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Oedipus the King

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Sophocles

Oedipus the King

Sophocles of Kolonos (c. 496 - c. 406 BCE) was one of the most famous and celebrated writers of tragedy plays in ancient **Greece** and his surviving works, written throughout the 5th century BCE, include such classics as *Oedipus the King*, *Antigone*, and *Women of Trachis*. As with other **Greek** plays, Sophocles' work is not only a record of **Greek theatre** but also provides an invaluable insight into many of political and social aspects of ancient Greece, from family relations to details of **Greek religion**. In addition, Sophocles' innovations in theatre presentation would provide the foundations for all future western dramatic performance, and his plays continue to be performed today in theatres around the world.

The Greek world had three great tragedians: **Aeschylus** (c. 525 - c. 456 BCE) **Euripides** (c. 484 - 407 BCE), and Sophocles. Their works were usually first performed in groups of threes (not necessarily trilogies) in such religious festivals as the competitions of **Dionysos** Eleuthereus, notably the **City** Dionysia in **Athens**. The plays were often performed again in lesser theatres around Greece, and the best were even distributed in written form for public reading, kept as official state documents for posterity, and studied as part of the standard Greek education.

LIFE

Sophocles had an exceptionally long career. His first competition entry was in 468 BCE and his last (whilst still alive) was in 406 BCE when he was 90. Clearly a great admirer of his fellow playwrights, Sophocles even dressed the actors and chorus of his final play in mourning to mark the death of Euripides in 407 BCE. Sophocles won at least 20 festival competitions, including 18 at the City Dionysia. He also came second many times and never had the ignominy of being voted third and last in competitions. Sophocles

was, therefore, at least in terms of victories, the most successful of the three great tragedians.

As a child, Sophocles had been the chief dancer in the festivities to celebrate victory over the Persians in 479 BCE. Early in his career Sophocles even acted in his own plays, but due to a weak voice he settled into the role of writer only. The playwright, based on his practical experience of acting no doubt, seems to have had a favourite principal actor, one Tlepolemus. As to Sophocles' character we have hint from **Aristophanes**, the great writer of **Greek Comedy**, who describes **contemporary** as 'easy-going' and 'relaxed'.

Outside of theatre life, Sophocles was also an active member of the **Athropolis**. **He was a state treasurer** (*bellenotamiai*) between 443 and 442 BCE and a general (alongside Pericles) involved with putting down the revolt on Samos in c. 441 D. **In 413 BCE he sat on the ten-man council** (the *probouloi*) which was convened to deal with the crisis of Athens' failed Sicilian expedition against Syracuse. In later life the playwright was involved in a legal **battle** with his son who claimed his father was senile and so sought his inheritance and control of the family property. We know that Sophocles was a pious individual and actually a priest in the hero cult of Halon. Following his death, the tragedian was himself honoured with a cult he was renamed Dexion.

APPROACH & INNOVATION

Tremendously popular in his own time, Sophocles was also an innovative playwright, as he added a third actor to the tragedy play format and was the first to employ painted scenery (to suggest a rural scene, for example), sometimes even changing scenery during the play. The use of three actors playing multiple roles and wearing masks was a major breakthrough as now much more sophisticated plots became possible. Sophocles, therefore, stands between the earlier Aeschylus and the later Euripides. Sophocles was more interested in realistic action than his predecessors but kept the chorus segment a group of up to 15 actors who sang rather than spoke their lines as more participatory cast member than his successors. For Sophocles the chorus became both a protagonist and a commentator on the events of the play, creating a closer relationship with the audience.

Sophocles was also great user of theatrical metaphor, for example, blindness in the **Oedipus** plays and bestiality in *Women of Trachis*, and his work in general sought to

provoke and disturb the audience from their ready acceptance of what is 'normal' and what is not, forcing them through the play's characters to make difficult or even impossible choices. Other techniques he used to convey meaning and emphasis were dramatic entrances and exits of actors and repeated use of significant props such as urn in *Electra* and the sword in *Ajax*. Finally, in the language itself that Sophocles used we see more innovation. Rich language, highly formalized but with flexibility added by running over sentences and including segments of more 'natural' speech, and the unusual use of pauses result in Sophocles achieving a greater rhythm fluidity, and dramatic tension than his contemporaries.

The plays of Sophocles, like those of his contemporaries, drew on classic tales of **Greek mythology**. This was the convention of tragedy (*tragoida*), and the familiarity of the story and setting to the audience allowed the writer to focus on specific elements and interpret them in a novel way. Sophocles is very often not so concerned with what happened the audience already knew this but with *how* these events happened. Another typical feature is that amongst the principal characters, there is usually a hero figure with exceptional abilities whose over-confidence and pride ensure a tragic ending.

One of his most famous works is *Antigone* in which the lead character pays the ultimate price for burying her brother Polynices against the wishes of King Kreon of **Thebes**. It is a classic situation of tragedy - the political right of having the traitor Polynices denied burial rites is contrasted against the moral right of a sister seeking to lay to rest her brother. A theme that runs through Sophocles' work is right battling against right and that the characters are mistaken in their interpretation of events. Only when tragedy results, when in fact, it is all too late, do the characters recognize truth.

SOPHOCLES' WORKS

We know that Sophocles wrote around 120 plays in all but these have survived only in a fragmentary form. A reasonable chunk of the satyr play *The Searchers* survives but in many cases only a few lines have withstood the ravages of time. Sophocles' seven surviving full plays are:

- *Antigone* (c. 442 BCE) about a woman torn between public and private duty.
- *Oedipus The King* (429 - 420 BCE) about the famous king who loved his mother a little too much.

- *Philoctetes*(409 BCE) on how Odysseus persuades the hero to join the **Trojan War**.
- *Oedipus at Colonus*(401 BCE) the final part of the trilogy about Oedipus.
- *Ajax* (date unknown) on the hero of the Trojan War and his wounded pride.
- *Electra* (date unknown) about two siblings who take revenge for their father's murder.
- *Women of Trachis* (date unknown) about the wife of **Hercules** and her failed attempt to regain her husband's affections.

Summary

Oedipus steps out of the royal palace of Thebes and is greeted by a procession of priests, who are in turn surrounded by the impoverished and sorrowful citizens of Thebes. The citizens carry branches wrapped in wool, which they offer to the gods as gifts. Thebes has been struck by a plague, the citizens are dying, and no one knows how to put an end to it. Oedipus asks a priest why the citizens have gathered around the palace. The priest responds that the city is dying and asks the king to save Thebes. Oedipus replies that he sees and understands the terrible fate of Thebes, and that no one is more sorrowful than he. He has sent Creon, his brother-in-law and fellow ruler, to the Delphic oracle to find out how to stop the plague. Just then, Creon arrives, and Oedipus asks what the oracle has said. Creon asks Oedipus if he wants to hear the news in private, but Oedipus insists that all the citizens hear. Creon then tells what he has learned from the god Apollo, who spoke through the oracle: the murderer of Laius, who ruled Thebes before Oedipus, is in Thebes. He must be driven out in order for the plague to end.

Creon goes on to tell the story of Laius's murder. On their way to consult an oracle, Laius and all but one of his fellow travelers were killed by thieves. Oedipus asks why the Thebans made no attempt to find the murderers, and Creon reminds him that Thebes was then more concerned with the curse of the Sphinx. Hearing this, Oedipus resolves to solve the mystery of Laius's murder.

The Chorus enters, calling on the gods Apollo, Athena, and Artemis to save Thebes. Apparently, it has not heard Creon's news about Laius's murderer. It bemoans the state of Thebes, and finally invokes Dionysus, whose mother was a Theban. Oedipus returns and tells the Chorus that he will end the plague himself. He asks if anyone knows who killed

Laius, promising that the informant will be rewarded and the murderer will receive no harsher punishment than exile. No one responds, and Oedipus furiously curses Laius's murderer and anyone who is protecting him. Oedipus curses himself, proclaiming that should he discover the murderer to be a member of his own family, that person should be struck by the same exile and harsh treatment that he has just wished on the murderer. Oedipus castigates the citizens of Thebes for letting the murderer go unknown so long. The Leader of the Chorus suggests that Oedipus call for Tiresias, a great prophet, and Oedipus responds that he has already done so.

Analysis

Oedipus is notable for his compassion, his sense of justice, his swiftness of thought and action, and his candor. At this early stage in the play, Oedipus represents all that an Athenian audience –or indeed any audience—could desire in a citizen or a leader. In his first speech, which he delivers to an old priest whose suffering he seeks to alleviate, he continually voices his concern for the health and well-being of his people. He insists upon allowing all his people to hear what the oracle has said, despite Creon's suggestion that Oedipus hear the news in private. When Creon retells the story of Laius's murder, Oedipus is shocked and dismayed that the investigation of the murder of a king was so swiftly dropped (145–147). Oedipus quickly hatches plans to deal with both his people's suffering and Laius's unsolved murder, and he has even anticipated the Chorus's suggestions that he send someone to the oracle and call forth Tiresias. Finally, Oedipus is vehement in his promises of dire punishment for Laius's murderer, even if the murderer turns out to be someone close to Oedipus himself.

Sophocles' audience knew the ancient story of Oedipus well, and would therefore interpret the greatness Oedipus exudes in the first scene as a tragic harbinger of his fall. Sophocles seizes every opportunity to exploit this dramatic irony. Oedipus frequently alludes to sight and blindness, creating many moments of dramatic irony, since the audience knows that it is Oedipus's metaphorical blindness to the relationship between his past and his present situation that brings about his ruin. For example, when the old priest tells Oedipus that the people of Thebes are dying of the plague, Oedipus says that he could not fail to see this (68–72). Oedipus eagerly attempts to uncover the truth, acting decisively and scrupulously refusing to shield himself from the truth. Although we are able to see him as a mere puppet of fate, at some points, the irony is so magnified that it

seems almost as if Oedipus brings catastrophe upon himself willingly. One such instance of this irony is when Oedipus proclaims proudly—but, for the audience, painfully—that he possesses the bed of the former king, and that marriage might have even created "blood-bonds" between him and Laius had Laius not been murdered (294–300).

Although the Chorus's first ode (168-244) piously calls to the gods to save Thebes from the plague, the answer they get to their prayer arrives in human form. Immediately following the ode, Oedipus enters and says that he will answer the Chorus's prayers. For a moment, Oedipus takes upon himself the role of a god—a role the Chorus has been both reluctant and eager to allow him (sec 39–43). Oedipus is so compound in the affairs of men that he comes close to dismissing the gods, although he does not actually blaspheme, as Creon does in *Antigone*. At this early moment, we see Oedipus's dangerous pride, which explains his willful blindness and, to a certain extent, justifies his downfall.

Summary

A boy leads in the blind prophet Tiresias. Oedipus begs him to reveal who Laius's murderer is, but Tiresias answers only that he knows the truth but wishes he did not. Puzzled at first, then angry, Oedipus insists that Tiresias tell Thebes what he knows. Provoked by the anger and insults of Oedipus, Tiresias begins to hint at his knowledge. Finally, when Oedipus furiously accuses Tiresias of the murder, Tiresias tells Oedipus that Oedipus himself is the curse. Oedipus dares Tiresias to say it again, and so Tiresias calls Oedipus the murderer. The king criticizes Tiresias's powers wildly and insults his blindness, but Tiresias only responds that the insults will eventually be turned on Oedipus by all of Thebes. Driven into a fury by the accusation, Oedipus proceeds to concoct a story that Creon and Tiresias are conspiring to overthrow him.

The leader of the Chorus asks Oedipus to calm down, but Tiresias only, taunts Oedipus further, saying that the king does not even know who his parents are. This statement both infuriates and intrigues Oedipus, who asks for the truth of his parentage. Tiresias answers only in riddles, saying that the murderer of Laius will turn out to be both brother and father to his children, both son and husband to his mother. The characters exit and the Chorus takes the stage, confused and unsure whom to believe. They resolve that they will not believe any of these accusations against Oedipus unless they are shown proof.

Creon enters, soon followed by Oedipus. Oedipus accuses Creon of trying to overthrow him, since it was he who recommended that Tiresias come. Creon asks Oedipus to be rational, but Oedipus says that he wants Creon murdered. Both Creon and the leader of the Chorus try to get Oedipus to understand that he's concocting fantasies, but Oedipus is resolute in his conclusions and his fury.

Analysis

As in *Antigone*, the entrance of Tiresias signals a crucial turning point in the plot. But in *Oedipus the King*, Tiresias also serves an additional role—his blindness augments the dramatic irony that governs the play. Tiresias is blind but can see the truth; Oedipus has his sight but cannot. Oedipus claims that he longs to know the truth. Tiresias says that seeing the truth only brings one pain. In addition to this unspoken irony, the conversation between Tiresias and Oedipus is filled with references to sight and eyes. As Oedipus grows angrier, he taunts Tiresias for his blindness, confusing physical sight and insight, or knowledge. Tiresias matches Oedipus' insult for insult, mocking Oedipus for his eyesight and for the brilliance that once allowed him to solve the riddle of the Sphinx—neither quality is now helping Oedipus to see the truth.

In this section, the characteristic swiftness of Oedipus's thought, words, and action begins to work against him. When Tiresias arrives at line 340, Oedipus praises him as an all-powerful seer who has shielded Thebes from many a plague. Only forty lines later, he refers to Tiresias as "scum," and soon after that accuses him of treason. Oedipus sizes up a situation, makes a judgment, and acts—all in an instant. While this confident expedience was laudable in the first section, it is exaggerated to a point of near absurdity in the second. Oedipus asks Tiresias and Creon a great many questions—questions are his typical mode of address and frequently a sign of his quick and intelligent mind—but they are merely rhetorical, for they accuse and presume rather than seek answers. Though Tiresias has laid the truth out plainly before Oedipus, the only way Oedipus can interpret the prophet's words is as an attack, and his quest for information only seeks to confirm what he already believes.

The Chorus seems terrified and helpless in this section, and its speech at lines 526–572 is fraught with uncertainty and anxiety. Though, like Oedipus, the Chorus cannot believe the truth of what Tiresias has said, the Chorus does not believe itself to be untouchable as Oedipus does, consisting as it does of the plague-stricken, innocent citizens

of Thebes. The Chorus's speech is full of images of caves, darkness, lightning, and wings, which suggest darkness, the unknown, and, most significantly, terror striking from the skies. The Chorus's supplications to the benevolent gods of lines 168–244 are long past. The gods are still present in this speech, but they are no longer of any help, because they know truths that they will not reveal. Thebes is menaced rather than protected by the heavens.

Summary

Oedipus's wife, Jocasta, enters and convinces Oedipus that he should neither kill nor exile Creon, though the reluctant king remains convinced that Creon is guilty. Creon leaves, and the Chorus reassures Oedipus that it will always be loyal to him. Oedipus explains to Jocasta how Tiresias condemned him, and Jocasta responds that all prophets are false. As proof, she offers the fact that the Delphic oracle told Laius he would be murdered by his son, while actually his son was cast out of Thebes as a baby and Laius was murdered by a band of thieves. Her narrative of his murder, however, sounds familiar to Oedipus, and he asks to hear more.

Jocasta tells him that Laius was killed at a three-way crossroads, just before Oedipus arrived in Thebes. Oedipus, stunned, tells his wife that he may be the one who murdered Laius. He tells Jocasta that, long ago, when he was the prince Corinth, he heard at a banquet that he was not really the son of the king and queen, and so went to the oracle of Delphi, which did not answer him but did tell him he would murder his father and sleep his mother. Hearing this, Oedipus fled from home, never to return. It was then, on the journey that would take him to Thebes, that Oedipus was confronted and harassed by a group of travelers, whom he killed in self-defense, at the very crossroads where Laius was killed.

Hoping that he will not be identified as Laius's murderer, Oedipus sends for the shepherd who was the only man to survive the attack. Oedipus and Jocasta leave the stage, the Chorus enters, announcing that the world is ruled by destiny and denouncing prideful men who would defy the gods. At the same time, the Chorus worries that if all the prophecies and oracles are wrong –if a proud man can, in fact, palace to offer a branch wrapped in wool to Apollo.

Analysis

Whatever sympathy we might have lost for Oedipus amid his ranting in the second section, we regain at least partially in the third. After Jocasta intercedes in the fight between Oedipus and Creon, Oedipus calms down and recalls that there is a riddle before him that he, as the ruler of Thebes, has a responsibility to solve. Consequently, his incessant questions become more purposeful than they were in his conversations with Tiresias and Creon. We see that Oedipus logically and earnestly pursues the truth when he does not have a preconceived idea of what the truth is. When Oedipus seizes upon the detail of the three-way crossroads (805–822), he proves that he was not merely grandstanding in the first scene of the play when he expressed his desire to be forthright with his citizens and to subject himself to the same laws he imposes upon others. In his speech at lines 848–923, Oedipus shows that he truly believes he killed Laius and is willing to accept not only the responsibility but the punishment for the act. The speech is heartbreaking because we know that Oedipus has arrived at only half the truth.

In this section, Jocasta is both careless and maternal. She tells Oedipus that prophecies do not come true, and she uses the fact that an oracle incorrectly prophesied that Laius would be killed by his own son as evidence. Jocasta's mistake is similar to Oedipus's in the previous section: she confuses conclusions and evidence. As Oedipus assumed that Tiresias's unpleasant claims could only be treason, so Jocasta assumes that because one prophecy has apparently not come to pass, prophecies can only be lies. While Oedipus's hasty and imperfect logic in the second section has much to do with his pride, Jocasta's in this section seem attached to an unwitting desire to soothe and mother Oedipus. When Jocasta is not answering Oedipus's questions, she is calming him down, asking him to go into the palace, telling him that he has nothing to worry about—no need to ask more questions—for the rest of his life. Jocasta's casual attitude upsets the Chorus, which continues to be loyal to Oedipus throughout this section (*see* 761–767). The Chorus's ode at lines 954–997 serves as a reminder that neither Oedipus, Jocasta, nor the sympathetic audience should feel calm, because oracles speak to a purpose and are inspired by the gods who control the destiny of men. Throughout the play, the Chorus has been miserable, desperate for the plague to end and for stability to be restored to the city. Nevertheless, the Chorus holds staunchly to the belief that the prophecies of Tiresias will come true. For if they do not, there is no order on earth or in the heavens.

And as for this 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!

Summary

A messenger enters, looking for Oedipus. He tells Jocasta that he has come from Corinth to tell Oedipus that his father, Polybus, is dead, and that Corinth wants Oedipus to come and rule there. Jocasta rejoices, convinced that since Polybus is dead from natural causes, the prophecy that Oedipus will murder his father is false. Oedipus arrives, hears the messenger's news, and rejoices with Jocasta; king and queen concur that prophecies are worthless and the world is ruled by chance. However, Oedipus still fears the part of the prophecy that said he would sleep with his mother. The messenger says he can rid himself of that worry, because Polybus and his wife, Merope, are not really Oedipus's natural parents.

The messenger explains that he used to be a shepherd years ago. One day, he found a baby on Mount Cithaeron, near Thebes. The baby had its ankles pinned together, and the former shepherd set them free. That baby was Oedipus, who still walks with a limp because of the injury to his ankles so long ago. When Oedipus inquires who left him in the woods on the mountain, the messenger replies that another shepherd, Laius's servant, gave him baby Oedipus. At this, Jocasta turns sharply, seeming to sense some horrible revelation on the horizon.

Oedipus wants to find this shepherd, so he can find out who his natural parents are. Jocasta begs him to abandon his search immediately, but Oedipus is insistent. After screaming and pleading some more to no avail, Jocasta finally flees back into the palace. Oedipus dismisses her concerns as snobbish fears that he may be born of poor parents, and Oedipus and the Chorus rejoice at the possibility that they may soon know who his parents truly are.

The other shepherd, who turns out to be the same shepherd who witnessed Laius's murder, comes onto the stage. The messenger identifies him as the man who gave him the young Oedipus. Oedipus interrogates the new arrival, asking who gave him the baby, but the shepherd refuses to talk. Finally, after Oedipus threatens him with torture, the shepherd

answers that the baby came from the house of Laius. Questioned further, he answers that it was Laius's child, and that Jocasta gave it to him to destroy because of a prophecy that the child would kill his parents. But

instead, the shepherd gave him to the other shepherd, so that he might be raised as a prince in Corinth. Realizing who he is and who his parents are, Oedipus screams that he sees the truth, and flees back into the palace. The shepherd and the messenger slowly exit the stage.

Analysis

Sophocles makes the scene in which Oedipus and Jocasta learn that Polybus is dead seem strangely comic. Oedipus digests the news of Polybus's death without showing the slightest sign of grief. The moment becomes, in fact, an occasion for near triumph, as Oedipus believes his doubts about prophecies have been confirmed. He is now convinced that prophecies are useless. He even says, "Polybus / packs [all the prophecies] off to sleep with him in hell!" (1062–1063). Oedipus's strange glee reveals the extent to which he has withdrawn into himself after obtaining the knowledge that he killed his father. He and Jocasta rejoice in the smallest and most bizarre details in order to alleviate some of the guilt Oedipus feels (for another example, see Oedipus and Jocasta's discussion at lines 938–951).

Oedipus's own tenacity, however, means that he will not allow his understanding to remain incomplete. When he learns that there is still a piece of the puzzle left unsolved—the identity of the man from whom the messenger received the baby Oedipus—Oedipus seems irresistibly driven to ask questions until the whole truth is out. Thus, he gradually deprives himself of ambiguous details that could alleviate his guilt. Jocasta, of course, solves the riddle before Oedipus—she realizes she is his mother while he is still imagining himself to be the child of slaves. Oedipus must realize that something is amiss when Jocasta leaves the stage screaming, but his speech at lines 1183–1194 is strangely joyful. Chance, he says in this speech, is his mother, and the waxing and waning moon his brothers. Overwhelmed by an onslaught of new information, Oedipus re-envisioning his earthly relationships as celestial ones as he announces his intent to uncover his true identity. It seems that he is unable to face directly the reality of his origins—reconceiving his identity allows him to feel a sense of control over it, but it also keeps that identity ambiguous. He basically identifies himself as someone who must search for his identity.

Oedipus, who is famous for his skill at solving riddles, thus makes his own life into a riddle.

The messenger and shepherd are both similar to and different from the messenger characters who enter at the end of Greek tragedies to announce the terrible events that have occurred offstage (as will happen at the end of *Oedipus the King* [lines 1365–1422]). Like the typical final-scene messenger, these characters bear important news that is largely concerned with events that have not happened on stage. But unlike the typical final-scene messenger, these characters bear news not only to the audience but also to the man whom the news directly affects.

Because Oedipus receives news of his own tragedy, his drastic actions near the play's conclusion become an exaggerated model of how the audience is expected to react to the words of the messenger characters, who narrate the catastrophes in the final scenes of Greek plays. Throughout the play, Oedipus has been concerned with precise words of the oracle (102), of Jocasta when she mentions the three-way crossroads (805), of the messenger who escaped death in Laius's traveling party (932– 937). After learning the truth of his origins, however, Oedipus gives words physical consequence. He transforms the messenger's statement into a tangible, life-changing, physical horror, in a manner that shows the audience what its reaction should be.

Summary

The Chorus enters and cries that even Oedipus, greatest of men, was brought low by destiny, for he unknowingly murdered his father and married his mother. The messenger enters again to tell the Chorus what has happened in the palace. Jocasta is dead, by suicide. She locked herself in her bedroom, crying for Laius and weeping for her monstrous fate. Oedipus came to the door in a fury, asking for a sword and cursing Jocasta. He finally hurled himself at the bedroom door and burst through it, where he saw Jocasta hanging from a noose. Seeing this, Oedipus sobbed and embraced Jocasta. He then took the gold pins that held her robes and, with them, stabbed out his eyes. He kept raking the pins down his eyes, crying that he could not bear to see the world now that he had learned the truth.

Just as the messenger finishes the story, Oedipus emerges from the palace. With blood streaming from his blind eyes, he fumes and rants at his fate, and at the infinite darkness that embraces him. He claims that though Apollo ordained his destiny, it was he alone who

pierced his own eyes. He asks that he be banished from Thebes. The Chorus shrinks away from Oedipus as he curses his birth, his marriage, his life, and in turn all births, marriages, and lives.

Creon enters, and the Chorus expresses hope that he can restore order. Creon forgives Oedipus for his past accusations of treason and asks that Oedipus be sent inside so that the public display of shame might stop. Creon agrees to exile Oedipus from the city, but tells him that he will only do so if every detail is approved by the gods. Oedipus embraces the hope of exile, since he believes that, for some reason, the gods want to keep him alive. He says that his two sons are men and can take care of themselves, but asks that Creon take care of his girls, whom he would like to see one final time.

The girls, Antigone and Ismene, come forth, crying. Oedipus embraces them and says he weeps for them, since they will be excluded from society, and no man will want to marry the offspring of an incestuous marriage. He turns to Creon and asks him to promise that he will take care of them. He reaches out to Creon, but Creon will not touch his hand. Oedipus asks his daughters to pray that they may have a better life than his. Creon then puts an end to the farewell, saying that Oedipus has wept shamefully long enough. Creon orders the guards to take Antigone and Ismene away from Oedipus, and tells Oedipus that his power has ended. Everyone exits, and the Chorus comes onstage once more. Oedipus, greatest of men, has fallen, they say, and so all life is miserable, and only death can bring peace.

Analysis

The speech of the Chorus, with which this section begins (1311–1350), turns the images of the plowman and ship's captain, which formerly stood for Oedipus's success and ability to manage the state, into images of his failure. And the way in which it does so is quite extreme, focusing particularly on the sexual aspect of Oedipus's actions. Oedipus and his father have, like two ships in one port, shared the same "wide harbor," and Oedipus has plowed the same "furrows" his father plowed (1334–1339). The harbor image ostensibly refers to Jocasta's bedchamber, but both images also quite obviously refer to the other space Oedipus and his father have shared: Jocasta's vagina.

Images of earth and soil continue throughout the scene, most noticeably in one of Oedipus's final speeches, in which he talks to his children about what he has done (see

1621–1661). These images of earth, soil, and plowing are used to suggest the metaphor of the sturdy plowman tilling the soil of the state, but they also suggest the image of the soil drinking the blood of the family members Oedipus has killed (see in particular 1531–1537). Oedipus's crimes are presented as a kind of blight on the land, a plague—symbolized by the plague with which the play begins—that infects the earth on which Oedipus, his family, and his citizens stand, and in which all are buried as a result of Oedipus's violence.

After we learn of Oedipus's self-inflicted blinding, Oedipus enters, led by a boy (1432)—a clear visual echo of the Tiresias's entrance at line 337. Oedipus has become like the blind prophet whose words he scorned. Unable to see physically, he is now possessed of an insight, or an inner sight, that is all too piercing and revealing. Though the Chorus is fascinated with the amount of physical pain Oedipus must be in after performing such an act, Oedipus makes no mention of physical pain. Like Tiresias, he has left the concerns of the physical world behind to focus on the psychological torment that accompanies contemplation of the truth.

Once the mystery of Laius's murder has been solved, Creon quickly transfers the power to himself. Even in his newfound humbleness, Oedipus still clings to some trappings of leadership, the most pathetic example being his command to Creon to bury Jocasta as he sees fit. Oedipus finds it difficult to leave the role of commander which is why he tries to preempt Creon's power by asking Creon to banish him. Creon, however, knows that Oedipus no longer has any real control. Creon is brusque and just as efficient a leader as Oedipus was at the beginning of the play. Just as Oedipus anticipated the Chorus's demand for a consultation with the oracle in the first scene, so Creon has anticipated Oedipus's request for banishment now: when Oedipus requests banishment, Creon says that he's already consulted “the god” about it (1574). Creon has also anticipated Oedipus's desire to see his daughters, and has them brought onstage and taken away again.

Mostly because he is contrasted with Creon, Oedipus becomes a tragic figure rather than a monster in the play's final moments. Though throughout the play Oedipus has behaved willfully and proudly, he has also been earnest and forthright in all of his actions. We trust Oedipus's judgment because he always seems to mean what he says and to try to do what he believes is right. His punishment of blindness and exile seems just, therefore, because he inflicted it upon himself. Creon, on the other hand, has the outward trappings

of Oedipus's candid, frank nature, but none of its substance. "I try to say what I mean; it's my habit," Creon tells Oedipus in the play's final lines, but the audience perceives this to be untrue (1671). Creon's earlier protestations that he lacked the desire for power are proved completely false by his eagerness to take Oedipus's place as king, and by the cutting ferocity with which he silences Oedipus at the end of the play. At the end of the play, one kind of pride has merely replaced another, and all men, as the Chorus goes on to say, are destined to be miserable.