgressive overreaching, dangerous overconfidence, and vengefulness' (Segal 2:168). He also recognizes that 'in the play which Sophocles wrote the hero's will is absolutely free and he is fully responsible for the catastrophe,' and yet, 'the play is a terrifying affirmation of the truth of prophecy' (Rudnytsky 273). Charles B. Daniels and Sam Scully believe that Oedipus loves public

recognition and adulation, his temper has a hair trigger, he is disloyal and dishonest toward those closest to him. (39-42) M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern have a point about Oedipus that 'It is not external fate, but rather his own determination to seek out the truth, that brings about his defeat' (309). R.P. Winnington-Ingram points out that 'The divinely appointed destiny of Oedipus comes about—and comes to light—largely through actions on his part which spring directly from his character: character is destiny' (Bloom 136). Charles Segal thinks 'Oedipus' haste and irascibility at crucial moments [particularly in the killing of Laius] contribute to the calamity but are not sufficient reasons for his suffering nor its main cause.[. . .]Sophocles lets us see these events as the natural result of an interaction between character, circumstances in the past, and mere chance combinations in the present' (2:54). I agree with Knox that Oedipus is 'fully responsible for the catastrophe,' I would add that Oedipus is responsible because he makes decisions without careful thought and he is so hot-tempered that his mistakes are beyond retrieval. That is to say, he takes actions just according to his own free will. And this is his fatal flaw. Next I will explain how he reaches his downfall step by step.

2.1. Oedipus' Flee from Corinth

From Oedipus' explanation to Jocasta we begin to know why Oedipus hurried to flee from Corinth. He was jeered at by a drunkard, who said that Oedipus was not his father's son. Oedipus became very angry, but kept his temper and then went to Polybus and Merope the next day. He questioned them closely only to receive their repeated assurance that he was, indeed, their son. Sophocles' description here is really in accordance with real life. Most adopting parents would deny their adoption. Oedipus' reaction to this thing is normal too, just as most adopted children would do. This is 'imitation of life' (Aristotle Chap. 6). Oedipus still kept that suspicion in his mind, then went to the Delphic Oracle to learn the truth. The god didn't give him direct answer, on the contrary, far from explicit. In response to Oedipus' question 'Who are my parents?' the oracle had responded: 'You will kill your father and marry your mother.' Although he consulted the oracle about who his parents were and had it raised the stakes on the answer without providing the question with an answer, Oedipus seems to have done nothing further to try to ascertain what the answer really was. Daniels & Scully think Oedipus is 'easily distracted. He does not have a piercing, focused intellect' (20). In response to the question concerning the identity of his parents, the oracle did not answer that very question, but rather went on to make terrifying, puzzling predictions about horrible things that would happen in the future. In this situation, hearing the mind-riveting prophecies the oracle was making, Oedipus seemed not to notice at the moment that it failed to answer the question he posed and only realized this later. 'He just flees from Corinth because of his dread of public ignominy, or his filial love for Polybus and Merope, or some combination of these or other reasons' (22). As Bloom says, 'It was like Oedipus that he must leave Corinth to discover the truth about his birth' (136). If Oedipus thought over the whole things carefully enough, he would find out that perhaps asking the drunk is a good way to solve his problem of parentage. The drunkard's hearsay would be helpful for him to find the shepherd who had given baby Oedipus to Polybus and Merope. Everything would become clear. Of course it would not be easy. Maybe he had to take the same threatening measures as he took to deal with Teiresias and the Theban shepherd many years later. Or Oedipus just stays at where he is. Since he has known his fate and who his parents are as he believes, he can try to avoid the fulfilment of his fate.

2.2. Oedipus' Killing Laius at the Crossroads

In an attempt to keep the Delphic Oracle's prediction from coming true, Oedipus decides to leave Polybus' kingdom. During his wanderings he meets his real father, Laius, and Laius' retainers at an intersection where the road from Thebes forks to go to Daulia and Delphi. One of the retainers forces Oedipus off the road and, as Laius' carriage passes, Laius knocks him on the head with a stick. In angry retaliation Oedipus kills Laius and all his retainers except one who, unbeknown to Oedipus, escapes. When his father had struck him, Oedipus made him 'pay back no equal share' in turning the blow back fatally upon the attacker.(Segal 2:118) 'I killed them all,' Oedipus says, quite simply, but Laius struck first, and so it seems that to strike back was justifiable homicide. 'Was it justifiable to kill the others, or was that too in self-defense?'(90). And no sign showed that Laius intended to turn back to attack him anew, or that the stick the old man wielded as his carriage rolled by could in any sense be thought a lethal weapon. So Oedipus made his berserk response not in self-defense---in defense, that is, of his life but in 'defense of his macho pride' (Daniels & Scully 78). What is most important is that at the critical moment he seemingly forgot the reason why he consulted the Delphic Oracle. As far as the identity of his real parents was concerned, there was still some question in his mind ---enough doubt to cause him to go Delphi to try to put it to rest. Yet even though Oedipus says the oracle gave no answer to the question of his parentage, he went ahead and behaved as if he had ascertained that Polybus and Merope were his real parents. If one takes the oracle seriously, as Oedipus does by exiling himself from Corinth attempting to avoid the fate it set out for him, one intelligent course for him to take in this attempt is not to kill any older man or marry any older woman until the doubts about his parentage are definitively put to rest. 'Oedipus has simply chosen to ignore a real possibility---that Polybus and Merope are not his parents---a possibility he is demonstrably aware of' (21). Certainly the gods brought Oedipus and Laius together at the place where the three roads meet. But Oedipus has only himself to blame for losing his temper at the swat of a man old enough to be his father. Actually he had had plenty of time beforehand to reflect about the implications of the oracle's prophecy and the still unsettled doubt about who his parents were. In such circumstances, a man would avoid fighting, even quarrelling violently with a man old enough to be his father, especially when his life is in no way threatened---if he were truly prudent and intelligent. He tried to escape his destiny. And if he had a truly creative intelligence, he might have considered many other ways of attempting to do so. There are many strategies a man might employ in an attempt to avoid killing his father. 'A cautionary handlist of do's and do-not's is one, immediate suicide another' (54). Unfortunately, Oedipus simply attacked in anger and started killing. Like father, like son. Can not we say this misfortune is of his own free will?

2.3. Oedipus' Solving Sphinx's Riddle

'For Sophocles the riddle of the Sphinx is a fundamental part of the Oedipus myth' (Segal 2:32). In Daniels& Scully's description Oedipus arrives in Thebes after killing Laius. Because Thebes is attacked by the Sphinx---part woman, part dog, part bird, an monster that poses riddles and kills and eats those who prove unable to solve them--- the death of Laius receives only cursory investigation. (12) Oedipus saves the kingdom from the Sphinx by answering the riddle it poses:

Sphinx: What is two-legged, three-legged, and four-legged?

Oedipus: Man, who first crawls in all fours, then walks, and then uses a cane. (29)

After hearing the answer, Sphinx dashes herself on the ground and dies.

The reward for Oedipus' solving the riddle is the throne and the wife of the deceased Laius. In

the play we can not find explicit record of these occurrences and their circumstances. It is not said, for instance, that throne and queen had been promised as a reward to whoever vanquished the Sphinx. All these facts are taken for granted. King of Thebes, husband to Jocasta, father of four children these are what he [Oedipus] is at the time of the action of the play and king and husband he became by his triumph over the Sphinx. 'His reign had been happy, he was revered by his people, he was regarded as the saviour of the city, he seemed to have been granted all a man can pray for, intellect, wealth, power, glory, ---in brief, happiness' (Kamerbeek 10). As Wilson maintains, 'No one can doubt the real heroism of Oedipus, his brilliant insight in mastering the Sphinx, and his genuine and altogether appropriate concern for his people when they were decimated by the monster' (12). Oedipus is at his peak of life mountain. Now let's have a look at his answer to the riddle of the Sphinx. Oedipus' rationale to it was simply that infants crawl about on four legs, while men walk on two in their prime and rely on a staff in their dotage. 'Nothing here appears too controversial' (Wilson 14). 'In his deeds, he is both the most evil and the most worthy of men' (12).

Charles Segal believes 'by succeeding against the Sphinx, Oedipus wins a bride and kingdom, but he also gains bitter unhappiness' (Segal 2:33). In F.Zeitlin's eyes, 'Oedipus' unique ability on the intellectual level to solve the riddle is commensurate on the familial level with his singular acts of patricide and incest. On the other hand, the full interpretation of the riddle would seem to require that Man must properly be defined in his diachronic dimension' (128). Freidrich Nietzsche viewed Oedipus as the paradigm of man's guilt about his power to dominate nature. To solve the riddle of the Sphinx, he suggests, is to solve 'the riddle of nature' (section 9). As Jean-Joseph Goux, elaborating on the Nietzschean view suggested, 'Oedipus' break with traditional, sacral patterns and his human centered solution to the Sphinx's riddle constitute an act of intellectual hubris that is all the more violent because it is without help from the gods' (Segal 2:38). 'Oedipus' fame and reputation is based above all on his solution of the riddle of the Sphinx' says Knox (1957 31). And in Daniels and Scully's opinion, 'The only intellectual success in his whole life that Oedipus has to boast about is his defeat of the Sphinx' (53). I think whatever answer Oedipus gives to the riddle, his action is against the nature, against the god. He considers himself equal to the god. And this hubris leads to his latter incest.

2.4. Oedipus' Wedding Jocasta

After solving the riddle of Sphinx, Oedipus becomes a hero. He is made king by the Thebans and marries Laius' widow, his own mother, Jocasta. 'Answering the Sphinx's riddle, has now 'found him out' in the terrible riddle of his own life, his 'marriage that is no marriage' ' (Segal 2:105). Vellacott believes 'Oedipus takes it for granted that marrying Laius' widow upon his succession to the throne was perfectly proper' (Vellacott Philip 119). In Charles B. Daniels and Sam Scully's view, Oedipus has a flaw in his character. That is 'his lack of honesty with the person closest to him, his wife.'

Really nobody compelled Oedipus to marry Jocasta. In their view, if Oedipus had not been so eager to obtain the honors Thebes was offering him for his victory over the Sphinx, he might have mentioned to his future wife his uncertainty about his parentage--- even though his speech might have jeopardized his accession to the throne of Thebes, it would have prevented him from committing incest crime. And Laius' widow, too, was old enough to be his mother. Why did not Oedipus investigate her life before the wedding to assure himself he was not marrying his mother? The oracle, after all, had not settled his doubts concerning who his mother really was. He failed to ascertain the answer to this question 'Is this widow I am about to marry my mother?'. No one else but he sought status by putting himself on Laius' throne without investigating Laius' murder, or by

marrying a widowed queen old enough to be his mother without putting to rest, once and for all, the uncertainty about his parentage, or sharing his doubts and history with her. (25-45) Zeitlin has another point of view. He points out that Oedipus, by his marriage to Jocasta, has managed to collapse time itself. He says 'Is not incest, after all, the quintessential act of return: Is not incest the paradigmatic act that destroys time by collapsing the necessary temporal distinctions between generations' (128). He then concludes 'that Oedipus, by killing his father and committing incest with his mother, has moved outside the ordinary course of time. When he killed Laius, he speeded up the process by which he would take his father's place, and when he marries Jocasta, he effects a totally anachronous return to the womb. Thus Zeitlin makes the necessary connection between the solution to the riddle, the physical movement of humankind, and incest' (Wilson 13). Peter L. Rudnytsky proposes that 'the consequence of Oedipus' incest is a doubling of kinship ties that freezes the passage of time and makes Oedipus the contemporary of both his parents' and his children's generation' (278). But who is responsible for this disaster? Of course Oedipus himself should be responsible for it. He ignores the suspicion in his mind and does not reflect on his action carefully. His ambition for power and honor, his rashness in character give rise to his behavior leading to his disaster. This behavior is of his free will again.

2.5. Oedipus' Public Tracing the Murderer

When the play opens Oedipus appears outside his palace to view first-hand the ravages of the plague and the suffering his subjects are undergoing. The citizens of Thebes plead with Oedipus to come to Thebes' rescue a second time. Oedipus informs the people outside his palace that he has sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to the oracle at Delphi to seek advice.

Oedipus seems to be much concerned about his people and his country. But in Daniels and Scully's view, Oedipus is a public posturer. He is 'king, an exceptionally public king, driven, even to the point of foolishness, to seek out and bathe in the limelight' (39). From the latter analysis on Oedipus' public action, their viewpoint is really sound.

Creon soon arrives from Delphi with the oracle. He advises Oedipus to discuss the oracle inside the palace, but is refused. After knowing the oracle: Apollo commands to take revenge upon whoever killed Laius, Oedipus makes a proclamation to all his citizens condemning Laius' killer or killers, as well as anyone who has knowledge of the crime and keeps silent. This proclamation with threat, public bluster, and rhetoric shows Oedipus is a typical politician. Up till now, all the citizens have known that the Delphic Oracle has made a prophecy, what the prophecy is and what will happen to the guilty party. So the investigation of Laius' murder is to take place. Oedipus has hopelessly and unwisely boxed himself in. This constructs the great irony too. Sophocles' spectators have been supposed to know the myth very well. Only Oedipus is blind to the result. The hunter turns out to be the hunted at last. Daniels & Scully comment, 'If Oedipus were wise, or at least concerned with the doubts we later learn he has, doubts that cast a great shadow over his life, he would be more cautious about what he says and does in public' (33). If he had discussed the oracle with Creon in private and kept his investigation out of the public eye, then when he discovered the truth, he could have stopped the plague by quietly leaving Thebes, with no general opprobrium. Frederick Ahl also shows his agreement on this point, 'If Oedipus were to opt for a private presentation of the oracle which he has publicly declared may affect the lives of everyone and solve the enigma of the plague, he would invite public suspicion and ill will. But the alternative proves more devastating. His decision to deal publicly with Creon and the oracle—and indeed with all the others he questions—is a tactical error in an erroneous strategy' (58). As the plot unfolds, we can see Oedipus insists on doing his business and doing it in public, despite the fact that Creon,

Teiresias, Jocasta, the Corinthian messenger, and the survivor-herdsman all indicate one way or another that business need not be done this way and might better proceed out of the public eye.

When Teiresias arrives, he angers Oedipus by an unwillingness to help expose Laius' murderer. The reason why Teiresias refuses to tell the murderer is very clear. But Oedipus' hot temper and stubbornness goads him to come out with what he knows about Laius' death, then when urged on by Oedipus, as bluntly as possible, and in top of that he points to the incestuous marriage in veiled terms. When Oedipus publicly bears the blunt of the terrible words he accuses Teiresias and then Creon of Laius' murder. Then naturally, Teiresias and Creon feel obliged in turn to defend themselves publicly. Jocasta enters suggesting them going into the house. If Oedipus had followed the suggestion, the public might have been kept from the truth about him and Oedipus might have been able to leave Thebes without attendant fanfare, or with the Corinthians' new offer as an excuse.

At the play's end 'Creon enters and confronts the now-blind Oedipus, his first thought is to get Oedipus inside, away from the public gaze' (Daniels & Scully 36). At first, Oedipus does not go in. Finally Creon has to order his attendants to take Oedipus away into the palace. Charles Segal believes 'Concerned about his people, Oedipus insists that the oracle be announced publicly, to all, not kept as a state secret among the leaders' (2: 75). Actually 'it was his foolish preoccupation with bringing still further honors upon himself and his false pride in his intellectual 'genius' that made him carry out an investigation of Laius' murder publicly before the eyes of everyone in Thebes' (Daniels & Scully 45). Oedipus' love of publication makes him lose face before the public.

Later Jocasta has understood the whole truth that Oedipus is Laius' murderer and her own son. She makes a last desperate attempt to dissuade Oedipus from pursuing his 'investigations' further. But Jocasta's pleas irritate Oedipus, who insists he will pursue his investigation, so Oedipus immediately turns on her and publicly accuses her of fearing that people will find out she has married below her station. 'Now their paths diverge, and Oedipus will face the rest of his suffering alone. He, the hunter and searcher, cannot be stopped by her pleas. Her last words to him are those of a mother and wife both. She knows his nature and knows too that her pleas will have no effect, but still, as she begs him four times not to go on with his search, she makes this last desperate attempt to save him' (Segal 2:100).

Daniels and Scully's words give an excellent conclusion to Oedipus' character flaws and their consequences:

Each time people try to shield him from this truth, parts of which bubble to the surface again and again in various forms as the play unfolds, he loses his temper, becomes angry, defensive, and lashed out with ill-founded and completely false accusations against them: that Teiresias, the blind prophet, is a fake who is spreading slander to hide his own complicity in Laius' murder, that Creon, his brother-in-law and friend, masterminded Laius' death and now conspires to overthrow Oedipus himself, and that Jocasta, his wife, is more concerned about her social status and reputation than with his problem. When the truth finally outs, Jocasta hangs herself, and Oedipus puts out his eyes. (43-44)

According to Knox, 'Oedipus did have one freedom: he was free to find out or not find out the truth[. . .]the freedom to search for the truth, the truth about the prophecies, about the gods, about himself. And of this freedom he makes full use. Against the advice and appeals of others, he pushes on, searching for the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth' (Fagles 134-135). But I think Oedipus should have made use of his intellectual skills in searching for the truth. He should have an idea about what can be done and how to do it, what can not be done and how to avoid it instead of doing things on impulse. Just like the old saying: Look before you leap.

3 Conclusion

From the above analysis on the tragic end of the play, we can unavoidably come to the conclusion that it is human free will that causes the tragedy. Oedipus is a victim of human free will instead of the victim of fate. Seemingly his tragic end is destined by the god. But every step he takes proceeds another, and finally leads to his disaster. In Sophocles' viewpoint, 'man has free will but that free will exists within the system of limitations on his activity, waves a network of circumstances which finally can not be broken. That is to say, man has to do their work within a framework. But the chain of circumstances can be broken at any point and man can strike out into another direction' (*Cliff Notes* 37). In Aristotle's *Poetics*, there is no mention of fate at all. However, he makes this point very clear 'errors in hero's character lead to his action, and this action determines his tragedy.' In my opinion this action is of human's own choice, as it were, of human free will. Oedipus' rash flee from Corinth makes him come nearer to his biological parents. If he had just stayed at where he is, since he has known his fate and who his parents are as he believes, he might have avoided the fulfillment of his fate. His ambition to be equal to the god makes him solve Sphinx's riddle. His pursuit of power and honour, his lack of careful thinking cause his marriage with Jocasta—his mother. At last his refusal to obey Jocasta and his insistence on public tracing the murderer lead to his truth known to the public. The result of it is Jocasta's suicide and his own blinding. In one word, his free will with errors in character brings him tragedy.

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